



The Archetype “Pygmalion” in *Back to Methuselah*

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Abstract

Pygmalion is an archetypal mythological figure, which reflected in many poems, drama plays and short stories. *Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw, clearly referenced to this mythical archetype. In 1921, Shaw wrote *Back to Methuselah* (1921). *Pygmalion*, written at the end of his second decade as a playwright. Shaw never freed himself from the irritating demands of these unconscious images. Another decade passed and Pygmalion appeared again as an actual character in *Back to Methuselah*.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Pygmalion, *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw, Archetype

1. The Myth “Pygmalion”

Pygmalion is a legendary figure of Cyprus in Greek mythology who was a king and a sculptor. He is most familiar from Ovid’s narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, in book 10 of it, Pygmalion was a Cypriot sculptor who carved a woman out of ivory. According to Ovid, Pygmalion declared that he was “not interested in women”, but then found his statue was so beautiful and realistic that he fell in love with it. On Aphrodite’s festival day, Pygmalion made offerings at the altar of Aphrodite, where he quietly wished for a bride who would be “the living likeness of my ivory girl”. When he returned home, he kissed his ivory statue, and found that its lip felt warm. Aphrodite had granted his wish, and Pygmalion married the ivory sculpture which changed to a woman under Aphrodite’s blessing ([1], p. 184).

This mythological story is reflected in many poems, drama plays and short stories, and the popularity of the Pygmalion myth surged in the 19th century. References to the myth are reflected in poems Robert Graves' *Pygmalion to Galatea*, Patrick Kavanagh's *Pygmalion*; in short stories such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birth-Mark and Rappaccini's Daughter*, Issac Asimov's *Galatea*; and also in plays as George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* and Willy Russell's *Educating Rita*.

In *The Birth-Mark*, a short story by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, Aylmer is a character whose story likes Pygmalion's. Aylmer is a brilliant and recognized scientist and philosopher who drops his focus from his career and experiments to marry the beautiful Georgiana, who is physically perfect except for a small red birthmark on her cheek. As the story progresses, Aylmer becomes unnaturally obsessed with the birthmark on Georgiana's cheek. He dreams of cutting the birthmark out of her cheek and then continuing all the way to her heart. Georgiana declares that she would rather risk her life, having the birthmark removed from her cheek. After kinds of experiments, Aylmer brings her the potion, and she drinks it then promptly falls asleep. Aylmer watches and rejoices as the birthmark fades little by little, however, once the birthmark fades completely, Georgiana dies. Aylmer thinks of himself as a godlike creator, he says that "Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be ([2], p. 4)." Aylmer believes that he could transform an imperfect woman to a perfect through his efforts.

In *Educating Rita*, a drama is written by British playwright Willy Russell. This drama follows the relationship between a hairdresser and a university lecturer. The hairdresser, Rita, dissatisfied with the routine of her work and social life, seeks inner growth by signing up for and attending an Open University course in English Literature. Rita meets Dr. Frank for the first time in the class. Frank is a middle-aged, alcoholic career academic who has taken on the tutorship to pay for his drink. He is impressed by Rita's verve and earnestness. As time goes on, Rita becomes more and more like other students, she begins to discuss literature and speaks properly. Frank becomes enamored of her, and he makes insinuations about wanting to run away with Rita. In the play's final scene, however, Frank was sent to Australia alone. This drama also borrows the story of *Pygmalion* from Greek myth.

The word "Archetype" first entered into English usage in the 1540s. It is a constantly-recurring symbol or motif in literature, painting, or mythology. This definition refers to the recurrence of characters or ideas sharing similar traits throughout various, seemingly unrelated cases in classic storytelling [3]. Pygmalion is an archetype, reflected in so many stories and dramas. *Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw, clearly referenced this mythical archetype.

2. Shaw's *Pygmalion*

Like all of Bernard Shaw's great dramas, *Pygmalion* (1912) is a complicated story. This drama has five acts.

The drama begins with a flower girl, Eliza. When Eliza tries to sell flowers to the Colonel, a bystander informs her that a man is writing down everything she says. The man is Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics. Higgins tells the colonel that he could transform the flower girl to a duchess merely by teaching her to speak properly. These words interest Eliza, she wants to make changes in her life and become more mannerly to get a job in a flower shop. On the next day, in Higgins' house, his housekeeper Mrs. Pearce tells him that a young girl wants to see him. Eliza tells him that she will pay for the language lessons, but Higgins shows no interest. The colonel makes a bet with him, and Higgins agrees to teach Eliza how to speak like the nobles. After a period of learning, Higgins tells his mother that he has picked up a flower girl whom he has been teaching. Mrs. Higgins is entertaining visitors in her drawing room. Eliza enters and talks about the weather and her family in beautifully modulated tones, but the content she says remains unchanged. But someone thinks that Eliza is a princess. When they come back to home, Eliza sits silently, but the colonel congratulates Higgins on winning the bet, but nobody cares about her future. Higgins said that he has been sick of teaching for the last two months. Eliza upsets and leaves. Higgins is mad about her leaving, but Eliza comes back at ease. She thinks that Higgins never show any respect for her, and she decides to marry Freddy. They invited the colonel and Mrs. Higgins to their wedding, and Eliza leaves with Freddy.

