

**CSCanada****Studies in Literature and Language**

Vol. 17, No. 3, 2018, pp. 6-9

DOI:10.3968/10778

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]

ISSN 1923-1563[Online]

www.cscanada.netwww.cscanada.org

A Study on Feminism of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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Supported by Heilongjiang Bayi Agricultural University Support Program for San Heng San Zong under the grant No. RRCPY201814. This work is also supported by Teaching Reform Program from Heilongjiang Bayi Agricultural University under the grant No. NDJY1827 and supported by Philosophy and Social Science Research Program of Heilongjiang Province under the grant No. 14D046.

Received 29 September 2018; accepted 30 November 2018

Published online 26 December 2018

Abstract

Feminism in *Pygmalion* George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* has been a play that gained academic discussions in various perspectives. Nevertheless, its feminist view has been the most discussed throughout the years. The purpose of this paper is to support the modern lost females with some suggestions through analyzing feminism in *Pygmalion* and excavating its practical significance. There are some brief introductions concerning feminism, the view on feminism of George Bernard Shaw and his work *Pygmalion*. The paper intends to explore the feminism in *Pygmalion*, analyzes the heroine Eliza and links them with practice. Furthermore, nowadays although females' condition has been improved greatly, there still are some females who are lost. It is proved that, today, feminism is also beneficial for females to remain themselves rather than get lost.

Key words: *Pygmalion*; Feminism; Female

Zou, X. W. (2018). A Study on Feminism of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 17(3), 6-9. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10778> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10778>

INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw said, "A person with confidence, can be small for the great, and the mediocre for the magic." We all know that female have been in a bad position for a long time, as time went on, feminism occurred and more females have pursued their rights and freedoms. However, there are still some females got lost. This paper will mainly focus on an analysis of the feminism of George Bernard Shaw 's *Pygmalion* for the purpose of awakening those lost females.

The first section of this paper will introduce George Bernard Shaw and his famous work *Pygmalion* briefly. Furthermore, there will be an analysis concerning the heroine Eliza in *Pygmalion*. And then, this paper takes feminism into consideration, combines it with the lost modern females and discusses its practical signification. Lastly, some effective suggestions and methods are pointed out according to *Pygmalion*.

Nevertheless, feminism also applies to today's society, and the heroine Eliza in *Pygmalion* has been a perfect model for the lost modern female.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Actually once the females have been in an inferior position for a long time. As time went on, most people eventually realized that the females were treated unfairly and then feminism occurred. Later, more and more scholars began to put their attention on feminism, represented by George Bernard Shaw, and his *Pygmalion* shows it distinctly. Furthermore, there have been many scholars studying *Pygmalion* from different perspectives. Those scholars at home and abroad had their own opinions, similar or dissimilar, which could clearly show in their articles. This thesis will focus on the feminism of *Pygmalion*, take some achieved achievements mentioned above into consideration, and perform reorganization, analysis and conclusion and then put forward new problem and

solution.

As to *Pygmalion*, the western scholars always tend to associate it with Pygmalion Effect, which refers to the phenomenon whereby higher expectations lead to an increase in performance. However, there are still few scholars who conducted studies on feminism of *Pygmalion*, such as Julie Wosk, Marcie Ray, Temouh and Ouahiba, etc. (Julie Wosk, 2015) In the twenty-first-century female artists taking on Pygmalion's role have used the tools of technology and science to fashion their own machine-women, female robots, mannequins, and cinematic dolls. Feminist writers during the period, rejecting essential ideas about women having innate, gender-based psychological characteristics, had argued instead for the socially constructed nature of female identity. Gender and sexual characteristics were not inherent but rather shaped by a range of social factors, including the environment, social expectations, and education. Julie (2015) mainly stressed the position of females on that society, while Marcie Ray (2014) emphasized on reinventing women and claimed that *Pygmalion* poised as it was at the beginning of second-wave feminism, predicted a much larger metamorphosis for women. Informed by the writings of Raymond Williams and Jacques Attali, Marcie Ray's essay: *My Fair Lady: A Voice for Change* argued that the heroine's voice became an expression of females' progress—a voice for change. This article exposed numerous reasons why this interpretation has appealed to scholars and audiences alike. Mainly, the fairy-tale reading attempts to resolve a number of uncomfortable questions mentioned in the story, such as the absence of a typical love plot, and especially Higgins's undefined sexuality. Meanwhile, Temouh and Ouahiba (2014) highlighted the central role played by the feminist movement in the struggle for the dismantling of the patriarchal system. In addition, Temouh and Ouahiba argued that the overthrow of patriarchal dominance would result, not only from outer reforms such as the establishment of Socialism, but from females' inner revolt against oppression as well.

