

Parallels and Contrasts between Shaw's "Pygmalion" Ibsen's "A Doll's House"

Ma. Rregjina Gokaj

Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education
Lecturer of British Language and Literature
University "Aleksandër Moisiu" Durrës, Albania
gokajrregji@yahoo.it

Abstract: Literary works are wide opened for discussions and points of view. Since its beginnings literature offered to its reader new ideas and thoughts; it affected society in many manners: way of living, communication, thinking and re-thinking. Modern Period brought about many radical changes in economy, politics, sociology, technology and sciences etc. which were reflected in literature as well. Writers expanded their way of thinking and writing by giving social characters whose private behavior was greatly affected by an atmosphere of moral perplexity in their works. Modern Literature considered the man as constituting simply a part of the natural world. This birth of Modernism was reflected even in drama which is the focus of this paper. Two important dramatists who paved the path to Modern Drama will be synthesized and contrasted focusing in two of their most famous plays. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and his declared following British one, George Bernard Shaw will be considered through their famous respective plays "*A Doll's House*" and "*Pygmalion*". Their dramas came to the public in a very appropriate climate where other playwrights around Europe witnessed a remarkable resurgence and brought a relatively new spirit and a new life to the almost moribund theatre of the nineteenth century. Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* illustrate the kind of drama in which both writers excelled. Both plays, also called '*problem plays*', deal with the common theme of transformation of individuals focused in the two protagonists, Nora and Eliza. Both come alive from their inanimate existence to life, Eliza from the oppressions of her class and Nora from her life under patriarchy. These and other issues will be browsed within this paper.

Keywords: gender oppressions, "*problem plays*", transformation of the individual, woman's role.

Introduction

"*Pygmalion*" is one of the most famous plays of Bernard Shaw, the disciple of Henrik Ibsen, whose famous play "*A Doll's House*" is also taken into consideration.

Both playwrights have much in common as their plays are considered problem plays, and their characters and situations can be discussed from different points of view. Ibsen's masterpiece *A Dolls' House* published in 1879 in Italy is a realist play which reflects real life problems of unexceptional people. Although *Pygmalion* treats the problem of the reformation of the English speech, seems it does not have much in common with *A Doll's House* which treats the female role within a cage-house. But another point of view which permeates both plays is the transformation of the individual. This individual is the female character who lives under the power of the patriarchy or under the oppressions of social divisions. The two main characters of these plays, Nora of *A Doll's House* and Eliza of *Pygmalion*, have their peculiarities and similarities. The way the plays evolve are quite different from one another, the ways these women are transformed are also different, the target of the transformation is quite personal and self-centered from their men (one appears to be Nora's husband; the other is Eliza's professor), the inspiring goal of Nora and Eliza's transformation is their self-respect and their self-esteem; but anyway the attitudes and the behaviors of these two women are of much interest because they are not given the deserved place in family (Nora) or in society (Eliza).

Nora is the kingpin of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* treated like a doll by her husband who lures her with flatters. All she does during her marriage is taking care of the family and her children. She is a very devoted wife, mother and household. Is that enough? Is she satisfied? She seems to be quite happy at the beginning and responds with great affection to her husband's teasing. Her husband, Torvald, sees her detached from the society and treats her as a precious thing in his life, but he does not estimate her.

He calls her “a silly girl” regarding her as a plaything. He thinks that Nora’s capacities and duties lay only in the devotion to her husband and her children; while she discovers, as the play evolves, that she can go beyond mere wifehood bonds because she possesses capacities, intelligence, ambition and courage to go ahead in her self-realization. Nora’s courage is seen in the loan she takes out secretly in order to preserve Torvald’s health. She has lied to her husband by telling him to be her father’s money and thus committing a forgery upon her father’s signature in the contract. Her determination to pay off the debt by working and saving money in secret shows her ambition and her sacrifice for Torvald’s health.

