

Q. 2. How does the play *Pygmalion* deal with the theme : 'Regeneration of Eliza Doolittle'?

Or

It has been said that *Pygmalion* is not a play about turning a flower girl into a duchess, but one about turning a woman into a human being? Do you agree?

Or

Discuss the significance of Eliza Doolittle's transformation at the hands of Professor Higgins.

Or

Can you consider Eliza as a fairy tale heroine Cinderella?

Ans. Introduction

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw presents the classic theme of drama - the complexity inherent in human relationships. The play's major thematic concern is of-course, romantic, as suggested by the title itself. In the *Pygmalion* narrative as told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, *Pygmalion* is described as having a repulsion for women and he thus decides to remain single. Ovid explains that *Pygmalion's* disgust for women is due to the behavior of the proppoetides, women of Amathus, who were the first women to become prostitutes. Yet *Pygmalion* longs for a feminine ideal and is inspired to sculpt an extremely beautiful woman in ivory and name it Galatea. Upon finishing his marvellous piece of sculpture, he clothes the state with colourful garments and adorns it with jewellery. However the beauty of the statue is not realized since it is lifeless. *Pygmalion* then prays to the goddess and Venus breathes life into Galatea. The once lifeless statue now comes alive and falls in love with its creator. *Pygmalion's* desire for a maiden beyond the imperfection of mortal women is fulfilled and he marries Galatea.

The Major Theme in Shaw's *Pygmalion*

In Shaw's play, Higgins' transforms a common flower girl into a graceful lady, like the sculptor *Pygmalion* in the Ovidian legend carved a beautiful statue out of shapeless ivory. Higgins affects this amazing transformation by teaching Eliza to speak correctly and beautifully. This cultural crash-course is simply a scientific experiment for Higgins and he is astonished to find that against his will Eliza has fallen in love with him. As a scientist, Higgins focuses upon his task (of passing of Eliza as a duchess) with absolute concentration and objectivity. He is amaged to find that he cannot control all the variables of his experiment since nobody can control the human

heart. Higgins realizes that he should not have ignored the humanity of his subject. However, the union between the two is out of question since they hold divergently opposed views about life. Higgins stands for the principle of rationality and the intellect while Eliza represents natural warmth and affection of the heart.

In Act I all the major characters are introduced. Though they are not ascribed with names, instead general terms are used like 'Note taker', 'flower girl' or 'Gentleman', the characters are presented with their distinct characteristics. The flower girl alias Eliza appears for the first time as an uneducated woman, a piteous creature whose mannerism and speech only evoke our laughter, a tinge of elegance in her manners is a far cry. Because of her ignorance she easily believes that the Note taker is a detective who has the malicious intention to tarnish her treasured virtue and modesty. In the later part of the act we also have a glance to her dingy household. It gives us a grim picture of the poor condition of her living.

Eliza's Education Under Higgins's Tutelage

Eliza's undaunted spirit brings her at Professor Higgins's residence in Wimpole Street. She has a dream of becoming a lady and to work in a flower shop for which she requires to learn ladylike etiquette, devoid of any Cockney mannerism, and impeccable diction of English language.

After severe debate over the appropriateness of the task, Eliza's education begins under the guidance of Higgins. The training starts from the scratch. Despite Higgins's tempestuous behaviour Eliza keep up her courage to learn and did not give in under the pressure of this rigorous session. She proves herself an intelligent student with quick ear to pick up delicately distinct sounds of phonetics. Her first public appearance was made in Act III. Her presence at the gathering at Mrs. Higgins's residence only blatantly points out the uncultured shallowness of her mind. She is, as Mrs. Higgins tells, an obtrusive display of Prof. Higgins's mastery that has snatched her beauty from outside but fails to nourish it within.

The final success comes as she makes an appearance at an ambassador's party along with Pickering and Higgins. Her elegance, cultivated charm keeps everybody who assumes that she is a member of royal family. The success tells on Higgins's ability as a teacher and his authority on phonetics and also Eliza's perserverance and her capability.

Eliza's Regeneration

Pygmalion also lends itself to an allegorical interpretation. Critics have tended to stereotype Shaw as a modern playwright who investigates the

"play of ideas." This has resulted in a gross neglect of the allegorical framework and moral content that bears heavily on his plays. Eliza can be seen as a morally character as she struggles to achieve spiritual salvation. The play charts Eliza's spiritual journey from illusion to reality, or from the darkness of ignorance to the light of self-awareness. She struggles against the varied temptations on her long and arduous quest and finally achieves self-awareness as a human being. She acquires enough independence of spirit, strength of character and maturity of thought to stand up to Higgins and criticize his way of life.

Shaw proclaims in the preface to *Pygmalion* that his prime objective in writing the play is to create an awareness about the importance of Phonetics in society. Throughout the play, Shaw points out the use of language as a means of dividing society into classes. Shaw gleefully claims in the preface "It (the play) is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the head of wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else." However Shaw is obviously ignoring the entertaining content of the play by this insistence on didacticism. Phonetics is only a minor concern in the play. While the play does indeed create awareness about the importance of Phonetics in society, it does this imaginatively. Shaw focuses our attention on the human implications of Higgins' project rather than on the nitty-gritty of Phonetics itself. The readers are interested in Eliza's phonetic lessons only because it exposes the shallowness of class distinctions. The prime message of the play is to assert the importance of individual worth. If a common flower girl can be passed off as a duchess in merely six months, then the only qualities that distinguish a duchess are her wealth and hereditary reputation.

