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## THE REAPPRAISAL OF “NATURE VERSUS NURTURE” DEBATE IN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW’S *PYGMALION* AND WILLY RUSSELL’S *EDUCATING RITA*\*

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### Abstract

This article explores the alluring association between George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1914) and Willy Russell’s *Educating Rita* (1985) in respect to the mythic tale, Pygmalion in which “nature versus nurture” debate is reflected to demonstrate the significance of education on social ascendancy in life. Most writers such as George Bernard Shaw and Willy Russell depict the influence of transformation through education via the mythic tale Pygmalion in which Pygmalion, a sculptor, made a woman statue and prayed goddess Venus to transform it into a living person. Pygmalion’s requirement is influential on most writers while producing literary texts which portray education’s power on innate and hereditary qualities, i.e., personal insufficiencies can be transcended by educational activities and various personal experiences as reflected through the main female characters in *Pygmalion* and *Educating Rita*.

**Key Words:** Pygmalion Mythic Tale, George Bernard Shaw, Willy Russell, “Nature versus Nurture” Debate.

### I. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1914) and Willy Russell’s *Educating Rita* (1985) reflect “nature versus nurture” debate in literary basis by means of applying Pygmalion mythic tale. This debate signifies that heredity and environmental problems as well as innate discrepancies can be surmounted by the help of educational facilities. Innate personal qualities become less significant when new personal experiences result in social ascendancy for most individuals. “Nature versus nurture” debate is related to whether heredity or the environment influence man’s psychological development.

*Pygmalion* is about a professor of phonetics, Henry Higgins, who bets Colonel Pickering, a professor of Indian dialects, to change a Cockney flower girl, Eliza Dolittle, into a duchess of gentility in a short time. Higgins emphasizes that educational facilities are a means to challenge rigid British class system of the time. As he corrects Eliza’s speech, Higgins also tutors the very Cockney flower girl in her manner and helps her arise in social standing. Reworking the classical mythic tale Pygmalion in which Pygmalion falls in love with his perfect female statue, Shaw portrays Henry Higgins as the person who has created a new individual out of a Cockney flower girl after training her to speak properly in a number of months. Shaw implies that discrepancies, innate problems, and many social problems can be transcended by means of educational forces. Thus, George Bernard Shaw implies that people could rise above the position they were born throughout education. Writing his play in 1914, George Bernard Shaw paves the way for most writers to depict the contradiction between the old Victorian literary tradition and the new early twentieth century literary trends. Such a thought contradicts with the Victorian belief that each individual belongs to the class she/he was born into. Thus, Shaw challenges the old Victorian belief that no body has the right to change her/his class origins.

*Educating Rita* deals with achievement through education in life. Rita demonstrates how happiness and self-fulfillment is guaranteed by making choices to improve herself in literary education in the Open University. The play is mainly about Rita’s attempt to break free from being a hairdresser in her

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working class society and to gain confidence by participating literary professor Frank's academic middle-class world. Similar to Frank who is in an escape from his dissatisfaction in his academic career through drinking, Rita departs from her disastrous marriage with Denny and earns a new living in Frank's academic world by writing essays. Coming from a different background, Rita is a good example to portray how education overcomes all innate, hereditary and environmental problems in social life. During her education in the Open University, Rita undergoes a big transformation, even to the extent of altering her natural speech and manners, as in the Pygmalion mythic tale. Thus, Rita is on the way to get well educated and transcend her insufficiencies.

## II. "Nature Versus Nurture" Debate Reflected in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Willy Russell's *Educating Rita*

This article explores the usage of myth while analyzing universal philosophical ideas or debates such as "nature versus nurture" in English drama in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as illustrated through an analysis of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Willy Russell's *Educating Rita*.<sup>1</sup> This article contradicts with the belief that heredity and innate personal qualities shape who we are. The concurrent "nature versus nurture" debate implies that educational experiences become more effective on personal characteristics rather than the hereditary and innate qualities. Tracing back to personal inborn features, heredity become less influential through the assessment of this convenient "nature versus nurture" debate as reflected in these plays. It is undeniable that nature endows individuals with inborn abilities and traits. However, nurture takes these genetic tendencies and molds them according to educational facilities in the learning and maturing process, i.e., innate individual qualities contradict with personal experiences which result in new improvements for each individual. This signifies new experiences contribute new characteristics to individuals, i.e., a new person is born out of new educational experiences.