It is obvious that there are many domestic scholars enjoying *Pygmalion*, and studying it from different aspects. But here the author studies *Pygmalion* only from the perspective of feminism. "Many proponents of feminism also focus on analyzing gender inequalities and the promotion of the females' rights, interests and issues" (Li, 2006, p.14). And many scholars associated females with *Pygmalion*, from the close to the distant, from the elementary to the profound.

Chen (2006) concerning *Pygmalion* exposed how woman figure being oppressed, and the position of woman in society being forced to the lowest. This article shows readers the position of women clearly in that social background and appeals to treat women fairly and

advocates feminism, but it is full of plots and analyses of *Pygmalion* in view of the position of women, without intensive study on feminism. Li (2016) mentioned and analyzed the heroine Eliza's awakening in the follow aspects: the visible changes in appearance, and the invisible ones in the understanding of the awakening of spirit. This paper mainly introduced and analyzed the heroine Eliza's transformation from the Cockney flower girl to an independent woman in the light of feminism. But it did not notice the practical problems among the modern females. Furthermore, in Liu's thesis (2005), except for detailed introduction and analysis of feminism embodied in the heroines, also mentioned the current problems confronting the modern females and stressed the significance of feminism in solving problems. However, this thesis was lack of specific methods and suggestions to the modern females, which seems to be incomplete. And therefore the author will put forward her own opinion in view of those problems mentioned above and write a paper so that readers can have a better understanding on feminism of *Pygmalion*, and the modern females who are in need can draw their inspirations eventually.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.1 Introduction of George Bernard Shaw and his *Pygmalion*

George Bernard Shaw is an playwright who comes from Irish. He also is one of the co-founders of the London School of Economics. Besides, his first profitable writing includes music and literary criticism. And his drama is popular and famous, too. He has been awarded Nobel Prize in Literature and Oscar, owing to his contributions to literature and the film *Pygmalion* which is adapted from his play of the same name.

Pygmalion is one of the most famous and popular plays of George Bernard Shaw. And It is a story like this. Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering meet in the portico of Saint Paul's church after the opera. Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering, one is a scientist of phonetics and another one is a linguist of Indian dialects. At the beginning, they made a bet that, Professor Higgins will transform Eliza Doolittle who is a flower saleswoman into a woman who is as well-spoken as a duchess. Later, Eliza receive his invention to transform herself in order that she may work in a flower shop when she speaks properly enough. Some months later, Higgins trains Eliza to speak properly and behave well. And there is the ambassador's party that Higgins and Pickering made their bet, Eliza makes a spectacular and resounding success. Actually their bet for Higgins is definitely won, but he and Pickering are bored with the project all the time, which hurts Eliza. And She does not know what is to become of her. At last, Eliza chooses to leave and become herself.

2.2 An Analysis of the Heroine in *Pygmalion*

2.2.1 The Heroine in *Pygmalion*

The heroine Eliza in *Pygmalion* is extremely unique and independent. In that hierarchical society, to a certain extent a person's pronunciation distinctively reflects his social status. Eliza is just a poor flower seller who speaks Cockney English, but possesses self-respect and dare to pursue her own happiness. By chance Eliza meets the hero Higgins, a professor of phonetics, and she is given an opportunity to improve pronunciation in order to get a better job while he is for the purpose of a bet. After persistent training and sustained practices, Eliza realizes a gorgeous transformation eventually. Later, Eliza is aware of the circumstance that actually she still is a bet of Higgins. She chooses to leave him and make herself independent, self-respect, and seeking freedom and equality.