Through this drama's name, Shaw has his own intention that he tells a story about creation. Higgins in this drama is Pygmalion. He made Eliza turn to someone new by changing her appearance, talking, and behavior. In some extent, Higgins creates Eliza and gives Eliza a new life. Shaw, however, adds something new to his drama. Shaw manages to keep the plot almost similar to that of the Roman myth, however, he does tweak it by not letting the central male character, Higgins fall in love with his own creation, Eliza.

Although Higgins is a Pygmalion character, Shaw gives him some different personalities, arrogance, conceit and reason. Higgins is a successful phonetics. At first, he never shows any respect to Eliza that he doesn't consider her human, and he never disguises himself. In the first two acts, his expressions of contempt for her shocked Pickering and Mrs. Pearce. "This creature with her kerbstone English," he says, "[has] no right to live." He refers to her as a "squashed cabbage leaf" "baggage", "draggletailed guttersnipe" in short, as he himself says, an object which is "incapable of understanding anything" ([4], p. 21). Comparing to the mythical Pygmalion, Higgins is more reason. The mythical Pygmalion, at last, falls in love with his creation, the statue. Higgins, however, has no feelings for Eliza. Higgins never thinks of Eliza as a potential lovable character and sees her as nothing but a means to an end. He sees Eliza is a mere accoutrement or an instrument that can be used to experiment in order to boost his own ego ([5], p. 66).

Statues do not speak. Even the ivory virgin who fulfills the idolatrous fantasies of Ovid's Pygmalion does not utter a single word, pliantly yielding to the sculptor's masterhand ([6], p. 419). Eliza, however, has her own discourse on the rela-

tionship between the creator and the creation. She has escaped not only from the proletarian squalor of “the gutter” but the stultifying rigidity of a myth that condemned her to perpetual objectification. Empowered by speech, Eliza can leave her pedestal, can declare herself autonomous, can choose her own lover and determine her own career. It is a Utopian reading; but myths are not so easily shaken off. Eliza’s voice, precisely the index of her apparent self-assertion, is not her own. From the level of phonemes through the grammatical structure to the pragmatics of her utterances, it is her speech that Higgins has magisterially crafted with the same tyrannical self-absorption as every other Pygmalion ([6], p. 420). There is a conflict between Eliza and Higgins. At the beginning, their conflicts are not appear, the turning points show conventionally at the midpoint of the play, at “Mrs. Higgins at Home”. Eliza by now has taken considerable training in speech and manners, and some people have already thought her as a princess that Higgins’ experiment makes a hit. When they back to Higgins’ house, however, Pickering and Higgins talk nothing to Eliza, they only stuck in their joy about the success of the experiment. Eliza, at this time, begins to consider her future, and she found that these two men did not think about where she could go. Eliza has her own self-awareness, not like the statue. She comes to Higgins’ experiment for a better work chance, and now, she considers her life, marriage, and even future. She understands that she is not a flower girl anymore, she could not live like before.

What the nature of the conflict between them? In spite of the initial unevenness of the experiment, Eliza fights back in an outrage at Higgins’s contempt for her, and is probably attracted to him at the same time. In any case, conforming to the aspirations of the poor, she wants to improve her economic lot. The conflict at this point arises because the two take very different views of the lessons: to Eliza they are a mutually advantageous commercial arrangement wherein Higgins is to get paid by her in order to teach her to talk properly to enable her to open a flower shop; to Higgins, on the other hand, the commercial and economic factors are simply nonexistent. Training her so as to pass her off as a duchess is an inspired folly done for the fun of it, a challenge because, as he says, “she’s so deliciously low-so horribly dirty.” Yet he meets this challenge in dead earnest, and with devastating consequences to the personality of Eliza ([7], p. 32). Eliza has the qualities of character-manifested in the “good ear and a quick tongue”, Higgins hopes for when he decides to take her on, which enable her to rise out of her lowly origins. Higgins is more sophisticated but equally accurate when he neatly summarizes his creation when Eliza complains that he has made trouble for her by making her a lady: “Would the world ever have been made if its maker had been afraid of making trouble? Making life means making trouble ([4], p. 79).”

The ending of Shaw’s *Pygmalion* shows obvious differences from the myth. In the myth, Pygmalion married with his creation, but Shaw did not make his character falls in love with Eliza.

Pygmalion is a Faust work. Higgins is a Faustian figure. He wants to play God, to create a new life of Eliza. Higgins wants to teach and change Eliza, because that she helps to make progress in his researches and experiments, Eliza just like a tool for him to pursue any new knowledge. This drama also has a Faustian ending, which more like a bad ending to some extent. It highlights the flawed dynamic between a creator and his creation, upset as soon as the creature's own consciousness must be acknowledged. This ending, however, is doomed. Eliza is a live person, and she has her own thoughts and self-awareness, which means that Higgins only could create something new on surface, not the nature that made by God in their land. Having outgrown Higgins, Eliza can successfully break the mold of the myth, escaping the submissive plasticity of other Galateas. *Pygmalion* may not altogether subvert its inherited power structure, but it does subvert the romantic impulse that altogether protects this power structure from open challenge ([6], p. 426).

