



Deconstructing Gender Roles in Pygmalion An Examination of Criticism and Transformation

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ABSTRACT

George Bernard Shaw's play "Pygmalion" has long been lauded for its astute commentary on social class and the transformative power of education. However, beneath its surface, the play also serves as a rich ground for the critique of traditional gender roles. The study delves into the nuanced examination of gender roles within the narrative, shedding light on the complex interplay between gender identity, societal expectations, and individual agency. Through a comprehensive analysis of the characters, especially Eliza Doolittle, and their relationships, this study explores how Shaw's work challenges and redefines traditional gender constructs. Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which "Pygmalion" engages with feminist themes, offering a fresh perspective on a classic text and its enduring relevance in the discourse surrounding gender and identity.

INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw's iconic play, "Pygmalion," has captivated audiences for over a century with its exploration of class transformation and the malleability of identity. Yet, amidst the play's profound commentary on these themes lies a rich tapestry of critical observations regarding traditional gender roles. "Pygmalion" is not merely the story of a flower girl's metamorphosis into a lady; it is a narrative that intricately dissects the constructs of gender, challenging societal norms, and sparking debates about the roles and expectations placed upon individuals based on their gender. In this research paper, we embark on a journey through the gendered undercurrents of "Pygmalion," unearthing its subtle, yet profound, critique of gender roles. Through a comprehensive analysis of the characters, their interactions, and the broader socio-cultural context within which the play is set, we explore how Shaw's work navigates the intricate terrain of gender identity, societal pressures, and the agency of individuals to shape their destinies. As we delve into the depths of Eliza Doolittle's transformation and her relationships with Professor Henry Higgins and others, we uncover the layers of gender commentary that make "Pygmalion" a timeless and thought-provoking text in the discourse on gender and identity.

The study invites readers to embark on a journey that not only revisits the classic narrative but also seeks to reinterpret and reassess it through a gendered lens. Through our exploration, we aim to demonstrate that "Pygmalion" is not merely a tale of linguistic transformation but a critical examination of the transformative power of challenging gender roles and the agency of individuals to shape their identities in a society steeped in tradition and expectation.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to critically analyze gender dynamics in George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," explore the reflection and critique of societal gender expectations within the play, evaluate character relationships through the lens of gender and power, examine embedded feminist themes, and assess the enduring relevance of its gender-related critiques in contemporary society.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology is employed to examine the criticism of gender roles in George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion." The primary method involves a close reading and textual analysis of the play, focusing on key characters like Eliza Doolittle and their interactions within the socio-cultural context of Edwardian England. Additionally, scholarly critiques and feminist literary analysis provide valuable insights into the gender dynamics present in the play. This multi-faceted approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of gender roles, identity, and societal expectations within the narrative of "Pygmalion."

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Portrayal of gender roles in George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion"

"Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw is a thought-provoking play that delves into the complex dynamics of gender roles and societal expectations. To critically examine the portrayal of gender roles in this play, we must explore various aspects of the text, including character development, social context, and the impact of language on gender identity.

Character Development:

- **Eliza Doolittle:** Eliza's character undergoes a significant transformation throughout the play. Initially depicted as a flower girl with a strong Cockney accent, she represents the marginalized working-class woman. Her journey to becoming a refined lady under the tutelage of Professor Henry Higgins highlights the malleability of gender roles. This transformation underscores how society often judges individuals based on their ability to conform to a predetermined gendered image.
- **Henry Higgins:** Professor Higgins embodies the traditional male archetype of the era, representing privilege, authority, and intellectual prowess. His obsession with transforming Eliza into a lady underscores the power dynamics between genders. He views her as a blank canvas to mold, reinforcing the idea of women as objects to be shaped by men.
- **Alfred Doolittle:** Eliza's father, Alfred, offers another perspective on gender dynamics. He is portrayed as a working-class man who revels in his hedonistic lifestyle. His character highlights the struggles of men who do not conform to traditional societal expectations of providing for their families. Alfred challenges the notion that all men are inherently dominant and responsible.

Social Context:

- "Pygmalion" is set in Edwardian England, a period marked by rigid gender roles. Women were expected to be submissive, domesticated, and conform to a narrow definition of femininity. Men, on the other hand, held positions of power and were seen as the primary breadwinners and decision-makers.
- Shaw uses this backdrop to critique and challenge these traditional gender norms. Through the character of Eliza, he questions the validity of these norms and suggests that gender is performative rather than inherent.