Eliza is the main female character in Shaw’s *Pygmalion* written in 1912 and produced in 1913. The story is about this lower-class flower girl who is trained by a priggish professor, Henry Higgins how to become a duchess and to speak pure English according to the rules of the phonetics scientist. As the play is browsed to us, Eliza stays for 6 months at Higgins’ house to learn the good manners of a duchess. Meanwhile, Pickering, Higgins’ friend, unknowingly has influenced on her self-respect and dignity so that Eliza can not just parrot the speech of a duchess. As Eliza is shown to other people, such as Higgins’ mother or her friends, even at the ball, her speech and manners are those of a real duchess, but that is not enough. Higgins at last comes to understand that it is to be considered not only the way she pronounces, but what she pronounces. Thus, we do not have anymore a poor little flower girl who knows nothing else but selling flowers in the streets of London for two pence, but with a confident, well concerned grown up woman who aspires new ambitions for her life now on. In the final act of the play she makes a very remarkable observation that “*the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated*” (SparkNotes Editors, n.d.)³²⁸ which transmits the very essence of her inner state through her transformation.

The utilization of Nora and Eliza

As the title itself suggests, *A Doll’s House*, Nora is presented as a mere doll for her husband within the walls of her house. She is treated like a useful object, because everything Torvald needs is a wife, children and a family to be gazed at. His social position requires such an appearance no matter how it is inside. He is a man with some reputation in the town so he needs to present a well-devoted wife to her husband and children. Torvald holds that Nora needs not to think about anything, she can not take any responsibilities over the family. All she has to do is take care of the children and be a satisfactory toy for her husband. Being regarded as a doll makes her feel empty and unimportant inside, with no feelings or thoughts. In poor words Torvald thinks he is married to an object-wife underestimating Nora as a human being.

It’s more or less the same with Eliza with the big difference that Higgins is not her husband, but happens to be a phonetics scientist that she met by accident under the portico of St Paul’s church in Covent Garden. When this prudish professor finds out that Eliza’s way of speaking might be of special interest in his field, he decides to have her as a useful object for academic research. The superiority that upper class in the Victorian England takes ground upon lower ones proves the deepness of social strata divisions. The important thing is that this does not show the superiority in values or virtues between people, but superiority due only to social belongings. Higgins treats Eliza as plasticine in his hands, and it seems he is a little boy shaping it in different forms until he finds the perfect shape for his toy. In this sense, the finding of *Pygmalion* as a title is appropriate and meaningful, although Higgins’ “Galatea” is quite different and unpredicted from the source one. Galatea, being a statue, came to life from the love of her creator; while Eliza, being a flower girl from the slums of the city, was introduced to nobility from the ambition of Higgins to prove his scientific theories. Thus their relationship is based on reciprocal interests, but one taking advantage upon the other. One peculiarity of the plays of Shaw, turning everything topsy-turvy, is seen here among Higgins and Eliza, where she is being exploited which leads to her rebellion and to an open end.

The idea of possession and materialization

Both Nora and Eliza come to light in the play from their former continuous oppressions by male characters, a husband and a high class professor. Torvald did not think of Nora being a woman, but she was regarded only as a wife and a mother. Nobody noticed Eliza until that rainy evening under the portico of Saint Paul’s church in Covent Garden.

³²⁸ SparkNotes Editors. (n.d.). SparkNote on *Pygmalion*. Retrieved March 29, 2011, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/pygmalion/>

