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**2015/203910**

**ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES**

**ENGLISH SURVEY; MODERN COMEDY**

**Sexism/Gender Differentiation in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*  
and Oscar Wild's *Importance of being Earnest***

Whilst our sex is decided at birth, our gender is much more about society's views of masculinity and femininity. Men are valued for their intellect and judgment, while women are attractive to men for their beauty and chastity. One of the reasons for surveying Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* and Oscar wild' *Importance of being Earnest* is that both play backs to the Victorian era. In this period, England was in terrible creative conditions; modernism arrived there, and everybody faced the contradictions of old and new beliefs. They lived in harsh conditions. There arose a movement called Social realism which is against romanticism, and classism exhibiting reality as it really is without any change. Social realism shows gender discrimination, feeling of loneliness, harshness, sexism, unbearable condition of life, destruction of families, racism, and class differentiation. Amongst all, class difference, gender difference, brutality, and harshness are more visible than others in the period. Therefore, the writers and artist like George Bernard Shaw and Oscar wild depicts these conditions in their works, for they believe that drama is the best way for showing the reality of the society.

During the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th century, England gained political and economical power. Under the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) it ruled great parts of America, Africa and Asia and was the richest country in the world. However, this property was divided in an unjust way. The majority of England's population lived in poverty and was dependent on charities like for instance the Salvation Army. Industrialization, urbanization and the railway revolutionized the society and changed the life of every single person. Traditional professions were not needed anymore and alternative factory jobs were underpaid. There were great discrepancies between rich and poor which were manifested in differences in payment, language, education and culture. Nevertheless, people were still in favor of progress. The underclass believed in implementation of their interests, because democratic institutions and a parliament were established and freedom of press was arranged. One important change is the elementary education for all classes, even for women. Queen Victoria whilst standing for modernism and break-up however, still holds on to tradition and convention. Although women for the first time try to fight for their rights under her reign, she is still convinced of her believes that the women's goals are immoral and redundant.

In the Victorian world of this plays, men have greater influence than women. Men make the political decisions for their families, while women work around the house, quietly taking care of the children. although this stereotyped role of women did not only exist in England, neither did it start with that age; its mark that makes it stand out is the realization and the awareness by women and other feminist supporters like the authors under our discuss to start up a movement against this traditionally shared roles. In America also, this movement kicked off

although later around the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Against this sexist views we could find writers like, Alice walker, Adrienne Rich and others.

In 1912 Bernard Shaw wrote *Pygmalion*, the title of which refers to the myth of the sculptor Pygmalion who created and then fell in love with a beautiful statue, and whose love enabled the marble to become a live woman, Galatea. Pygmalion, a Cypriot sculptor, had renounced all women because of bad experiences with them. Furthermore he thought them to be bad influence for himself and therefore concentrated on his work. In the tale of Ovid' metamorphoses; he "saw women waste their lives / in wretched shame, and critical of faults / which nature had so deeply planted ... he lived in preference, / for many years unmarried." Unconsciously, out of ivory he forms the body of a woman, who is so beautiful that he treats her more and more like a real person and finally falls in love with her. The day Venus was celebrated, Pygmalion begs her that his future wife be like the statue he created, because he does not dare to articulate his real wish. Venus, however, feels what his secret wish is and turns the statue into a real person. When Pygmalion comes home and turns towards the statue to kiss and embrace her, like he did before, she slowly turns into a living person. They marry and nine months later their son Paphos is being born.

The myth is appropriately called "Pygmalion" because it is not the story of "her" but the story of "him", and while it shows the masculine ways of thinking, it never explains the feminine experience. This is not the case with the more modern versions of *Pygmalion* in which the statues only transform into real people when they rebel, challenge their educators, creators, or fathers and force them to see a woman on her own terms. The modern Galatea cannot and should not be a mere stone like object in the hand of a man who wishes to educate and form her

according to his own desire. A modern Galatea must have her own feminine voice.

