



Romance and Transformation in *Pygmalion*: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* reimagines the classical Pygmalion-Galatea myth, integrating themes of romance and transformation while subverting conventional expectations. This study critically examines how *Pygmalion* explores transformation not just in terms of social mobility and linguistic refinement but also as a journey of self-discovery and autonomy. Unlike the original myth, where the sculptor falls in love with his creation, Shaw's play denies a romantic resolution between Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, instead emphasizing Eliza's independence. The contrast between the mythological Pygmalion's idealized love and Higgins's detached, academic approach underscores Shaw's critique of gender dynamics, class structures, and the limitations of societal expectations. While Higgins sees Eliza as an experiment in phonetics, Eliza's transformation is more profound—she asserts her agency and rejects being molded into another person's vision. This paper also examines how Shaw employs satire to deconstruct traditional romantic narratives, replacing them with a more progressive perspective on self-worth and identity. Ultimately, *Pygmalion* presents transformation as a multifaceted process that extends beyond superficial refinement to include personal empowerment, making it a timeless and thought-provoking critique of social conventions.

Keywords: - *Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw, transformation, romance, gender roles, social mobility, self-identity, phonetics, feminism, autonomy, class structure, myth adaptation.*

INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) is a play that intertwines the themes of romance and transformation while subverting conventional expectations associated with both. Inspired by the classical Pygmalion myth, the play critiques social class structures, gender dynamics, and the complexities of personal identity. Unlike the original myth, in which Pygmalion sculpts an ideal woman who becomes his devoted partner, Shaw's protagonist, Henry Higgins, transforms Eliza Doolittle but does not attain romantic fulfillment with her. Instead, the play challenges traditional romantic narratives and redefines transformation as an assertion of agency rather than a passive adaptation to another's expectations. This paper explores how *Pygmalion*



portrays romance and transformation, emphasizing its departure from classical myths, its critique of societal norms, and its subversion of romantic ideals.

The Classical Pygmalion Myth and Its Adaptation

The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea originates in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where Pygmalion, a sculptor, creates a statue so beautiful that he falls in love with it. His devotion and prayers move the goddess Aphrodite to grant the statue life, allowing Pygmalion to unite with his creation. The myth celebrates artistic idealization, transformation, and romantic fulfillment. Various adaptations of the myth have retained this central theme, portraying transformation as a means to achieving ideal love.

Shaw's *Pygmalion* draws from the myth but subverts its romantic conclusion. Instead of a sculptor creating a perfect lover, Professor Higgins transforms Eliza through linguistic training, believing that speech determines social class. Unlike Galatea, who gratefully accepts her transformation, Eliza resists Higgins's control and asserts her independence. This fundamental divergence illustrates Shaw's intent to critique power dynamics, particularly in gender relations and class structures.

Transformation in *Pygmalion*: Education, Identity, and Autonomy

Transformation in *Pygmalion* is multidimensional, encompassing linguistic, social, and personal changes. Eliza's initial transformation is driven by her aspiration to improve her social standing. Her decision to seek Higgins's tutelage reflects the rigid social hierarchies of Edwardian England, where class mobility was constrained by accents and behavior. Higgins, confident in his linguistic expertise, undertakes the task of refining Eliza's speech, believing he can remold her into a high-society lady.

Eliza's transformation is not merely external but also internal. As she acquires refined speech and manners, she faces an existential dilemma: she no longer belongs to her former working-class world, yet she is not fully accepted by the aristocracy. This liminal state forces her to confront her own sense of self. Unlike Galatea, who embraces her sculpted identity, Eliza questions the validity of her transformation and refuses to be merely a product of Higgins's experiment.

The climax of this transformation occurs when Eliza asserts her autonomy, rejecting Higgins's authority over her. She recognizes that her self-worth is not dependent on his approval,



marking a stark contrast to the classical myth. In choosing her own path, Eliza redefines transformation as self-determination rather than passive submission.

Romantic Elements and Their Subversion

While *Pygmalion* is not a traditional romance, it contains elements of romantic tension. The dynamic between Higgins and Eliza is often interpreted as having underlying romantic undertones, yet Shaw deliberately denies them a romantic resolution. Higgins, despite his influence on Eliza, does not view her as a romantic partner. His intellectual arrogance and emotional detachment make him an unsuitable lover, reinforcing Shaw's critique of patriarchal dominance.

Eliza's rejection of Higgins and her decision to marry Freddy Eynsford-Hill subverts conventional romantic tropes. Freddy, in contrast to Higgins, is kind and appreciative of Eliza, though lacking the intellectual prowess of Higgins. Shaw's choice to pair Eliza with Freddy rather than Higgins challenges the expectation that transformation should lead to romantic fulfillment with the 'creator.' Instead, it reinforces the idea that Eliza's self-assertion is more significant than any romantic outcome.

Gender Dynamics and Power Struggles

The play's treatment of gender roles is central to its themes of transformation and romance. Higgins embodies the archetype of the controlling male mentor, believing he can mold Eliza to fit his ideal. His condescending attitude reflects the broader patriarchal structures of the time. However, Eliza refuses to conform to Higgins's expectations. By asserting her independence, she disrupts the traditional power dynamic between mentor and protégé, challenging gender norms. Eliza's decision to leave Higgins signifies a rejection of the notion that women owe their existence to men. In this sense, *Pygmalion* aligns with feminist thought, advocating for women's autonomy over societal expectations of romantic and social transformation.

Social Class and Transformation

The transformation in *Pygmalion* also serves as a critique of class divisions. Higgins's experiment underscores the artificiality of class distinctions, suggesting that social status is performative rather than inherent. Eliza's ability to 'pass' as an aristocrat based solely on speech challenges the rigid class structures of Edwardian society.

However, her transformation exposes the limitations of social mobility. Despite mastering the external markers of upper-class identity, she remains an outsider. This paradox highlights



Shaw's argument that true transformation extends beyond external changes and requires societal shifts in perception.

CONCLUSION

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* reinterprets the classical Pygmalion-Galatea myth through a modern lens, challenging traditional notions of romance and transformation. While the play retains the theme of metamorphosis, it subverts expectations by emphasizing personal agency over passive acceptance. Eliza's transformation is not merely an ascent into high society but an assertion of independence and self-definition. Unlike Galatea, she refuses to be molded according to another's vision, making her journey one of empowerment rather than submission.

Romance in *Pygmalion* is similarly deconstructed. The absence of a conventional romantic resolution underscores the play's critique of power imbalances in relationships. By choosing Freddy over Higgins, Eliza prioritizes kindness and respect over intellectual dominance, reinforcing the play's feminist undertones.

Ultimately, *Pygmalion* is a profound exploration of identity, power, and societal expectations. Through its nuanced portrayal of romance and transformation, it remains a timeless and thought-provoking work that continues to resonate with contemporary audiences.

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