Nora as a doll is owned by a model husband, father and citizen.³²⁹ (Shaw, 1864) All the play is situated in only one room which shows the limited space Nora is disposed to, the cage she has been keyed in, the entrapment she finds herself; all those stressing the realistic aspect of the play. According to Torvald, social duties are divided into man affairs and woman devotions. He thinks he possesses a wife, not that he is married to her. Coming to know this Nora takes ambitious decisions for her life; she wants to find and develop her personality so she leaves home and refuses to meet her children again until she thinks she has the right dignity for doing it. Her rebellion seems to be a pure moral act. Her wrath brings to us the civil protest against the patriarchy and the prejudices of the society with sharp masculine thoughts. The wife in the family has no space to think freely, to cooperate in actions, to take decisions for her or for the family. Nora's rebellion was a surprise for the time it happened, because woman emancipation does not concern only wife-husband relationship, or mother-child links, but primarily determines the dimensions of her personality. (Papagjoni, 2004)³³⁰ Torvald is astonished to hear Nora talking about other concerns which seems impossible to him. This makes him think that Nora is insane, mad, ungrateful, childish, blind and incompetent. Her self-esteem is too low because of her husband who has treated her like a doll for eight years of marriage, and now suddenly like an unimportant thing at his house. All he is concerned to, is to save his reputation in the society, like many a moralist to keep up the appearances with the cost of having a double standard. All this is unacceptable for Nora, so she is going on her way trying to become a human being:

Nora: *What do you consider my holiest duties?*

Helmer: *Do I need to tell you that? Your duties to your husband and to your children.*

Nora: *I have other duties equally sacred.*

Helmer: *Impossible! What duties do you mean?*

Nora: *My duties toward myself.*

Helmer: *Before all else you are a wife and a mother.*

Nora: *That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are - or at least that I should try to become one. (A Doll's House, Act 3). (Goldman, 1914)³³¹*

What about Eliza? She is treated no better than Nora but she reacts differently. Eliza is more independent than Nora and has got self-esteem since the very beginning of the play. She believes in herself and her capacities ever since she accepts to being taught in becoming a duchess. Shaw's theory of the life's force which drives man to procreation is what all species aim at for their continuation. Thus the dominant agent of this impulse is the woman endowed with a subtle energy, will-power and sensitivity which goes beyond the intellect. (Ansaldo, Giuli, Zanichelli; 2006)³³² Both Eliza and Higgins are gifted with intelligence and strong will-power, but only Eliza shows great sensitivity. Due to this sensitivity, a sharp conflict between them occurs and shows the traditional role of women's dependence on men. Considering this, Eliza goes through another form of gender discrimination, not within a family by one's husband but by social divisions into noble class and poor. Social roles in the Victorian era were viewed as natural and largely fixed: there was perceived to be something inherently, fundamentally unique about a noble versus an unskilled laborer and vice versa. (Napierkowski, 1998)³³³ As it will be considered later, Liza's ability to fool society about her "real" identity raises questions about appearances. She goes beyond the conventional notions of the society by disregarding them because she feels she can not fit to them. First she was an unimportant flower girl who tried to make a living, but no one traced her existence. Suddenly she became of interest to someone, not as a human being but as a species who utters words in a deplorable way. This man belongs to the noble class and thinks has the right to use Eliza for his research once she has agreed to be taught to speak like a lady in a flower shop.

² Shaw, B. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Hill and Wang, Inc., London, 1964 (sixth edition) pp.84-87

³³⁰ Papagjoni, J., *Dialog me Teatrin Boteror*, "Shkenca", Tirane, 2004 (my translation)

³³¹ Goldman, E., *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*, Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914; The Gorham Press, Boston, U.S.A. (Document maintained at: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Writings/Drama/doll.html> by the SunSITE Manager)

³³² Ansaldo, M., Giuli, G., Zanichelli, M. G. *Golden Pages-A Short History and Anthology of Literature in English*, Petrini Editore, Torino, 2006 pp. 220-227

³³³ "Pygmalion: Themes." Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1998. eNotes.com. January 2006. 10 April 2011. <http://www.enotes.com/pygmalion/themes>

