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# THE ENDING OF PYGMALION: A STRUCTURAL VIEW

STANLEY J. SOLOMON

*Pygmalion* is one of Shaw's most popular plays as well as one of his most straightforward ones. The form has none of the complexity that we find in *Heartbreak House* or *Saint Joan*, nor are the ideas in *Pygmalion* nearly as profound as the ideas in any of Shaw's other major works. Yet the ending of *Pygmalion* provokes an interesting controversy among critics. Higgins and Eliza do not marry at the end of the written text, while the play as it is usually produced often does reconcile the two main characters.<sup>1</sup> Obviously many directors and many readers feel that the apparent unromantic ending is an arbitrary bit of sarcasm appended to the play merely for spiteful humor.

It is my contention that the only valid approach to the problem of *Pygmalion's* ending is to analyze the structure of the dramatic movement. In examining the play, I will consider the central situation and the dramatic problem it raises in preparation for the ending, which is the solution to that problem. All other critical approaches applied to the ending have tended to introduce extraneous in-

formation and lead to inconclusive suppositions about which of the possible endings is to be preferred. For instance, in evaluating the ending, one would probably be wise to pass over two extremely interesting but contradictory pieces of evidence which, at first, seem to bear directly on the matter. On the one hand we have the postscript which Shaw added to the published version of *Pygmalion*. In it he explains vehemently and reasonably why Eliza will not marry Higgins. On the other hand there is the movie version ending which Shaw rewrote so that it becomes clear to the audience that Eliza *will* marry Higgins. We can speculate about Shaw's real intention, but lacking conclusive external evidence we should justify or condemn the ending of the stage play only in relation to the text itself.

The controversy over the ending deserves some scrutiny, however, because the criticism represents a good many different approaches to Shaw's work. One approach is the "instinctive" method, a method which is outside the realm of literary criticism but is certainly of value in judging a play, since Shaw or any good dramatist realizes that during a performance the spectators will intuitively "feel" that an action is right or wrong without bothering to analyze their feelings. After considering the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York, 1956), p. 616. In the first English production, Higgins threw a bouquet to Eliza at the end.

structure of *Pygmalion*, Milton Crane, in an often-quoted article, concludes that Shaw was either wrong or not serious in his ending.<sup>2</sup> But Professor Crane gives no objective reason for his point of view, nor does he tie it in with his analysis of structure. A similar view is expressed by St. John Ervine concerning the denouement:

[The ending] convinces nobody who reads it . . . the facts of the play cry out against its author. The end of the fourth act as well as the end of the fifth act deny . . . [the post-script], and assure all sensible people that she married Henry Higgins and bore him many vigorous and intelligent children.<sup>3</sup>

The trouble with such opinions is that a great many people may instinctively feel that the play ends correctly. We cannot depend too much on a director's view of the text, for if the play in production has been interpreted romantically, the ending of the stage version seems inappropriate; on the other hand, if the play is produced "anti-romantically," the ending of this version is necessary.

Two directly opposing interpretations of the ending can be based on an analysis of character and situation. In one view, Eliza, a representative of Shavian vitality, is in the vitalistic sense superior to Higgins who is "the prisoner of 'system,' particularly of his profession."<sup>4</sup> Higgins and Eliza are unsuited for one another since their temperaments are totally dissimilar. Another interpretation places emphasis on the growth of Eliza's character to the point where she is able, at the end of the play, to rid her-

self of her fear of the rich (her middle-class morality); thus, no longer the intimidated flower girl, Eliza has no need to bargain for Higgins' affection.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Eliza may be considered as less than a match for Higgins, for her desires are the commonplace ones of marriage and security.<sup>6</sup> Higgins, then, is the representative of Shavian vitality, the true superman, and as such he is superior to Eliza. In each interpretation, the Shavian denouement is justified by the critics' belief that a marriage between the two characters would be a misalliance; or, as Eric Bentley has said, "Eliza's leaving Higgins is the outcome of the realities of the situation."<sup>7</sup>