"Nature versus nurture" is a psychological debate or controversy related to whether heredity or the environment most influences human psychological developments (Dörnyei, 2005: 4-5.) The dilemma whether human achievement depends on genetic predispositions or life experiences and educational improvements happen to be an interesting field to study in literary texts as in *Pygmalion* and *Educating Rita*. While considering how George Bernard Shaw and Willy Russell stress the influence of education on personal improvements, it is also significant to demonstrate how such a transformation is reflected in the universality of Pygmalion mythic tale which has been influential on most writers' writing style.

The story of Pygmalion passes in the tenth book of Ovid's mythological poem, the *Metamorphoses*. The story of the play revolves around a sculptor Pygmalion—the king of Cyprus—who worships Venus, the goddess of love. Because of being disgusted by the behavior of the women of Amathus and being resolved never to marry anybody, Pygmalion devotes himself to his art. As a proficient sculptor, he falls in love with a statue of a woman he made. At his praying, the goddess Venus transforms this statue into a living woman, called Galatea whom he gets married later (Alexander, 1988: 19). Transforming a non-living creature into a beloved person has been a significant source for many writers to produce literary texts based on the subject of transformation as in *Pygmalion* and *Educating Rita*.<sup>2</sup>

From *My Fair Lady* and *Educating Rita* to the critical evaluation of John Fowles, the tale of Pygmalion has occupied twentieth century narrative scene. George Bernard Shaw has been followed by some other writers such as Willy Russell in using Pygmalion as the subject matter. Social constructions and expectations of the main characters such as Eliza Dolittle, Henry Higgins, Freddy, and Liza's father Alfred Dolittle in *Pygmalion* have been a primary source for later narrative writers. John Fowles, Muriel Spark, and Ian McEwan reveal and problematize those social constructions such as climbing social ladders throughout personal endeavors. Eliza and Higgins' self identities are basically formed of the wish for independence in social life.<sup>3</sup> (Bloom, 1988: 6).

Shaw's play has been a comedy about an expert in phonetics who intends to transform an uneducated Cockney flower-girl into a well-educated and admirable respectful lady. Shaw has ultimately adopted the philosophy of being critical on human manners rather than appreciating them individually. Just like a philosopher, Shaw manifests his rational outlook in his plays. As a result of his philosophic

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<sup>1</sup> *Pygmalion* is the last of George Bernard Shaw's "pot-boilers."

<sup>2</sup> The usage of Greek mythology as the body of myths and legends in most masterpieces manifests that there has been a quest for nostalgia and retrospection for reviving western heritage, culture, and language in literary canon.

<sup>3</sup> Setting the stage of *Pygmalion* universally through a reference to mythic legends also manifests Shaw's mythopoeic powers.

standing, he applies various subject matters to be much more critical on daily events (Cresterton, 1991; 24-25). This case is also the reason why most writers such as George Bernard Shaw and Willy Russell refer to myths and rituals in order to clarify the divergence between the old and the new ways of living. Calling upon the Classical and Hellenistic periods, dramatists such as Shaw and Russell highlight that there is a longing for the transmission of philosophical ideas bound up with the adventures of heroes and heroines in Greek mythology.<sup>4</sup>

Moving up the social ladder, Eliza Dolittle, the main character in *Pygmalion*, represents a mythic figure in Greek mythology<sup>5</sup>. The title of Shaw's play is taken from this Greek legend, in which Pygmalion wished for a wife as beautiful as the statue. Transmuting a romantic story into a modern myth, Shaw became more poetic and suggestive when he wrote his imaginative, romantic, mythic play focusing more on social commentary (Berst, 1973: 196-197). A survey of Shaw's artistic life-work puts forward that George Bernard Shaw pinpoints first-rate problems that needs to be solved, i.e., women's social standing. In his social plays as in *Pygmalion*, there are the social conflicts of modern life (Strauss, 1991: 37). He focuses on powerful tensions between old and new outlooks on women's roles in social life. He portrays different characters in his plays who have disguised another perspective or mask in order to be much more critical on social events.

*Pygmalion* is a study of the revival of Greek mythology. Through an emphasis on morality and ethics, Shaw informs and awakens the readers to evaluate the significance of mythic legends in English drama. He uses such a mythic title in his play to remind his audience that he is himself a dramatist in classical tradition and his play is a depiction of the play of ideas for being didactic while dealing with an important social question.