The plot of the play is no doubt the creation of a woman, either the creation of a duchess from a flower girl, or the creation of a woman from a duchess, in which man is god, father, and creator, whereas the woman is in the position of a child, being corrected and remade by man. Like in the original myth of the Pygmalion, Henry Higgins the language professor is also distasteful of women and has such views about them as this excerpt from the play; "I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance. I find that the moment I let myself make friends with a woman, I become selfish and tyrannical. Women upset everything." As Pygmalion sculpts his ideal woman, Higgins and Pickering mold Eliza into an ideal lady. These two narratives show how unrealistic and even unnatural the expectations that society often has for women are. Pygmalion's perfect woman can only be attained with an artificial construct, a sculpture. Similarly, the ideal noble lady of British society in the world of Shaw's play is a kind of fake, only a role that Eliza must learn to play. Pygmalion can thus be seen as showing how oppressive unrealistic ideals of femininity can be: to attain these ideals, Eliza has to be coached, disciplined, and taught. She has to pretend to be someone other than who she really is.

The play further explores gender roles with its other female characters. As it is set in the early 20th century, before women gained many basic rights and privileges, the play's other female characters; Mrs. Pearce and Mrs. Higgins are largely confined to their respective households. Nonetheless, they both play important roles. Mrs. Pearce ensures the functioning of Higgins' household and reminds him of his

own manners. And Mrs. Higgins takes Eliza in when she leaves Higgins and Pickering, and helps resolve things at the play's conclusion. These two characters thus demonstrate how women might still exert some agency within an oppressive Victorian society. But despite any redeeming aspects to women's roles in the world of the play, they ultimately cannot escape the constraints of their sexist world. At the end of the play, Eliza must choose between living with Higgins, living with her father, or marrying Freddy. In any case, her future can only be under the control of a man of some sort. She tells Higgins that she desires independence, but although she is a strong character, we never see her actually obtain her independence in the play. Eliza is greatly transformed over the course of the play, but it would take even greater transformations of the society itself in the 20th century for women like Eliza to have real independence. Some times, the women are viewed as purchasable commodities to be kept /owned and controlled by their male counterparts. This is revealed in act 5 after hearing of Doolittle's newfound wealth, Mrs. Higgins suggests that he can now support Eliza; Higgins replies that this is nonsense, since he technically "bought" Eliza for five pounds at the beginning of the "experiment". And earlier in act 2, page 42; Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father, storms into Higgins' house, demanding to know where his daughter is. He claims to have not seen her for two months, and accuses Higgins of taking his daughter away from him. However, when Higgins dismisses his claims and says he can take Eliza back, Doolittle is shocked at his passivity. He presses on, insisting that Higgins is being entirely unreasonable by keeping Eliza away from him. This is further evidence of Eliza's situation as a girl who is now to be "kept" by Higgins, and who has previously "belonged" to her father. Both men see her as a kind of property, one to be traded and bartered and used as a kind of commodity. Here, neither Higgins nor Doolittle treats Eliza as an actual human being

with feelings. Their lack of empathy for Eliza is indicative of Victorian misogyny and the treatment of women by men and patriarchal structures in general. Higgins' treatment of Eliza is sadly less appalling when the reader sees how her father treats her; she is used to being ordered around by an older man. Though she is between a rock and a hard place in terms of male guardians, at least remaining in Higgins' care will allow her a glimmer of hope for a better life.

As have been stated above, only as the play ends that Eliza finds a better option, though she must live under a sort of man, Freddy is one that instead of her being taught, she will be the one teaching. Eliza argues that she's not so dependent on Higgins as to be stuck with him, and reveals her plan to marry Freddy and teach to support him. Higgins scoffs at the notion, mocking both the idea that Eliza would work at all and the idea that she might have any knowledge that she could teach to others. Eliza has at least learned one good thing beyond proper phonetics: she has learned that she deserves better than what she has received from Higgins. To try and make her own way in the world, she decides, is worth the struggle, rather than remaining in the lap of luxury and guarded by a pretentious man who does not respect her intelligence and emotions. Ultimately, Eliza is successful in the experiment beyond Higgins' expectation. Thus, Eliza leaves both Higgins and her old life behind her, in the hopes of finding someone who loves and respects her for who she is, inside and out, and to teach others phonetics, though with far more kindness than she received from her own instructor.