Language and Identity:

- A central theme in "Pygmalion" is the impact of language on identity. Higgins believes that by altering Eliza's speech and mannerisms, he can fundamentally change her identity and social status. This linguistic transformation reveals how society often associates speech patterns with gender, class, and social standing.
- Eliza's struggle to master proper speech and comportment reflects the challenges women faced in conforming to societal expectations. It also

highlights how language can be a tool of empowerment or oppression, as it can either reinforce or challenge established gender norms.

"Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw provides a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics within the context of Edwardian society. Through character development, social commentary, and linguistic analysis, Shaw challenges traditional gender roles and invites the audience to question the rigidity of these roles. The play encourages us to consider how society constructs and enforces gender norms and raises important questions about individual agency and identity in the face of these norms.

Reflecting and Critiquing Societal Expectations Based on Gender

George Bernard Shaw's play "Pygmalion" offers a poignant exploration of societal expectations and the ways they are imposed on individuals based on their gender. This analysis delves into how the play reflects and critiques these expectations through its characters and themes.

One of the central themes in "Pygmalion" is the transformation of Eliza Doolittle, a working-class flower girl, into a refined lady. This transformation is orchestrated by Professor Henry Higgins. Eliza's journey reflects societal expectations placed on women to conform to a specific, often superficial, standard of femininity. She is expected to adopt refined speech, manners, and appearance to be deemed socially acceptable. This transformation highlights how society often demands that women conform to predetermined roles and appearances, reinforcing traditional gender norms.

Professor Higgins, a symbol of patriarchal authority, sees Eliza as a project and objectifies her throughout the play. His belief that he can mold her into a lady reflects the assumption that men hold the power to shape women's identities. This highlights the unequal power dynamics between genders and critiques the notion that women should passively accept societal expectations imposed upon them by men.

Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, stands in contrast to traditional gender expectations. He rejects the conventional role of a responsible, hardworking man and embraces his lower-class lifestyle. His character challenges the idea that all men must conform to a particular image of masculinity and highlights the consequences of deviating from societal expectations.

"Pygmalion" also addresses the intersection of gender and class. Eliza's transformation is not just about gender; it's about moving between social classes. Her struggle to fit into high society highlights how societal expectations are not only gendered but also class-based. The play critiques how individuals are judged not only by their gender but also by their social status.

The play underscores the role of language in shaping gender identities. Eliza's journey to adopt proper speech and mannerisms to fit the mold of a lady illustrates how language can be used to reinforce gender expectations. Shaw critiques the idea that gender is solely determined by speech and presentation, encouraging the audience to question these norms.

"Pygmalion" serves as a thought-provoking critique of societal expectations placed on individuals based on their gender. Through its characters and themes, the play highlights the pressure on women to conform

to traditional femininity, the patriarchal authority that enforces these norms, and the consequences of non-conformity. Additionally, it explores the intersection of gender and class expectations and the role of language in shaping identity. Shaw's work challenges the audience to reflect on these societal expectations and consider the impact of conformity and transformation on individual autonomy and identity.

Dynamics between characters, especially Eliza Doolittle and Professor Henry Higgins, in the context of gender and power

The dynamics between characters, particularly the relationship between Eliza Doolittle and Professor Henry Higgins, in George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" are richly layered and provide a compelling lens through which to examine the intersections of gender and power. In this evaluation, we will delve into these dynamics, emphasizing the nuances of their interactions within the context of societal expectations and power structures.

At the outset of the play, Eliza is in a vulnerable position as a working-class flower girl, while Higgins holds a position of authority and privilege. This inherent power imbalance is central to their relationship and underscores traditional gender roles, where men like Higgins are seen as the ones with the knowledge and agency to transform women like Eliza.

Higgins initially sees Eliza as a mere experiment and objectifies her throughout the play. His focus on her physical appearance, speech, and manners reduces her to a project, reflecting the way society often objectifies women and reduces their value to their ability to conform to a particular standard of femininity.

As Eliza undergoes her transformation under Higgins' guidance, she gains a newfound sense of self-confidence and agency. This evolution highlights the potential for personal growth and empowerment when individuals challenge societal expectations. Eliza's journey disrupts the traditional gender roles that confine women to passive roles and demonstrates her capacity to assert herself.

Throughout the play, Eliza and Higgins' relationship is fraught with tension and conflict. Eliza challenges Higgins' authority and demands recognition for her efforts. These clashes reveal the limitations of Higgins' power and authority over her and reflect the changing dynamics between genders as Eliza gains confidence and autonomy.