Most critics such as Theresa Sullivan confess that Willy Russell in *Educating Rita* compares Rita with Eliza, the flower girl, in *Pygmalion*. Such a similarity clarifies the universality of mythic stories. Both plays have a great deal in common in focusing on working class girls who learn to adopt the attitudes and manners of the middle class with the help of an intellectual man, i.e., they reflect "nature versus nurture" through their behaviors and attitudes while transcending their insufficient speech formation and lack of education in literary basis.<sup>6</sup>

Although Willy Russell did not write his play by referring to *Pygmalion*, he considers how class system is still strong in the 1980s in contemporary period (Sullivan, 1990: 2). Pygmalion learns the rules of phonetics by the help of Henry Higgins. Rita wants to get well informed through the Open University, set up in 1969. Eliza is forced to learn rules of phonetics through Henry Higgins' bet with Pickering by transforming a flower girl into a duchess, i.e., her transformation is external whereas Rita's internal because of trying to improve her literary knowledge thanks to her own efforts. This indicates that women have boundaries to change in early twentieth century while women in the contemporary period are free for transformation in life, i.e., freedom seems to be the best policy for them to taste in life.<sup>7</sup>

While focusing on the transformation of a flower girl into a duchess, Shaw essentially implies the possibility of removing lack of education through an improvement in the rules of speech. Such a study in phonetics indicates that education is a serious instrument for climbing the social ladders in life, i.e., Shaw emphasizes that even the actual class barriers can be eliminated by means of education.<sup>8</sup> Shaw indicates the effectiveness of "nature versus nurture" debate in *Pygmalion* throughout Henry Higgins' and Liza's attitudes and manners:

Liza: I'll advertise it in the papers that your duchess is only a flower girl that you taught, and that she'll teach anybody to be a duchess just the same in six months

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<sup>4</sup> George Bernard Shaw exposes in *Pygmalion* that a myth or a legendary story is a story of a rite. Since all drama derives from ritual drama, then, Shaw in this play depicts ritual dramatic scenes. Thus, as Lord Raglan indicates, the relation between myth and drama should never be disregarded because traditional narratives are unhistorical mythic and legendary stories including oral histories as well. (Raglan, 2003: 221).

<sup>5</sup> Eliza Dolittle has been introduced as the flower girl at the very beginning of the play. When Henry Higgins, the note-taker asks her name she responds as Liza Dolittle. She gains her Eliza Dolittle name after the ambassador's party when she becomes an independent woman as a duchess. This indicates that a change in her name represents a transformation in her social change.

<sup>6</sup> Such a rise indicates women's wish for emancipation from their domestic roles through becoming well educated in their living circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> Both plays end ambiguously: Higgins does not accept that Eliza will marry Freddy and never will come back; Rita refuses to go to Australia with Frank but cuts his hair as a friendly gesture to show her influence on him.

<sup>8</sup> The social problem diversifying in class structures was mainly about speech and accent in England in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries as depicted in Shaw's *Pygmalion* (Alexander, 1988: 20).

for a thousand guineas. Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself.

Higgins [*wondering at her*] : You damned impudent slut, you! But, it's better than sniveling; better than fetching slippers and finding spectacles, isn't it? [*Rising*] By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have. I like you like this.

Liza: Yes: You turn round and make up to me now that I'm not afraid of you, and can do without you.

Higgins: Of course I do, you little fool. Five minutes ago you were like a milestone round my neck. Now you're a tower of strength: a consort battleship. You and I and Pickering will be three old bachelors together instead of only two men and a silly girl (Shaw, 2007: 103-104).

Liza becomes a "tower of strength" by means of education and ascends her old illiterate background. Tracing an archetypal pattern in *Pygmalion*, Shaw indicates Eliza's quest for self-awareness from confusion, ignorance, illusion to coherence, knowledge and reality through education. Eliza's spiritual development manifests her ability to realize and express her feelings as well as her considerable spiritual freedom (Berst, 1973: 216). Shaw depicts the quintessence of the New Woman who has a place in social life. Barbara Bellow Watson explains that "both thought and character in the Shavian drama proclaim the possibility of radical change, for they defy law itself, not just some abuse of the law. They defy custom itself, not just some perversion of custom" (1991: 145-146). This indicates that the Shavian woman differs from radically from tradition, i.e., the New Woman wishes for change through education rather than being dependent on her inborn qualities. In the Preface of *Pygmalion*, Shaw manifests the significance of social problems while being didactic :

I wish to boast that *Pygmalion* has been an extremely successful play all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be anything else. (Shaw, 2007: 9)