The criterion of realism is of questionable value here. Shaw is a realist—if we must classify him at all—but dramatic realism does not always call for a "realistic" (that is, "true-to-life") ending. After all, Shaw often does marry off his heroine and hero (e.g. *Arms and the Man*, *Man and Superman*, *The Millionairess*, *Buoyant Billions*), and when he does so, it is not because he is particularly concerned with "true-to-life" probabilities, but because he is doing the correct dramatic thing. Furthermore, even if the criterion of realism were valid, we would face a difficult task in trying to prove that a marriage between Higgins and Eliza is hopelessly unrealistic. The two have existed in the same environment for a long time, they have grown used to one another—even reliant on one another, and they are no longer very far apart in social position. The fact is, as Shaw himself points out and as Professor Bentley notes, such a

<sup>2</sup> "Pygmalion': Bernard Shaw's Dramatic Theory and Practice," *PMLA*, LXVI (December, 1951), p. 883.

<sup>3</sup> *Bernard Shaw, His Life, Work and Friends* (New York, 1956), p. 460. Compare the identical view taken by Alan Jay Lerner in "'Pygmalion' and 'My Fair Lady,'" *Shaw Bulletin*, I (November, 1956), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw* (Norfolk, 1957), p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> Norbert O'Donnell, "On the 'Unpleasantness' of 'Pygmalion,'" *Shaw Bulletin*, I (May, 1955), pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Myron Matlaw, "The Denouement of 'Pygmalion,'" *Modern Drama*, I (May, 1958), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> "My Fair Lady," *Modern Drama*, I (September, 1958), p. 135.

marriage would be a bad one. But what is more realistic than a bad marriage! It happens so often in real life that one can hardly accuse an author of being a romanticist if he includes it in his play. It is not quite right dramatically, but for critics to attribute Shaw's ending to "the realities of the situation" is to evince a rather unnecessarily limited view of what reality is.

## II.

An examination of the structure of *Pygmalion* can leave little doubt that Shaw's ending is the only logical one. The most direct way to approach the structure is to discern what the dramatic problem of the plot is. Some possibilities that might come immediately to mind concern the superficiality of class distinctions, the inability of Higgins to dominate Eliza's spirit, and the satire on middle-class morality. All of the preceding are aspects of the play, but further thought on the matter of what happens in *Pygmalion* will eventually lead us to some statement about Higgins' making Eliza into a "lady." Indeed, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is just what the play is about since the action, obviously, is mainly taken up with the development of Eliza from Act I through Act V. Furthermore, the play is concerned not only with the fact of her development but with the peculiar circumstances surrounding it, that is, the manner in which she is transformed.

It is important to decide whether Eliza or Higgins is the main character, for the main plot will be constructed around the actions of this central character. If we try to put the subject of the play's action into the form of a dramatic question, we would ask, "Will Eliza become a lady?" The action is done either *by* or *to* Eliza, but in either case

we may be certain that the passive *main* character does not occur in Shaw's work. We need not assume that he is the most interesting character in the play or that he is the one who occupies the author's greatest attention. It appears that Shaw was more interested in Eliza than in Higgins because he explains in detail what happens to her after the play is over. Nevertheless, Higgins must be the main character because he manipulates the action. In a comedy it is not necessary for the main character to undergo a change or show character development. Higgins remains the same from first to last; to use Shaw's term he is "incorrigible." Eliza changes, but Higgins makes her change; she is his product. Thus, a more accurate way of stating the dramatic question would be: Will Higgins succeed in re-creating the common flower girl into a truly different person, inwardly as well as outwardly?

Once we see the dramatic problem of the play in this light, we can begin to trace the steps leading to the logical conclusion of *Pygmalion*. The first act is dramatically essential to the play not merely because it introduces the characters or serves as a prologue, but because it begins the action: Higgins makes such an impression on the flower girl that she is filled with a desire for her physical improvement, her external recreation. In Act II, the question is raised as to whether Higgins will succeed in his experiment.

As is usual in a play with a traditional five-act structure, the climax occurs in Act III and virtually resolves the question. Although the question is not definitely answered, certainly some strong indication is given the audience as to the direction which the following action will take. A shift in the direction of the action after the climax would surely confuse the spectators and might

result in bringing the play to the level of romance. But *Pygmalion* is not romance, in spite of the subtitle, and thus Shaw makes his denouement consistent with his climax.