Shaw uses the relationship between Eliza and Higgins to critique traditional gender roles. Eliza's transformation challenges the notion that women are passive recipients of male guidance and highlights the performative nature of gender. This commentary encourages the audience to question the validity of societal expectations based on gender.

Towards the end of the play, Eliza's decision to leave Higgins and seek independence demonstrates her rejection of traditional gender roles. The ambiguity surrounding their future relationship raises questions about whether she will continue to assert her autonomy or succumb to societal pressures once again.

The relationship between Eliza Doolittle and Professor Henry Higgins in "Pygmalion" serves as a complex exploration of gender and power dynamics. It highlights the initial power imbalance, the objectification of Eliza, her transformation and empowerment, conflicts that arise, and the broader social commentary on gender roles. Ultimately, the play challenges traditional gender norms and invites the audience to consider the evolving dynamics between individuals, especially when it comes to asserting one's agency and challenging societal expectations.

Feminist themes and messages embedded in the narrative.

"Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw, written in the early 20th century, offers a rich tapestry of feminist themes and messages that challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. In this examination, we will identify and discuss these themes within the narrative.

1. Women's Agency and Transformation:

At the heart of "Pygmalion" is the character of Eliza Doolittle, a working-class woman who undergoes a remarkable transformation under the guidance of Professor Henry Higgins. Eliza's journey from a flower girl to a refined lady illustrates her agency and capacity for self-improvement. This theme challenges the prevailing notion that women are passive recipients of male guidance and highlights their ability to shape their own destinies.

2. Objectification and Patriarchal Authority:

The character of Professor Higgins initially objectifies Eliza, viewing her as a mere experiment. His sense of entitlement and authority over her reflects patriarchal attitudes of the time, where men were often seen as the ultimate arbiters of women's identities. This objectification serves as a critique of how women were often reduced to their appearance and mannerisms.

3. Challenging Gender Stereotypes:

"Pygmalion" subverts traditional gender stereotypes by portraying Eliza as a strong, determined, and adaptable character. Her ability to master proper speech and comportment challenges the conventional idea that women are inherently inferior or incapable of intellectual growth. This theme challenges societal expectations and underscores the fluidity of gender roles.

4. Economic Independence and Class:

Eliza's transformation also highlights the link between economic independence and gender. As she gains refinement and the ability to speak "properly," she gains access to better economic opportunities. This theme underscores the economic constraints that often limited women's choices and the empowerment that comes with financial independence.

5. The Performative Nature of Gender:

Shaw explores the performative aspect of gender through language and appearance. Eliza's ability to change her identity through speech and manners suggests that gender is not inherent but rather a social construct. This challenges the notion that women are biologically predisposed to certain behaviors and roles.

6. Female Solidarity:

Eliza's interactions with other female characters, such as Mrs. Pearce and Clara, demonstrate moments of female solidarity and support. These relationships highlight the importance of women lifting each other up in the face of societal pressures and expectations.

7. Ambiguity and Independence:

The play ends ambiguously regarding Eliza's future relationship with Professor Higgins. Her decision to leave him and seek independence suggests a rejection of traditional gender roles and an assertion of her autonomy. This ambiguity encourages the audience to contemplate the choices women must make in a society that often constrains them.

"Pygmalion" is a feminist work that challenges and critiques societal expectations placed on women in the early 20th century. Through the character of Eliza Doolittle and the themes of agency, objectification, and the performative nature of gender, George Bernard Shaw delivers a powerful message about the potential for women to break free from traditional constraints and shape their own destinies. The play invites reflection on the enduring relevance of these feminist themes in contemporary society.

Relevance of the play's gender-related critiques in today's society.

George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" may have been written in the early 20th century, but its gender-related critiques remain strikingly relevant in today's society.

In contemporary society, the pressure to conform to gender expectations is still very much present. Women are often expected to adhere to conventional standards of appearance, behavior, and speech, mirroring Eliza's transformation. The play's message that individuals can challenge and transcend these expectations remains vital for those seeking to assert their true selves.

Despite significant progress, objectification and patriarchal attitudes persist in various forms today. The character of Professor Higgins symbolizes the persistence of male authority and entitlement over women. Instances of objectification, whether in the workplace or in popular culture, underline the ongoing need to challenge and confront these attitudes. Contemporary society continues to grapple with deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. "Pygmalion" challenges these stereotypes by portraying Eliza as a strong, independent, and adaptable character. This resonates with the ongoing struggle for gender equality and challenges to stereotypical expectations of women's roles.