Shaw's reference to Greek mythology is both an indication for diversifying drama through an emphasis on the application of different approaches such as the use of mythology in modern literary canon and an indication for the beginning of experimental theatre<sup>9</sup>. Beginning in the 1900s, experimental theatre leaves behind the acceptable conventions for writing plays in order to use multiple styles and instruments of acting, as well as dialogue, sets, and costuming. It is clear that dramatic performance was enriched by all these mastering multiple styles and helped a thorough understanding of a play in its broadest sense as reflected in *Pygmalion*. Through referring to Greek mythology, Shaw intends to prepare a universal setting for the audience to unite a mythic legend with real social circumstances. He intends to indicate how education has been effective on most characters while improving themselves in social standing<sup>10</sup>. It is clear that consulting different subject matters on stage and enriching the materials of theatre with various thoughts and attitudes, Shaw creates a new type of comedy different from its classical definition. Especially throughout focusing on philosophical ideas, debates and discussions, Shaw creates the beginning of a new approach for new drama. Eric Bentley emphasizes his new approach as:

It is Shawian, not in being made up of political or philosophic discussions, but in being based on the standard conflict of vitality and system, in working out this conflict through an inversion of romance, in bringing matters to a head in a battle of wills and words, in having an inner psychological action in counterpoint to the outer romantic action, in existing on two contrasted levels of mentality, both of

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<sup>9</sup> The Pygmalion myth had been influential especially on Victorian Era playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw and it had signed for a big change in characters in social life at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw's *Pygmalion* is a modernized Cinderella story with a realistic ending. After ever living happily in the end, the stories of *Pygmalion* and Cinderella fairy tale are also associated with the myth of "rags-to-riches" in which the main characters acquire their lives in prosperity after experiencing poverty in their previous social standing.

which are related to the main theme, in delighting and surprising with a constant flow of verbal music and more than verbal wit.<sup>11</sup> (Bentley, 1988: 18)

Bernard Shaw sympathizes with the Pygmalion myth in his *Pygmalion* through imitating the sculptor's emotions and behavior who made a statue and requested from the goddess Venus to metamorphose it to a woman. Shaw makes such a comparison through expressing Henry Higgins' ideal of transforming a flower-girl into a duchess through transcending natural characteristics by means of education and expressing that he has created a person from ignorance to knowledge. In order to express his free spirit of self-sufficiency and authoring through applying education, Higgins intends to create the full sense of life from birth to death to rebirth (Bertolini, 1991: 103-107). Shaw portrays Higgins like the sculptor in Pygmalion myth while boasting his social engineering of Eliza and becoming the power of intellect in transforming a poor flower-girl to a duchess in *Pygmalion*. Henry Higgins exposes how he created a new living lady:

You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. I could even get her a place as lady's maid or shop assistant, which requires better English. That's the sort of thing I do for commercial millionaires. And on the profits of it I do genuine scientific work in phonetics, and a little as a poet on Miltonic lines. (15)

Thus, as a story of a flower-girl who becomes a duchess after taking phonetics lessons, *Pygmalion* is a serious study of human relationships and applauds the new scientific approach to language by focusing on the study of phonetics (Crompton, 1969: 141-142). Shaw implies the transformation from the question of social manners to the question of social morality as depicted through the dustman Eliza Dolittle's father Alfred Dolittle's change to a moral preacher (Crompton, 1969: 144). However, such a philosophical transformation is rather hypocritical and too low on the social scale to have any moral values and, thus, indicates that Shaw is critical about human manners and relationships.

The usage of universal mythic figures such as Pygmalion indicates universal philosophical ideas and debates can be discussed in dramatic settings. Nature versus nurture can be evaluated in a universal setting in this way. This should be the main reason why George Bernard Shaw chose the note-taker professor of phonetics, Henry Higgins, for his play to teach the flower girl to talk like a duchess in three months. Shaw stresses the significance of scientific thought and method. Reflecting the importance of intelligence in *Pygmalion*, Shaw indicates the entity of a creative force while struggling for the improvement and perfection as seen in the poor, naïve, simple and ignorant flower girl, Eliza. Such an improvement is reflected through Eliza's change from a simple flower girl to a thoughtful young lady<sup>12</sup>. This deliberate change makes Eliza more sensible and honorable than the others, especially that of Higgins.<sup>13</sup> Her Cockney speech has turned into an honorable lady's speech through phonetic rules, i.e. education has been much more influential. Eliza became more self-confident when she gained her social standing among honorable ladies. She became more powerful when she fulfilled her spiritual voyage from darkness to light and reflected her self-awareness as a human being in such variations by expressing "I can do without anybody. I have my own soul: my own spark of divine fire." She defines the code of her relations with others when she expresses her determination to Higgins: "I'll be nice to you if you be nice to me."