3. The “Pygmalion” in *Back to Methuselah*

World War I is a watershed for Shaw. During this period, Shaw wrote *Back to Methuselah* (1921). It expounds his philosophy of creative evolution in an extended dramatic parable that progresses through time from the Garden of Eden to 31,920 CE. This play represents Shaw's more mature conception, and he mentions many his former works in this drama. *Pygmalion* is written at the end of his second decade as a playwright. Shaw never freed himself from the irritating demands of these unconscious images. Another decade passed and *Pygmalion* appeared again as an actual character in *Back to Methuselah*. Nine years later, in 1921, in this play, the character *Pygmalion* attempts to assemble a mechanical man, as Henry Higgins created Eliza.

The character *Pygmalion* appears in the Act five “As Far as Thought can Reach: A. D. 31,920”. This act is in a time when short-lived people are a mere footnote in ancient story, and the great longevity is the norm. The opening scene is a sunlit glade at the foot of a hill, and there is a marble altar. In the glade, a group of youths and maidens, all appearing to be eighteen or older are dancing gracefully to music played on flutes. A stranger, physically in the prime of life but with a wrinkled and timeworn face, comes down the stairs and contemplates. He is an “Ancient”, and he is invited to join the festivities. The Ancient refuses, saying he is too mature for enjoy, and ancients must stick to their own ways of enjoyment. He leaves and the children pledge to stay forever young, but Chloe, somewhat older, says she feels drawn toward the ancients' way of life. It will be a busy day at the nursery: a birth is scheduled followed by the Festival of the Artists. A child is ready to bear in the egg, after her born, she takes a few uncertain steps, but quickly learns to walk, then the Ancients name her Amaryllis. Amaryllis provides amusing interludes throughout the remainder of the play. The festival of the artists begins. Their two greatest sculptors will show their latest masterpieces. Arjillax and Martellus arrive, but Martellus brought nothing

and Arjillax brought busts of Ancients. Martellus, instead of sculptures, he has brought a scientist, Pygmalion, who is a greater artist than the world has seen before. Pygmalion has successfully created a pair of living, artificial human beings and is ready to display them to the audience. The creations are a man and a woman, noble in appearance, beautiful to look at and splendidly attired. They are plainly modeled from the primitives of the twentieth century. Pleasant at first, their behavior soon turns murderous and Pygmalion is killed during his efforts to control them. The Ancients destroy the couple painlessly. Their remains are collected, and burnt at Pygmalion's laboratory, which is also destroyed. The ancients make use of the occasion to explain the realities of life to the young ones. At last, the ghosts of Adam, Eve, the serpent and Lilith come, each has a say, and Lilith prophesies an end of life's slavery to matter.

From this act, the character Pygmalion shows differences from Shaw's *Pygmalion*. In Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the Pygmalion considers as the figure Higgins. He is a phonetics, who creates a new life for Eliza. Pygmalion in *Back to Methuselah*, also appears as a creator, but a scientist who creates an artificial couple of machines. He has the eager confidence and fantasy of science, he says, "But hitherto the vital force has eluded us; so it has had to create machinery for itself. It has created and developed bony structures of the requisite strength, and clothed them with cellular tissue of such amazing sensitiveness that the organs it forms will adapt their action to all the normal variations in the air they breathe, the food they digest, and the circumstances about which they have to think. Yet, as these live bodies, as we call them, are only machines after all, it must be possible to construct them mechanically ([8], p. 281)." Pygmalion, also a God like character, wants to create the living human from the machines. He dreams of creating through his limitless efforts and knowledge, "I tried thousands of combinations before I succeeded in producing anything that would fix high-potential Life Force ([8], p. 283)." His experiments, however, succeed eventually, and he realizes that there is something horrible, "I was able to make a sort of monster: a thing without arms or legs; and it really and truly lived for half-an-hour." "My first man was the ghastliest creature: a more dreadful mixture of horror and absurdity than you who have not seen him can conceive ([8], p. 284)." At this time, maybe, he realizes that his creation would bring death for him. He thinks that he creates the living human, but they are conscious, and he also teaches them to talk and read.

The character Pygmalion has a Faustian ending. After his creation, he says, "The best tissues we can manufacture will not take as high potentials as the natural product: that is where Nature beats us ([8], p. 287)." He realizes that human could not like nature to create the living things. The female creation, wrenches stone to her husband, wants to kill him. Pygmalion is dead in the process. This ending of Pygmalion, means that, Pygmalion becomes the slave of his creation, he overpasses the borderline that he could not like the omnipotent God, and he comes to grief eventually.

4. Conclusion

This thesis introduces the myth of Pygmalion, Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and analyzes the archetype Pygmalion in his another work *Back to Methuselah*. This thesis will enrich the study of George Bernard Shaw and his works.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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