Shaw thus points out that gentility is simply a matter of education and environment and that a lady is only a flower girl with six months' training in Phonetics and a gentleman is only a dustman with money. This point is proved by the dual transformations of Eliza and Alfred Doolittle.

The Conflict between Higgins and Eliza

The conflict between the two provides the comedy of the play. Higgins simply cannot regard others in human terms. He sees them as only the means to achieve his end. He tells Eliza that he does not care for her as an individual person but because she is a part of the human species. As he tells her, "I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way." Eliza cannot seek consolation in such impersonal generalities. Higgins's declaration that he has grown accustomed to her voice and face

does not impress Eliza, who prefers Freddy's simple-minded proclamation of devotion to Higgins' profound indifference. Shaw himself favours Eliza's union with Freddy as he writes in the sequel to the play, "Galatea never does quite like *Pygmalion*; his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable."

Pygmalion : A Modern-day Cinderella Story

Pygmalion may also be read as a modern-day Cinderella story. The miserably poor, dirty and ill treated but exquisitely beautiful maid who is magically raised to a high level in society is common to both Shaw's play and the popular fairy tale. The other necessary ingredients - a step-mother, a golden coach, the midnight hour when the maiden is confronted with reality, slippers, a scintillating ball and a desperately lonely gentleman - are inseparable details of Shaw's plot as well. However like the Ovidian legend Shaw manipulates the fairy tale narrative to serve his own unique ends. Consequently the chronology of the incidents is changed and even the ingredients are modified. For instance, Eliza's stepmother is rather harmless, the slippers are thrown at the good fairy and the scintillating ball only serves to shatter Eliza's romantic illusions. The golden coach is the cab that Eliza hires in Act One from the money that Higgins symbolizes her handedly into her basket. Throwing the slippers at Higgins symbolizes her break from a life of servitude and her absolute rejection of Cinderella's romantic notions. More significant is the emphasis on the midnight hour of self-actualization than on the ball scene since the focus is on Eliza's capacity to adjust to the harsh conditions of the real world. And finally contrary to the popular fairy-tale's ending, Shaw does not offer any certainty of a blissful married life.

A Criticism of Middle-class Virtues

Another prominent theme is the exploration of the Victorian concept of the "undeserving poor" through the character of Alfred Doolittle. The Victorians designated the class who refused to practise thrift and squandered their money on drinking sprees and other mindless forms of entertainment as the "undeserving poor." In the Victorian Age the poor were not rightfully entitled to charity and had to prove that they morally deserved charity. Shaw attacks this hypocritical moral code through Doolittle, who defines middle class morality as "an excuse for never giving anything." The prime objection against charity to the poor was the belief that it would pauperize them, i.e. habituate them to living off charity like paupers. Doolittle subverts this bourgeois moral code to suggest that living off unearned income is also pauperizing. Through this in effect Shaw attacks the middle class virtues of prudent savings.

Conclusion

Pygmalion as a comedy of ideas is concerned with manners and class. It is a criticism of social barriers and class distinctions and it upholds the ideals of equal opportunities of wealth and education for all, regardless of class and gender. It exposes the sham of genteel standards and examines the real differences between a lady and flower girl, a gentleman and a dustman. It is a scathing criticism of the Victorian concept of the "undeserving poor," who were accused of bringing their indigent state upon themselves due to vice.

Other minor themes include the limitations imposed by respectability, the fundamental difference of opinion between men and women, and the way gender differences may inadvertently complicate relationships. All these themes enrich the play's texture and scope.

Q. 3. Analyse the plot structure of the play *Pygmalion*. Do you think ending is anticlimatic?

Or

Discuss the plot construction of the play *Pygmalion*. Do you think Eliza's evolution is a "Movement from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge."

Ans. Introduction

Pygmalion is a primarily Shawian reworking of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with undertones of *Cinderella*. Romance and satire dominate both the play's plot as well as style. Shaw takes a strong central situation—the transformation of a common flower girl into a lady—and surrounds it with superficial trimmings. There is technical innovation in the plot structure since Shaw, under the influence of Ibsen, replaces the stock Victorian formula of exposition, situation and unravelling with exposition, situation and discussion. The plot thus has three distinct stages of development.

The First Two Stages of the Play

In the first stage Professor Henry Higgins, who is an expert in Phonetics, transforms a common flower girl into an artificial replica of a lady by teaching her how to speak correctly. Prior to this Eliza's life has been miserable. As a poor flower girl she coaxes money out of prospective customers and is thrilled when she suddenly receives a handful of coins that Higgins throws into her basket. She lacks the capacity to express her feelings articulately and an indiscriminate sound of vowels "Ah-ah-ow"