
A Role Of Appearance In Pygmalion

Pygmalion Essay: Appearance vs. Reality

Daniel Webster stated that “the world is governed more by appearances than realities” because people mistake what they seem to know over the truth. In *Pygmalion*, Shaw explores this theme of appearance versus reality through his characters and how they are perceived by themselves and others. For example, Alfred Doolittle grudgingly adopts “middle class morality” to secure his visage as a wealthy member of the bourgeoisie. Social mobility is limited in the Victorian Era as Eliza’s lower class rank is seen as ordinary and expected. However, characters are able to elude societal norms and stereotypes and their “real” identities by transforming physical characteristics. The reshaping of Eliza’s identity, perhaps the biggest in the story, is not due to Higgins’ prodding and modeling or her adoption of articulate speech and refined manners. Her true and lasting transformation was the learning of independence and confidence that allowed her to leave Higgins.

Eliza’s passion for life and respect for herself wanes as Higgins introduces her to the high nobility in society. While originally a kind and innocent girl attempting to make a decent living in the gutters of London, Eliza is forced to rethink her simple morals through Higgins’ attempts to cleanse her of her impropriety. Her eagerness to sell the flowers to a gentleman without change demonstrates her kind persistence and innocence. Eliza shows great pride in her line of work because she obeys the law by not resorting to illegal prostitution or stealing. Her will to be seen as good is further shown when she repeatedly wails to Higgins, who she thinks is a detective out to arrest her, that she is a “respectable girl” (4). Eliza is grateful and kind in her mission to live her life despite her poor circumstances, but is still a proud and stubborn girl. She has the courage to make good of Higgins’ boast though lessons to “talk more genteel” (14) and “to be a lady in a flower shop stead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road” (14). Her fiery streak is shown as she attempts to terminate the interview when Higgins persists in treating her as a social inferior. As the play progresses and Shaw skips a chunk of Eliza’s training, she appears in a fine dress, able to produce an “impression of such remarkable distinction and beauty” and “studied grace” (38) that the people in the room stand up to greet her. This scene demonstrates that appearance is a changeable and powerful thing, but also personality. For someone first described as “not at all attractive” (14), Eliza has become incredibly appealing due to fine clothing, jewelry, and a few months of training. Pickering and Higgins reveal that Eliza has “the most extraordinary quickness of ear” (45) and is able to pick up new skills such as playing the piano and learning languages and phonetics quickly as if she is “like a parrot” (44). Her transition into a noble lady ends her inability to speak for herself: Eliza only starts or stops her actions when Higgins gives her a signal as if she were a domesticated pet instead of an independent human being. While small pockets of Eliza’s hot-headed and saucy personality still manages to shine through, she seems to have lost her initial ability to stand up to Higgins.

Ultimately, while Eliza eventually breaks and lashes back at Higgins about her poor treatment, Eliza has become more aggressive and derisive due to her loss of innocent bliss as a flower girl. Treating Eliza as a tool to enhance his reputation in society and gloating that it was not Eliza the won his bet, but himself, Higgins triggers Eliza’s old pride and stubbornness. Even as Eliza stands “on the lighted landing in...brilliant evening dress, and diamonds, with fan, flowers, and

all accessories,” her “pallor contrasts strongly with her dark eyes and hair; and her expression is almost tragic” (47). The contrast between Eliza’s magnificent attire and her grim expression, between their elegance and her sadness, represents the inner turmoil she feels as she is pulled apart in two directions. Months of training to be an empty and passionless noble lady and being belittled by Higgins taught her starts to conflict with the good morals and innate fiery determination she possess to speak her mind. Higgins had drilled into Eliza that she was a lady, she would speak like a lady and she would act like a lady while contradicting himself by treating her as less than one. Eliza only manages to keep her good manners and respect for others through Pickering, who is the only one who shows respect for her and treated her more like a human than like a dog. Eliza explains this to a befuddled and angry Higgins, saying “apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she’s treated” (63) As Eliza tears off her beautiful jewelry and thrusts them at Higgins, she chooses her reality over her appearance, declaring that in “wound[ing Higgins’] heart,” she has “got a little of [her] own back” (53).

The audience expects Eliza to have her “happy ever after”; her achievement of upper class mannerisms should earn her a romantic and joyful finale. However, Shaw’s choice to continue the story after Eliza’s elegant debut at the ball and place the climax of the story in Eliza’s rejection of Higgins reveals that her real transformation was a change in character, not physical appearance. In utilizing the classic rags-to-riches theme, Shaw tricks the audience in the same way Eliza fools the upper classes: her change in appearance and manners overshadows her character growth and strength.