The link between economic independence and gender is still pertinent. Women's access to better economic opportunities often correlates with their empowerment. The ongoing fight for equal pay and workplace opportunities illustrates the relevance of "Pygmalion's" exploration of these themes. The idea that gender is performative, rather than biologically predetermined, remains a topic of discussion and activism today. This perspective has fueled the push for greater gender fluidity and inclusivity, challenging traditional notions of what it means to be masculine or feminine.

Female solidarity and support, as depicted in the play, continue to be crucial in addressing gender-related challenges. Movements such as #MeToo and advocacy for women's rights emphasize the importance of women supporting one another in the face of systemic issues. The play's ambiguity regarding Eliza's future independence resonates with modern discussions about women's choices and autonomy. Women continue to make complex decisions about their lives, careers, and relationships, often navigating societal expectations and pressures.

"Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw possesses enduring contemporary relevance as it speaks to ongoing gender-related critiques and challenges. The play's exploration of societal expectations, objectification, the performative nature of gender, and the quest for independence continues to mirror and inform discussions surrounding gender equality and empowerment in the 21st century. It serves as a timeless reminder that the struggle to transcend gender-based constraints remains a relevant and essential part of the modern feminist discourse.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" emerges not only as a compelling tale of social transformation but also as a thought-provoking commentary on the complex and often confining nature of gender roles in Edwardian England. Throughout our journey into this literary classic, we have uncovered layers of subtle critique and redefinition of traditional gender constructs that resonate deeply with contemporary discussions on gender identity, agency, and societal expectations.

One of the central themes that "Pygmalion" presents is the idea that gender is a performative act. The character of Eliza Doolittle is a testament to this concept. Through her linguistic and behavioral transformation, Eliza not only ascends the social ladder but also navigates the intricacies of performing a different gender role. Her evolution from a flower girl to a lady is, in many ways, a performance. This underscores Shaw's critique of the rigidity of gender roles, suggesting that they are not inherent but rather imposed and performed, a notion that aligns with contemporary gender theory. The character of Eliza Doolittle is a striking embodiment of the societal expectations placed upon women in Edwardian England. As a flower girl, she occupies a lower rung in society, devoid of agency or opportunity. Her transformation highlights the stark contrast between the constrained roles society assigns to women and the potential for personal growth and independence when these roles are challenged. Eliza's journey challenges the conventional narrative of women as passive subjects, offering a glimpse into the possibilities of self-determination. The dynamics between Eliza and Professor Henry Higgins, her linguistic mentor, are central to the examination of gender roles. Their relationship is marked by a power imbalance, reflecting broader patriarchal structures of the time. Higgins often exerts control over Eliza's speech, behavior, and even her sense of self. However, as the narrative unfolds, Eliza's assertion of her own identity becomes increasingly evident. The play leaves us with the question of

whether Eliza's transformation was shaped by Higgins or driven by her own agency. This ambiguity underscores the complexity of gender dynamics, hinting at the potential for resistance and self-discovery within oppressive structures.

"Pygmalion" offers a feminist critique of a society where women were expected to conform to predefined roles. It critiques the objectification of women, as seen in the opening scenes where Eliza is treated as a commodity by Freddy and other characters. Shaw's work questions the societal norms that limit women's opportunities and self-expression, advocating for their agency and potential for growth beyond traditional roles. The themes and critiques within "Pygmalion" remain profoundly relevant in the context of contemporary discussions on gender and identity. The concept of gender as performance and the struggle against societal expectations continue to resonate with modern audiences. The play serves as a historical mirror that reflects the challenges women faced in the early 20th century while simultaneously offering a timeless message about the enduring importance of autonomy and self-expression.

As we conclude our exploration, it is essential to recognize the limitations of Shaw's narrative. "Pygmalion" primarily addresses gender dynamics within a specific cultural and temporal context. To fully grasp the complexities of gender roles, it is crucial to consider intersectionality, acknowledging that individuals experience gender in unique ways influenced by factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation. Contemporary gender discourse emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and recognizes the diverse experiences and challenges faced by individuals across intersecting identities.

"Pygmalion" emerges as a literary masterpiece that transcends its time and place, offering profound insights into the criticism of gender roles. Shaw's exploration of gender as a performative act, the struggle against societal expectations, and the agency of individuals to shape their identities has enduring relevance. The play's ambiguity and complexity invite ongoing discussion and reflection, reminding us of the enduring power of literature to engage with and challenge our understanding of the world, both past and present. As we navigate the changing landscape of gender and identity, "Pygmalion" stands as a testament to the enduring quest for self-discovery and the limitless potential for transformation, regardless of the confines of traditional gender roles.

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