As in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Willy Russel reflects how educational endeavors can help each individual to transcend personal and social deficiencies. Rita, who has left her husband as a result of his aggressive tendencies, starts studying literature lessons in the Open University. She, in fact, leaves all her problems in her background while creating short stories and reading many novels in literature lessons led by Professor Frank. Rita experiences a turning point in her life because of leaving her husband Denny's working class culture to experience life in Frank's respectable world of middle-class academics. She throws herself wholeheartedly in her studies. She takes the decision that throughout education she will

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<sup>11</sup> As Elsie B. Adams also points out in *Bernard Shaw and the Aesthetics*, while producing different plots via some literary trends, George Bernard Shaw has been a realistic dramatist who reflects various subjects from realistic point of view (1971: 72).

<sup>12</sup> Shaw was one of the first members of the Fabian Society founded in 1884. This was a socialist society committed to social justice, equality, and the need for the individual improvement for perfection. Shaw describes the aim of the society as: "The Fabian Society seeks to establish equality as the universal relation between citizens without distinction of sex, colour, occupation, age, talent, character, heredity . . ." (Shaw, 2007: X)

<sup>13</sup> *Pygmalion* reflects the debate of "Nature versus Nurture" by the end of the nineteenth century. George Bernard Shaw is one of the representatives who explores this movement sustaining that people could rise above the position they were born.

never end up like her mother who feels unfulfilled in life due to her lack of education. For Rita, education represents a new route apart from her hairdresser working-class background. She manifests her own feelings why he disgusts her husband to Frank and for Rita, the only way to be saved from her problematic marriage is to follow education in the Open University with Frank:

Rita: I'm busy enough findin' meself, let alone findin' someone else. I don't want anyone else. I've begun to find me – an' it's great y' know, it is Frank. It might sound selfish but all I want for the time bein' is what I'm findin' inside me. I certainly don't wanna be rushin' off with some feller, cos the first thing I'll have to do is forget about meself for the sake of him.

Frank: Perhaps, perhaps your husband thinks you're having an affair with me.

Rita: Oh go way. You're me teacher I've told him.

Frank: You've told him about me? What?

Rita: [*sitting down*] I've—tch—I've tried to explain to him how you give me room to breathe. Y' just, like feed me without expectin' anythin' in return (Russell, 2003: 51-52).

Willy Russell emphasizes how education makes woman a power of strength in her social standing and how it holds “a room for breath” for all women. Russell also signifies that education is a means to find self identity. For being in a quest for identity by following literary information, Rita experiences radical changes for representing the Modern Woman who has the right to give all her decisions herself.

Following her success at summer school in the Open University, a new Rita who has gained her self-esteem emerges. She reflects her self-confidence gained at the end of recent course through her new clothes, the way she speaks and the new friends she has made in her new environment, i.e., education has made an improvement in her personal characteristics and tendencies. Once she has started to improve herself throughout educational means to get independent from any social limitations, Rita will need less support from Frank. As a result of Rita's effective improvement in literary lessons, Frank's own sense of self-confidence in his academic life begins to diminish. Education has improved Rita's self-esteem so much that she even has been reliant on Frank for her learning. Rita's newly acquired confidence and intellectual maturity signifies that Rita is able to hold her own in academic circles, i.e., this represents a shift in her attitude and confidence.

Rita comes to self recognition that education has provided her the chance to choose her own destiny rather than her life mapped out by the others. She displays her thoughts as “I might go to France. I might go to me mother's. I might even have a baby. I dunno. I'll make a decision. I'll choose.” (Russell, 2003: 104). Here, Rita manifests how education has been effective on her to transcend all her disastrous living circumstances and her personal deficiencies for being less informed about her social environment.

### **Conclusion**

Rejecting outmoded literary conventions, both George Bernard Shaw and Willy Russell have been credited with creating new trends for basing their subject matter on mythic plot constructions. Because of majoring in social commentary as well as realistic plot constructions in modern drama, these dramatists concurrently reflect the problems in social institutions. Shaw and Russell imply that different social classes, morality, inequalities, injustices, and the effects of poverty are the milestones of the theatre of ideas which include new trends in itself as reflected in *Pygmalion* and *Educating Rita*. By consulting mythology, both Shaw and Russell correlate the mythic Pygmalion tale with a so-called romantic play in modern context. Shaw, in fact, mocks with the readers in his play *Pygmalion* subtitled as “a romantic play in five acts” in order to manifest that the play is not a romantic play but a realistic one in which the realities of middle and lower classes are revealed. Similar to Shaw, Russell display his dramatic success of intellectual supremacy through making a dramatic balance between Greek mythology and the modern period. Both plays highlight that sense of incompleteness can be left aside to possess knowledge, skills, and confidence to choose one's own direction in life by achieving a necessarily better life via education. Finally, universal “nature versus nurture” debate has been wholeheartedly reflected in *Pygmalion* and *Educating Rita* by considering a universal mythic tale in literary basis.

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