After the second act, the audience might expect the reception scene to contain the climax as it does in the movie and in *My Fair Lady*, but Shaw does not dramatize this scene. It is necessary to have a scene precede the ambassador's reception so as to show the developing process of Eliza's education, and Shaw is skillful enough to make the scene of Mrs. Higgins' at-home serve both as an expository scene of characterization and as climax.<sup>8</sup> However, a few critics are determined to make the omitted garden party into the climax. Professor Bentley says:

If again we call Act I the prologue, the play falls into two parts of two Acts apiece. Both parts are Pygmalion myths. In the first a duchess is made out of a flower girl. In the second a woman is made out of a duchess. Since these two parts are the main, inner action the omission of the climax of the outer action—the ambassador's reception—will seem particularly discrete, economical, and dramatic.<sup>9</sup>

But we need not be deceived by the subtlety and calmness of Shaw's climax. The dramatic question is answered at the home of Mrs. Higgins when Eliza encounters society and passes as acceptable to the Hills, and even to the much cleverer Mrs. Higgins. We now feel cer-

<sup>8</sup> The more recent editions of the standard Constable text reprint scenes from the film version. These scenes are not to be considered revisions to the stage play. Shaw includes a "Note for Technicians" (does he mean scholars?). In it he says, "A complete representation of the play as printed for the first time in this edition is technically possible only on the cinema screen or on stages furnished with exceptionally elaborate machinery. For ordinary theatrical use the scenes . . . are to be omitted."—*Androcles and the Lion, Over-ruled, Pygmalion*, p. 1944. These scenes are, for the most part commonplace.

<sup>9</sup> *Bernard Shaw*, p. 124.

tain that, with more practice, Eliza will succeed in her official debut at the ambassador's party, although she probably would not be able to do so at the time of the climax. Nevertheless, what is important is the knowledge which one now has that Higgins is on the verge of succeeding with his experiment. Eliza's success will be Higgins' success. The question, "Will Higgins be able to recreate the flower girl?" is answered affirmatively.<sup>10</sup>

But Higgins' success is not complete in Act III. In Act I, he had expressed a wish to Pickering to demonstrate what kind of a Pygmalion he could be in regard to Eliza if he had the chance. He wanted to see if he could create a new human being, not merely a duchess, out of a flower girl. The climax, then, only indicates his accomplishment but does not actually show it. It remains for Act V to reveal to us the full extent of Higgins' achievement. Then we see that Higgins has succeeded so well—he has turned the frightened, easily-dominated Eliza into an independent woman—that he loses the prize possession itself. The irony of such a success is evident. Thus, *Pygmalion* has created a masterpiece, a real person—and to Shaw a real person is one who is not dominated in spirit by the elements of his environment. *Pygmalion* loses his Galatea, for he has re-

<sup>10</sup> Several pages might be spent in demonstrating the subtleties of the construction of the climax. For example, the philosophical opposition to the Shavian idea in this play is the false moral standard of society. The dramatization of the opposition is depicted in the characters of the Hills. Thus, on the philosophical level, the opposing abstraction is revealed (in Act III) as silly and trivial at the same time that the literal antagonists, the Hills, are shown to be inconsequential. Therefore, the dramatic climax parallels the climax to the philosophical argument of the play. Note, too, how Shaw prepares for the presence of the Hills by introducing them in Act I where we find them separated from and antagonistic towards the world of Eliza.

created her with the great humanizing qualities of character: independence of spirit and vitality of mind.

It is now possible to see why Shaw's ending is the only satisfying one, and why certain adapters such as Alan Lerner in *My Fair Lady* contradict the meaning of the play. Suppose Eliza's last line were changed from one of disdain (in answer to Higgins' confident order to her as his servant) to an acquiescent reply that indicates she will return to Higgins. If this were the case, then Higgins would not have really succeeded. He would have taken Eliza, the flower girl, the servant of society, and changed her physically but not spiritually. In the end, she will still be a

servant girl at heart. Shaw's ending is not an arbitrary imposition of the author's temperament. Without the essential paradox involved in Higgins' accomplishment of recreation, the play becomes sentimental and one-dimensional.

The traditional structure serves Shaw well here. Professor Bentley is right in dividing the inner development of Eliza into two parts. But he does not go far enough, for the inner development is also dramatized; both inner development and plot structure are connected inseparably—that is, theme and action are virtually the same thing. *Pygmalion* is one of Shaw's best-constructed plays, and this is an important reason for its repeated success in production.