Eliza’s Journey of Disillusionment—An Interpretation of Pygmalion in the Perspective of Myth Archetype

Abstract: G. B. Shaw names his play Pygmalion by a protagonist in Metamorphoses Book Ten, so that he connects the enlivened ivory statue with the dramatically changed flower girl. Great culture significance was attached to this play. At the same time, the originality which is different from the original myth displays the author’s effort to explore female self—creation.

Key words: George Bernard Shaw; Pygmalion; myth archetype; disillusionment

1 Pygmalion in Greek Myth

In Ovid’s narrative, Pygmalion was a Cypriot sculptor who carved a woman out of ivory. According to Ovid, after seeing the Propoetides prostituting themselves (more accurately, they denied the divinity of Aphrodite and she thus ‘reduced’ them to prostitution), he was not interested in women, but his statue was so fair and realistic that he fell in love with it. In the vertex, Aphrodite’s festival day came. For the festival, Pygmalion made offerings to Aphrodite and made a wish. “I sincerely wished the ivory sculpture will be changed to a real woman.” However, he couldn’t bring himself to express it. When he returned home, Cupid sent by Aphrodite kissed the ivory sculpture on the hand. At that time, it changed to a beautiful woman. In the myth, Pygmalion made offerings to Aphrodite and made a wish. “I sincerely wished the ivory sculpture will be changed to a real woman.” However, he couldn’t bring himself to express it. When he returned home, Cupid sent by Aphrodite kissed the ivory sculpture on the hand. At that time, it changed to a beautiful woman. In the vertex, Aphrodite’s festival day came. For the festival, Pygmalion made offerings to Aphrodite and made a wish. “I sincerely wished the ivory sculpture will be changed to a real woman.” However, he couldn’t bring himself to express it. When he returned home, Cupid sent by Aphrodite kissed the ivory sculpture on the hand. At that time, it changed to a beautiful woman.

2 The Changing in Image

In the myth, Pygmalion was a Cypriot sculptor who carved a woman out of ivory. It is the first change. In the play, this process is Eliza’s change in her appearance. Under Higgins’s instruction, Eliza has changed a lot in dressing, conversation and behavior. In act one, when Mr. Higgins saw her at first time, "she wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed. Her hair needs washing rather badly: its mousy color can hardly be natural. She wears a shoddy black coat that reaches nearly to her knees and is shaped to her waist. Eliza was droved out of home when she was young, so she has no time and energy to make up herself. When she goes to Mr. Higgins’s and wishes to learn a decent accent, she tries to make herself look better. "She has a hat with three ostrich feathers, orange, sky-blue, and red. She has a nearly clean apron, and the shoddy coat has been tidied a little."But in the gentlemen’s eyes, she is still "so deliciously low—so horribly dirty".

Contrast with this, after taking a bath, she has changed into a dainty and exquisitely clean young Japanese lady. No one recognizes her, including her father. But dressing can only decorate her shallow appearance. Higgins even says: "A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech."Even if Higgins makes a bet with his friend Colonel Pickering and asks Mrs. Pearce to change Eliza’s clothes, Eliza still says to the father: "Garn! Don’t you know your own daughter?"After six months for an experiment in teaching, her conversation has changed. In act three, Higgins invites Eliza to his mother’s home. Eliza expresses quite well. She "is exquisitely dressed, produces an impression of
such remarkable distinction and beauty” and “speaks with pedantic correctness of pronunciation and great beauty of tone”. But her topics are restricted to the weather and health. Especially she says “Not bloody likely” with her elegant tone makes everyone surprised. Mrs. Higgins tells Higgins Eliza’s accent and dressing “is a triumph of your art and of her dressmaker’s”, but “of course she is not presentable”, because there’s something sanguinary element from her conversation.

In the end of Act Three, after six months’ training, in the Embassy Ball Eliza learns to behave properly as well as to speak properly. The challenge she faces is increased, however, Eliza is quite presentable. Meanwhile Higgins, the interesting work done, rapidly loses interest in proceedings as he sees that no one will see through Eliza. Someone even has detected that Eliza is not English, as she speaks it too perfectly (“only those who have been taught to speak it speak it well”), and that she is, in fact, Hungarian, and of Royal blood. When asked, Higgins responds with the truth and no—one believes him.

