

Eliza'S Pilgrimage- from Mythology to Realty

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ABSTRACT. *This article, through the analysis of the actor Professor Henry Higgins, tries to point out that by parodying the plot of the mythology "Pygmalion", George Bernard Shaw weaves his own classical drama of the same name. At the same time, this article makes analysis of the actress, Eliza Doolittle. Through her pilgrimage, Shaw's drama surpasses the ancient Greek mythology, and comes to reality.*

KEYWORDS: *Pygmalion, Parody, Mythology, Reality*

1. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), the Irish playwright, was considered as one of the most excellent British dramatists in the 19th century. Born into a poor family in Dublin, the capital of Ireland, he suffered from nearly all kinds of difficulties and pains, which offered him the first-hand experience of the harsh living conditions of the lower-class. At first, he wrote some novels, and then turned to drama writing. The latter gained him world fame as "Moliere of the 20th century". In 1925, he won Nobel Prize for Literature, for "his works embody the idealism and humanism. His inspiring words and irony always contain special and poetic beauty". The award also said, "His plays make him to be the most charming writer in our time."

Shaw's view of the world is rather complex. On the one hand, he accepted the philosophy of Henri Bergson, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche; on the other hand, he was interested in Marxism. In 1884, he joined the "Fabian Society", claiming to change the capitalism by reformation, but not revolution. In the aspect of artistic creation, he agreed with Henrik Johan Ibsen's opinion, that is, to write about the social problems, instead of "art for art's sake".

All his life, he finished 51 dramas in total. His creation came to the climax in the 20th century, publishing his main plays, such as "Men and Superman" (1903), "Major Barbara" (1905), "Heartbreak House" (1913), "Saint Joan"(1923), "Apple Cart"(1929). Among them, "Pygmalion" was published in 1912. At that time, the temporal stability and prosperity in Britain gave Shaw a chance to push the Fabianism. Although "Pygmalion" is not his representative work, it is still a very brilliant play.

2. Mr. Higgins --Emersion of the Greek Mythology “Pygmalion”

Interestingly, Shaw’s play and the Greek myth share the same title “Pygmalion”. It is obviously that Shaw intended to borrow into his work this Greek story: disgusted with the ordinary women in the world, the king of Cyprus, Pygmalion, chose to keep single. He immersed in fantasy everyday praying for an ideal woman. One day, with his ivory he caved a beautiful lady, and fell in love with her. He dressed the statue elegant long skirt, wore her jewels, and indulged in her perfection. At last, the goddess Aphrodite bestowed the statue with life so that Pygmalion could marry his ideal woman at last.

After all, the story “Pygmalion” is just a romantic mythology. As the representative of critical realism, Shaw believes that the mythology must face the reality. Therefore, in his work, the tone changes from mythology to reality: Mr. Higgins is, in fact, the incarnation of Pygmalion since the two heroes have some in commonalities. First of all, they both come from the upper-class background. Mr. Higgins is a professor who has a lot of advanced phonological instrument in his capacious house, and withholds a house keeper and many servants. While Pygmalion in the myth is a king, who has a men-like block of ivory. Second, they both have a keen eye to art, and they both are enthusiastic towards their professions. With no doubt, Mr. Higgins is a genius in phonetics. He “can place any man within six miles”, and “place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets” (P93). However, his interest in academy is much intense than his care for reality humanity. His extreme selfishness and indifference are so unacceptable that even his mother, Mrs. Higgins is not satisfied when he appears in her party. Apart from his achievements in phonetics, Mr. Higgins is too ill-bred in social life. He never concerns about other’s feelings, and hurts others at will. When Eliza assails his cruelty, he rebuffs with justice: “The great secret, Eliza, is not having bad manners or good manners on any other particular sort of manners, but having the same manner for all human souls. In short, behaving as if you were in Heaven, where there are no third-class carriages and one soul is as good as another.”(P144)

The most resemblance lies in that they both abhor women, so they create their own ideal women respectively. Mr. Higgins once said in 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. When you let them into your life, you find that the woman is driving at one thing and you’re driving at another.”(P106)

3. Eliza – from Mythology to Reality

If Mr. Higgins is the incarnation of Pygmalion, the image of Eliza signifies the ivory statue. At the beginning, she is a carefree flower girl. She lives with the lower-class people surrounded by “utters depressing and disgusting sounds” (P94). Owing to her strong desire to “be a lady in a flower shop instead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road” (P99), she asks Higgins for his lecture, and then

becomes his masterpiece. Due to her perfect pronunciation and graceful behavior, Eliza successfully acts as a Duchess in the party. She conquers the hearts of everyone at present, including the heart of Mr. Higgins the misogynist.

However, different from the doll in the ancient mythology, the “statue” of the reality-Eliza is an animated woman who has great passion towards life and love. The poverty and pains of the lower-class teach her to know self-respect, and her irresponsible father forces her to be self-reliant. The reason why she accepts Higgins’ cultivation is not because she wants to be an apparent Duchess so that she could marry above her class, but because she needs to get a more decent job to feed her father and herself in a better way. For such kind of woman, even if she were given the chance to change her life in an indecent way, she would never sit besides her creator as a doll. To her, the essential factor in marriage is independence and equality. Nevertheless, Higgins considers her as a mere flower girl from the beginning to the end. To him, she is just a chip for his bet.

After the bet, Eliza realizes the reality: “what’s to become of me?”(P131) She begins to feel the hollowness behind the flourish life. It was she who made the most efforts to win the bet, but no one cares for her. Mr. Higgins and Mr. Pickering become overexcited, and they attribute all the accomplishments only to Higgins, neglecting the contribution of Eliza, which tortures her and drives her mad. She “tries to control herself and feel indifferent...Finally she gives way and flings herself furiously on the floor, raging” (P130). She “snatches up the slippers and hurling them at him one after another with all her force” (P130). This can be seen as Eliza’s pilgrimage from mythology to reality. The potential worries about the future now float in front of her eyes. She “crushed by superior strength and weight”, and asks Higgins: “What’s to become of me? What’s to become of me? ”, but Higgins said: “How the devils do I know what’s to become of you? What does it matter what become of you?” This answer completely wakes Eliza, she desperately howls out:” You don’t care, I know you don’t care. You wouldn’t care if I was dead. I ’m nothing to you.” She is “hopeless and crushed”. She realizes the game was over. If she wants to live in the way she likes, that is, in an independent and equal way, she must leave this place, and leave her “creator”-Mr. Higgins forever.

All in all, in the play Eliza finishes her pilgrimage from mythology to reality through the quest for her identity and her struggle with Higgins, the Pygmalionist tyrant.

4. Conclusion

George Bernard Shaw skillfully parodies the mythology “Pygmalion”. He remolds the myth into his the post-Pygmalion story through the creation of his actress Eliza who puts self-respect and independence in the first place and defies the coldness, selfishness and hypocrisy from the upper class. Therefore, Shaw’s play “Pygmalion” surpasses the mythology, and comes to reality.

References

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