

Pygmalion – Themes

Appearances and Reality

Pygmalion examines this theme primarily through the character of Liza, and the issue of personal identity (as perceived by oneself or by others). Social roles in the Victorian era were viewed as natural and largely fixed: there was perceived to be something inherently, fundamentally unique about a noble versus an unskilled laborer and vice versa. Liza's ability to fool society about her "real" identity raises questions about appearances. The importance of appearance and reality to the theme of *Pygmalion* is suggested by Liza's famous observation: "You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated."

Beauty

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw interrogates beauty as a subjective value. One's perception of beauty in another person is shown to be a highly complex matter, dependent on a large number of (not always aesthetic) factors. Liza, it could be argued, is the same person from the beginning of the play to the end, but while she is virtually invisible to Freddy as a Cockney-speaking flower merchant, he is totally captivated by what he perceives as her beauty and grace when she is presented to him as a lady of society.

Change and Transformation

The transformation of Liza is, of course, central to the plot and theme of *Pygmalion*. The importance at first appears to rest in the power Higgins expresses by achieving this transformation. "But you have no idea," he says, "how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul." As the play unfolds, however, the focus shifts so that the effects of the change upon Liza become central. The truly important transformation Liza goes through is not the adoption of refined speech and manners but the learning of independence and a sense of inner self-worth that allows her to leave Higgins.

Identity

The indeterminacy of appearance and reality in *Pygmalion* reveals the significant examination of identity in the play. Shaw investigates conflicts between differing perceptions of identity and depicts the end result of Higgins's experiment as a crisis of identity for Liza. Liza's transformation is glorious but painful, as it leaves her displaced between her former social identity and a new one, which she has no income or other resources to support. Not clearly belonging to a particular class, Liza no longer knows who she is.

Language and Meaning

In an age of growing standardization of what was known as "the Queen's English," *Pygmalion* points to a much wider range of varieties of spoken English. Shaw believed characteristics of social identity such as one's refinement of speech were completely subjective ones, as his play suggests. While Shaw himself hated poor speech and the varieties of dialect and vocabulary could present obstructions

to conveying meaning, nevertheless the play suggests that the real richness of the English language is in the variety of individuals who speak it. As for the dialect or vocabulary of any one English variety, such as Cockney, its social value is determined in *Pygmalion* completely by the context in which it is assessed. While Liza's choice of words as a Cockney flower merchant would be thought as absurd as her accent, they are later perceived by the mannered Eynsford Hill family to be the latest trend, when they are thought to emanate from a person of noble breeding.

Sex Roles

Sex and gender have a great deal to do with the dynamics between Liza and Higgins, including the sexual tension between them that many audience members would have liked to see fulfilled through a romantic union between them. In Liza's difficult case, what are defined as her options are clearly a limited subset of options available to a woman. As Mrs. Higgins observes, after the conclusion of the experiment Liza will have no income, only "the manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living." To this problem Higgins can only awkwardly suggest marriage to a rich man as a solution. Liza makes an astute observation about Higgins's suggestion, focusing on the limited options available to a woman: "I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else."

Übermensch ("Superman")

Shaw's belief in the Life Force and the possibility of human evolution on an individual or social level led him to believe also in the possibility of the Superman, a realized individual living to the fullest extent of his or her capacity. (The naming of the concept is credited to the influential German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 1844-1900). Shaw addresses the topic explicitly in his play *Man and Superman* and in many other works, but he also approaches it in *Pygmalion*. Higgins, for example, represents the height of scientific achievement in his field, though he may be too flawed as an individual to continue evolving towards a superhuman level. Liza, proving herself capable of one type of transformation, also makes an important step towards self-awareness and self-realization, which for Shaw is the beginning of almost endless possibilities for personal development.

Wealth and Poverty

One of the many subjects under examination in *Pygmalion* is class consciousness, a concept first given name in 1887. Shaw's play, like so many of his writings, examines both the realities of class and its subjective markers. The linguistic signals of social identity, for example, are simultaneously an issue of class. Economic issues are central to Liza's crisis at the conclusion of Higgins's experiment, for she lacks the means to maintain the standard of living he and Pickering enjoy. Doolittle's unforeseen rise into the middle class similarly allows Shaw to examine wealth and poverty. Though Doolittle fears the workhouse, he's not happy with his new class identity either; Shaw injects humour through Doolittle's surprising (according to traditional class values) distaste for his new status.