"The Importance of Being Earnest" was written by the famous Irish author Oscar Wilde. The play represents Wilde late Victorian view of the aristocracy, marriage, wit and social life during the early 1900's. In *The*

*Importance of Being Earnest*, the question of each gender's role in society often centers on power. Wilde raises interesting questions about gender roles in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by making figures like Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen, and Cecily reverse gender role stereotypes by exercising power and control over the opposite sex, and by showing that men like Jack and Algernon can be irresponsible and bad at decision-making. This gender and role reversal creates comedy, when Algernon proposes to Cecily and she replies with "we have been engaged for the past three months" Cecily then proceeds to tell him about their fantasy love affair, whilst he was in London entirely unaware of the situation. This creates comedy because again it is a female dominating a male character and announcing their engagement, when it is traditionally a man's role to propose, and the absurdity and unlikelihood of the situation. Although the female characters in "*Importance of being Earnest*" exercise power briefly, they also conform to many female stereotypes—ultimately ensuring that the play upholds traditional gender roles instead of challenging or changing them.

Wilde has presented Lady Bracknell talking about the position of men. She says, in her talk with Gwendolyn, house is the proper place for man. In the late 19th century women had reached to the point of giving their traditional place to men, and taking the professional position of men. This bit of conversation reveals women have also begun to move freely in the occupational world. Although Wilde pokes gentle fun at this side of feminist move; Wilde uses Miss Prism as an awakened woman who serves as a governess of Cecily, and writes novels. Perhaps Wilde too wanted to see the limitations of the movement of feminists. The "feministically" awake and educated women had to cling to the mere job of governess. They had to write fictions. Except this pursuit and jobs of

governess those feminist women got nothing significant. In the play, Cecily and Gwendolyn also discuss, changing gender roles in their conversation about male domesticity, indicating their belief that "home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man". Marriage, however, remained woman's most primary goal and occupation. Arranged marriages had been on the decline since the late eighteenth century but were not unknown among the Victorian era's upper classes.

The status of the nineteenth century's educated women remained grim, however, with few occupational outlets, other than teaching. Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, combines two common female occupations, teaching and novel writing, another activity at which women flourished. Prism's confusion between a baby and a manuscript pokes fun at changing ideas about parenthood and child rearing. The misplaced baby symbolized what critics saw as a confusion of gender roles, when women entered the traditionally masculine world of the mind. The plight of orphaned baby Jack illustrates the destabilization of family ties, which in his case are sequentially lost, invented, changed and discovered.

Lady Bracknell makes a remark on voting and politics "oh they count as Tories they dine with us or come in the evening" this shows off her masculinity as women at the time did not have the right to vote, this makes her seem as though she is putting on a facade; pretending to know of politics, and to exercise her power, again this creates comedy as women had very little power, so it is completely absurd.

When we read this plays, we see none of the male characters as serious in life or earnest in nature. There is lack of moral values in each character. In the "*Importance of being Earnest*", the characters contradict themselves most of the time, the dramatist portrays each character to depict



the hypocrisy of the contemporary Victorian society; Wilde deals with the inconsistency of nature of men here. In *Pygmalion*, Bernard Shaw although parodies the myth of the sculptor Pygmalion who creates a woman of his fantasy, in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the created woman is portrayed as being able to withdraw from the scepters of her creator and finds herself able to start an independent life with a respectful man. Finally, there is an argument by both writers which seems to agree with each other; women will still remain in their traditional place although not to be subjugated or suppressed. The argument is that they be respected. In both works, the women always sought almost desperately for marriage; to live under the umbrella of a man.