

SOCIAL CLASS, LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION IN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S PYGMALION

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George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), an Irish dramatist and one of the most influential playwrights in English literature, is renowned for his sharp social criticism and witty dialogue. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925, Shaw frequently explored themes of class, education and human potential. Among his works, *Pygmalion* (1913) stands out as one of his most enduring and widely studied plays.

The play centres on Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower girl with a strong Cockney accent, and Professor Henry Higgins, a phonetics expert who undertakes to transform her speech and manners so that she may pass as a member of the upper class. While the surface narrative focuses on linguistic training, a closer examination reveals deeper concerns with social inequality, the arbitrary nature of class distinctions, and the dual potential of education both to liberate and to constrain the individual.

One of the central ideas of the play is that society frequently judges individuals not by their inherent qualities but by external markers such as accent, clothing and social background. Prior to her transformation, Eliza is dismissed and treated with contempt because of her poverty and lack of formal education. Once she acquires the speech and deportment of a lady, the same society begins to treat her with respect. Shaw thereby demonstrates that social class is largely a construct based on appearance and linguistic performance rather than on character or intelligence. Through this contrast, the dramatist invites readers to question the fairness of rapid social judgements and the superficial criteria by which worth is often assessed.

Equally significant is the theme of education as a force for personal development. Eliza's progress is not limited to improved pronunciation; the process of learning fosters greater self-confidence, independence and self-respect. By the conclusion of the play she is capable of asserting her own will and making autonomous decisions. Shaw suggests that genuine education does more than enable social conformity: it cultivates the individual's capacity for growth and self-determination.

The play also draws a series of revealing comparisons. It contrasts the rich and the poor in order to show that differences in ability and intelligence between social classes are often exaggerated by societal attitudes rather than rooted in innate disparity. Appearance is set against reality: although Eliza's outward manner changes, her essential qualities of diligence and kindness remain constant, prompting reflection on the ease with which first impressions can mislead. Finally, the relationship between

Eliza and Higgins highlights a further contrast. While Higgins possesses superior education and intellectual brilliance, he frequently displays a lack of empathy and respect. Eliza, by contrast, emerges as a more complete and self-aware individual. Through these character dynamics, Shaw implies that education, though valuable, must be accompanied by human kindness and mutual regard.

In conclusion, *Pygmalion* functions both as an engaging dramatic narrative and as a pointed social commentary. Shaw challenges audiences to look beyond accent, appearance and class position, and to recognise the equal dignity and potential of every individual. Although written more than a century ago, the play's critique of superficial social judgement retains considerable relevance in contemporary society, where linguistic and cultural markers continue to influence perceptions of worth and opportunity.