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COMIC REALISM AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE: A STUDY OF HUMOR AS IDEOLOGICAL WEAPON IN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S PYGMALION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion employs comic realism and satire to critique social class, gender roles, and linguistic ideology. By focusing on the transformation of Eliza Doolittle, the study reveals how language is used as a tool of both empowerment and control. Drawing on theories from sociolinguistics, linguistic criticism, and feminist discourse, the analysis uncovers the ideological implications of speech, identity, and social mobility. Shaw challenges the traditional comic structure by rejecting romantic closure and emphasizing self-awareness over assimilation. The play ultimately illustrates that real transformation comes not from external refinement but from individual agency and resistance to imposed norms.

KEYWORDS: Pygmalion, comic realism, satire, identity, social class, language, power, gender, transformation.

INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion (1912) is widely recognized as a comic masterpiece, yet its humor transcends entertainment to serve a sharp ideological purpose. Rooted in the tradition of comic realism, the play blends exaggerated social behaviors, linguistic mimicry, and character-driven satire to expose the artificial constructs of class and gender in Edwardian society. Far from a light-hearted comedy of manners, Pygmalion operates as a subversive critique of social norms, where humor functions as an ideological weapon used to dismantle entrenched power hierarchies. Shaw's unique contribution lies in his use of comic realism – a form that draws attention to real social issues through the lens of exaggerated or ironic humor. As Henri Bergson argues in his seminal work Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, "the comic is that which calls for the mechanical encrusted upon the living" (Bergson, 1911, p. 49). In Pygmalion, characters like Professor Higgins represent the "mechanical," rigidly enforcing classist and patriarchal structures through phonetics, while Eliza's evolving identity challenges this rigidity. The transformation of Eliza Doolittle from a Cockney flower girl to a lady of refined speech is often read as a Cinderella-like narrative. However, Shaw ironically subverts this trope, using satire and linguistic parody to critique the very notion that identity is determined by accent, appearance, or social performance. As Fairclough (1989) notes, "Language contributes to the domination of some people by others" (p. 1). Shaw's deployment of humor highlights how linguistic norms act as gatekeepers to social mobility and respectability.

This thesis explores how Shaw's comic strategies serve a critical function, especially in revealing the classism, sexism, and ideological manipulation embedded in everyday social practices. It argues that Pygmalion operates not merely as a romantic comedy, but as a realist

satire, where laughter destabilizes dominant ideologies. Drawing on the theories of Bergson (1911), Fairclough (1989), Fowler (1996), and feminist discourse critics like Coates and Cameron (1988), this study situates humor as a powerful literary tool in challenging societal conventions.

Main part. George Bernard Shaw masterfully employs comic realism in Pygmalion to expose the contradictions of Edwardian society. Unlike farcical or purely romantic comedy, Shaw's realism grounds humor in everyday speech, recognizable social behaviors, and real class tensions. Characters are exaggerated not for absurdity's sake, but to mirror the rigid expectations imposed by social norms. Eliza's exaggerated Cockney accent, for instance, is a source of comic contrast when juxtaposed with the artificial elegance of upper-class speech. Shaw creates irony through this linguistic collision, blurring the line between what is considered "authentic" and "acceptable." While Shaw's comedic technique is rooted in realist drama, it nevertheless echoes what literary theorist Northrop Frye described as the basic pattern of comedy—a movement from disorder to order, often culminating in the protagonist's integration into a restructured society. Frye writes, "The comic movement is usually from one kind of society to another… in which the hero is accepted, recognized, or integrated" (Frye, 2000, p. 163). However, Shaw subverts this pattern: instead of a reconciliatory ending, Pygmalion concludes with Eliza rejecting Professor Higgins's dominance, thus resisting full "integration" into his world. By blending comic realism with social satire, Shaw undermines the expectations of conventional comedic closure. The humor in Pygmalion serves as a critical tool—it exposes class-based prejudice, mocks linguistic elitism, and destabilizes romantic norms, all while cloaked in the structure of comedy.

In Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw wields satire as a sharp instrument to expose the ideological structures embedded in language, education, and class. The figure of Professor Higgins, a linguist who believes he can "create a duchess out of a flower girl", becomes a vehicle for mocking both scientific elitism and social engineering. Through exaggerated confidence and indifference, Higgins embodies the arrogance of institutions that assume power over identity formation. Shaw's satire is particularly potent in scenes where language is treated as the sole gateway to social mobility. This idea is mocked as Eliza's speech becomes polished while her social belonging remains unresolved. As Fairclough (1989) argues, language is not neutral – it reflects and enforces dominant ideologies (pp. 2–4, 33). In Pygmalion, the notion that changing one's accent can erase class difference is exposed as a myth upheld by upper-class norms. Moreover, Shaw satirizes the romantic narrative. Instead of offering a traditional "happy ending", he denies the audience the expected union between Eliza and Higgins, thereby subverting the ideological comfort associated with romantic closure. This refusal challenges both class and gender conventions, using satire not just to mock, but to dismantle.

Gender dynamics are tightly interwoven with class and power structures, revealing how patriarchal authority functions within a class-based society. Professor Higgins's dominance over Eliza is not merely professional; it reflects a broader social pattern in which men control not only women's bodies but also their voices, identities, and futures. His claim of "creating" Eliza echoes the myth of Pygmalion, but with critical irony – Shaw uses this dynamic to question male authorship over female transformation. Eliza's journey illustrates how power operates through both language and gender. As Coates and Cameron (1988) argue, women's speech is often evaluated through male-defined norms, making language a domain of gendered control.

In Pygmalion, Eliza's "improvement" is seen through Higgins's standards, not her own. Despite her linguistic mastery, she remains subordinate until she asserts her independence, resisting the social mold he tries to impose. Shaw critiques not only classist ideologies but also the gendered hierarchies present in everyday interactions.

Shaw's Pygmalion serves as a fertile ground for linguistic criticism, particularly in its exposure of how language reflects and reinforces social power. Professor Higgins treats language as a neutral scientific tool, yet his phonetic training masks a deeper ideological agenda: to reshape Eliza's identity according to upper-class norms. This reflects what Fowler (1996) terms the "ideological function of language," where linguistic choices are never neutral but inherently value-laden.

Ironically, while Eliza masters the "proper" accent and grammar, she becomes socially alienated, neither fully accepted by the upper class nor comfortable with her origins. This ideological irony underscores the illusion that language alone can ensure social integration. Shaw's play satirizes this illusion, revealing that linguistic transformation without agency or self-determination only reinforces existing hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion transcends the boundaries of traditional comedy by embedding sharp social critique within the framework of comic realism. Through satire, linguistic conflict, and disrupted romantic conventions, Shaw reveals the artificiality of class distinctions and the ideological power of language. Eliza Doolittle's transformation serves as a central paradox: though she gains social polish, she confronts alienation and struggles for autonomy within systems that attempt to define her. Drawing on perspectives from sociolinguistics, linguistic criticism, and gendered discourse, this study has shown that humor in Pygmalion is not merely entertainment – it is a critical lens that exposes the mechanisms of control embedded in language, class, and gender. The play subverts the traditional comic ending, replacing resolution with self-awareness and resistance. Ultimately, Pygmalion suggests that true transformation requires more than external adaptation—it demands inner agency, the rejection of imposed roles, and the courage to redefine one's own identity.

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