It looks like Eliza gets a great success in appearance and conversation, and her life has also changed a lot. Higgins wins the bet and his friend Pickering gets much fun in the process of training. But for Eliza, it is only a game which makes her exhausted. She wants to be a flower sailor, but now she can only face the reality of being got rid of when the bet is over. But Shaw’s play is not over. In Act Four, Shaw pushes her into reality to deal with the questions she must face, and displays the arousing of her spirit.

3 The Arousing of Spirit

In the myth, the ivory sculpture was changed into a beautiful woman. But we don’t know if she owns her own thought after she gets her life. In Shaw’s play, he describes clearly Eliza’s courage and determination when she is in trouble.

When Eliza comes to Higgins, she just wants to be a lady in a flower shop instead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. She doesn’t want to be a princess. She wants to get a decent job to support herself and what she wants is just the respect from others.

But the reality makes her dream break. When Eliza hears Higgins says, “Thank God. It’s over”, she flinches violently. Higgins says “It was interesting enough at first, while we were at the Embassy Ball Eliza learns to behave properly as well as to speak properly. The challenge she faces is increased, however, Eliza is quite presentable. Meanwhile Higgins, the interesting work done, rapidly loses interest in proceedings as he sees that no one will see through Eliza. Someone even has detected that Eliza is not English, as she speaks it too perfectly (“only those who have been taught to speak it speak it well”), and that she is, in fact, Hungarian, and of Royal blood. When asked, Higgins responds with the truth and no—one believes him.

Shaw tries to project this picture by portraying the Professor who cares for nothing but his own self—satisfaction and ego. Eliza passes the test as a Princess of some Russian Royal family but in reality she is faced with an emotional breakdown as she has nowhere to go. When she was a flower girl, she had her own slum to call her home but after the Professor is successful in his mission, she for sure knows that she will be thrown out of the house and it is impossible to go back to her place. She is puzzled: “I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now you have made a lady of me. I’m not fit to sell anything else. I wish you’d left me where you found me.”

“Eliza tries to control herself and feel indifferent as she rises and walks across to he earth to switch off the lights… she sits down in Higgins’s chair and holds on to hard to the arms. Finally she gives way and flings herself furiously on the floor, raging.”

Shaw’s sculptor, Higgins unlike the sculptor is not ready to accept his creation as life—blood human being but considers only as a masterpiece of his work. But when Eliza realizes the truth, she does not hesitate to leave, because she doesn’t want to be a doll. She is determined to pursue her own freedom and independence instead of depending on a man for his position and possession. At that time she leaves Mr. Higgins and chooses her own life, her opinion of feminism plays a dominant role and shows a profound social significance.

References:
The Pygmalion element, although with some variations, is quite evident in Memoirs of a Geisha. The character of Mameha can be likened to Professor Higgins of George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion. She transforms Chiyo, under her tutelage, from a lost cause facing a life of drudgery into one of Japan's most celebrated geishas. In summary, the combination of these elements in the stories reinforces the notion that even in today's modern society we are still obsessed with the Pygmalion. Related Documents. Essay The Story Of Pygmalion. The story told by Orpheus, in book ten, ‘The Initiation (Hero’s Journey) Second Stage symbolizing the continuing development of the Psyche through the intermediary stages toward ultimate self-realization and self-knowledge and the period of growth where personal talents and skills are honed and perfected usually with the assistance of masters also it is the path of trials that test the initiate in their journey toward mastery of the. ‘The Return (Hero’s Journey) Third Stage symbolizing the final result of the Psychological development, i.e. Maturation or Individuation and the inevitable return to aid the community from which they came also it is the attainment of the goals of self-actualization and the skills necessary to be fully human, fully potentialized. The Pygmalion Effect is Boris Eifman’s first endeavor in recent years to work in the genre of comedy or, more accurately, tragicomedy the form which the choreographer has perfected. As he once again finds inspiration in the world cultural heritage, Eifman offers his audience a ballet interpretation of the archetypical story of Pygmalion, the sculptor who fell in love with his creation, a statue of a beautiful young woman. In the ballet storyline the role of the tempestuous creator falls to a successful ballroom dancer who resolves to ‘sculpt a virtuoso performer from a clumsy common girl.