2.2.2 Perfect Transformation of the Heroine in *Pygmalion*

As the plot unfolds, Eliza appears in three different images—a poor flower girl, a lady in good manners and an independent woman with self-respect (Liu, 2005). The transformation from a flower girl to a lady is only the transformation in accent, dressing and manners, while the transformation from a lady to an independent woman lies in the evocation of Eliza's self-awareness. The transformation from a lady in good manners to an independent woman with self-respect and dignity reflects in subtle changes occur within Eliza unconsciously in Wimpole Street. It is no doubt that at the beginning Eliza is just a poor flower girl who lives in the lowest condition and without any decent status. But Eliza never gives up herself, conversely seeks for her independence, freedom and equality. She tries her best to find a way transforming herself from the poor to the decent. Afterwards, with the help of professor Higgins, she becomes a lady in good manners, but she loses herself. Ultimately Eliza realizes that she is just a bet, and then she makes a decision to leave professor Higgins, which transforms her from a conventional lady into an independent woman with self-awareness. Eliza has her own dreams and ideals, and she establishes her independence and transformation completely.

3. FEMINISM IN *PYGMALION* AND ITS INFLUENCES ON MODERN FEMALES

Li (2006) claims that "Generally speaking, feminism is a body of social theory and a political movement primarily based on, and motivated by, the experiences of women."

3.1 The Feminism in *Pygmalion*

Eliza, in *Pygmalion*, at the beginning is a flower seller with poorly dressed and speaking a "terrible" English. An experiment is conducted on her. She has an opportunity

to speak the language correctly and she also becomes a bet between the two gentlemen, Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering. After having been trained for some months, she achieves her completed transformation in high society. Eventually she seems like a beautiful lady who speaks English perfectly. And she passes for a "duchess". With her triumph comes her awakening. The two gentlemen started the experiment regardless of her feelings. She has been made a lady but has no means to support herself and Higgins does not care for her a bit. She asserts her independence. And she asks herself "What is to become of me?" The underlying theme in *Pygmalion* discussed above is strong feminine awareness. Eliza turns herself from a poor flower girl into a daring and passionate woman. And we can conclude that Eliza has the feminist awareness or awakening. And eventually Eliza has achieved her transformation and realized real independence through her awareness of feminism.

3.2 Circumstances of the Modern Females Who Are Lost

Nowadays, women seemingly have gained more rights and freedom than before and women even almost get equal rights as men in many ways in modern society. But owing to the influences of male-centered culture flourishing in China for thousands of years, many women are used to living a designed life by men (Liu, 2005). For example, Minhong Yu, the founder of New Oriental said in a speech that it was the fall of women that led to the depravity of society as a whole. There is no doubt that this is blatant discrimination against women, and ironically, it comes from one of the most successful educators. Actually there must have been some practical examples for Minhong Yu to claim his extreme view, such as those material females or gold-diggers. The fact that there are still some females who get lost and can't recognize their real values as females. However, for females, it is still unfair and inequitable to be responsible for the entire fault all over the world. Besides, the females have the obligation to stand for themselves and seek for their own rights and freedom.

3.3 Ways to Shape the Lost Modern Females Through *Pygmalion*

Therefore, it is no doubt that feminism has been used by females as a weapon to gain equal rights with men. Just like what have been mentioned above, Minhong Yu was continuing his speech concerning the faults caused by females when some independent females occurred and opposed to the extreme view. If the females have troubles in society, such as being unfairly treated and suffering discrimination, which make them lost. And then feminism is an effective weapon for females to employ so as to fight back to enjoy equal rights with men and let them become of themselves. Although the hardships among females are provoking and tantalizing, especially for those lost

females, the future is still light. It is essential for them to learn from the heroine Eliza in *Pygmalion* who achieves great transformation, wins her own independence, esteem and freedom, and becomes a real female. Generally speaking, females, let you become of yourselves.

CONCLUSION

This paper mainly elaborates and analyze the feminism in *Pygmalion*, and through expressing the heroine Eliza's experiences and transformations shows people an independent and real woman who is worth to be a perfect example for the females.

It aims at advocating feminism, stresses the practical functions of feminism in the current society, especially among those females who get lost. Furthermore, there will be much more scholars to conduct a study on the feminism of *Pygmalion*, owning to its effects.

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