The social class divisions are present throughout the play: in the descriptions of poor lodgings of Eliza (end of Act I), Higgins' luxurious house (beginning of Act II), Mrs. Higgins' comfortable drawing room (beginning of Act III), contrasts in their outer appearance, differences in way of behaving and speaking. All these differences influence Higgins character and behavior, making him act like a selfish, spoiled child, careless about other people's feelings, (Kadija, 2001)³³⁴ and feeling disdainful over them. He does not care about Eliza's feelings or thoughts; he pretends superiority over her insulting her many times by saying 'squashed cabbage leaf', 'draggled-tailed' or 'guttersnipe' etc. During her stay at Higgins' house she complains of having become a slave, she has been treated like an object all the time, like Higgins' property. She has worked so hard in learning Higgins' lessons meaning that she has the right stamina for doing things right. So well she learns to behave like a lady that no one can recognize her even at the ambassador's party. At this point, acting like a duchess but not being a real one, treated like an object but being a woman, she is disappointed to feel herself a useless person. Higgins attitude towards her does not change even after his successful experiment. When he asks her to fetch his slippers for him, in a moment of rebellion she throws them away to his face showing that she belongs to nobody and decides to go away to make a life on her own. Higgins unwillingness to let her go means the recognition of her as a functional housemaid, thus she is once more materialized by him not only for his scientific purposes.

The symbol of money

Money is a symbol used in both plays to denote different attitudes towards it. Both Nora and Eliza have strange relationships with money throughout the plays. Nora does not run the family economically because she is not capable of it according to her husband, Torvald. On the other hand, Eliza is quite independent earning and spending her own money as a flower girl.

When Nora's husband becomes ill they have to find a considerable amount of money to pay for their trip to Italy for his recovery. Considering the importance of the case, Nora takes the risk to get a loan and making a forgery by signing the contract in the name of her father. This is only the beginning of a huge sacrifice for her, because she has to pay it in secret without Torvald's knowledge. How can she pay it? She does secret jobs and puts money apart to pay the loan on time. Here is another sacrifice of hers showing Nora's great attempt to put things right by herself. Torvald could never admit her wife's forgery even for such a sublime reason like his recovery from illness. This is a sign of love, compassion and respect from her, but this can be a very harmful stigma for Torvald's reputation. He does not want to lose the status, so he does not estimate her act but blames Nora for her wrongdoing. The shallowness of the society they live in is nothing more but to keep up the appearances in other people's eyes. That is why he pretends to be generous by permitting Nora stay home. As a sign of his forgiveness he happily exclaims: "*There is something indescribably sweet and soothing to a man in having forgiven his wife - honestly forgiven her, from the bottom of his heart*" (*A Doll's House* Act 3). Nora does not care about his generosity any more but decides to leave him then and there by going out into the real world to find out its reality for herself and to gain some position not fundamentally false, refusing to see her children again until she is fit to be in charge of them. (Shaw, 1964)³³⁵ Considering her decision, Nora is not concerned about the money and the belongings of her husband, so she leaves everything, any joy and luxury she had at her house in order to find her lost dignity.

On the other side, money is something worth fighting for according to Eliza. Most of the characters in the play are concerned a great deal about money. The difference between social classes is mainly based on money and property. These people seem to depend on money in order to fulfill their needs. This causes Eliza to want to change her appearance and speech³³⁶ (Laweag, 2007) in order to have a better life than before. She is very pragmatic and

³³⁴ Kadija, R., *Modernism and Postmodernism in English Literature*, AlbDesign, Tirane, 2001, pp.68-82

³³⁵ Shaw, B. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Hill and Wang, Inc., London, 1964 (sixth edition) p. 87

³³⁶ www. <http://secretibenglish.blogspot.com>, 17 April, 2007, *Symbolism in "A Doll's House" and "Pygmalion"*

level-headed so she admits to collaborate for the experiment since she has nothing to lose, but gains over poverty and social class discrimination. First, it is to be noticed the courage of Eliza asking for speech lessons at Higgins laboratory offering him a considerable sum regarding her incomes. This means that she is really a sassy flower girl from the slums, but she inspires to leave the place one day or at least tries to do so at all costs without losing her moral integrity. When she at last becomes a duchess according to the speech and clothes appearance, she claims to have some money to start the flower business.

These are some of the features of these two women described by the notable playwrights, defendants of their rights. Both protagonists, Nora of Ibsen and Eliza of Shaw are pure examples of the new area of changes that was arriving for women all around the world.

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