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Source: Shaw, Vol. 25 (2005), pp. 73-81
Published by: Penn State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40681708
Accessed: 24-08-2016 20:35 UTC

REFERENCES
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PYGMALION AS NARRATIVE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE CENTURIES

From My Fair Lady and Educating Rita to the critical theorizing of J. M. Miller and John Fowles, the tale of Pygmalion, with some re-visioning, has permeated much of the twentieth-century narrative scene. Perhaps the best-known version of Ovid’s tale is Shaw’s Pygmalion, which deals most overtly with the shaping of a self in relationship to social constructions and expectations. Shaw’s version of the original tale merges internal and external aspects of identity formation, a move that places Shaw solidly in the center of the transition from nineteenth- to twentieth-century understandings of identity and its creation. Shaw’s Higgins and Eliza set the stage, so to speak, for later narrative writers such as John Fowles, Muriel Spark, and Ian McEwan to explicate and eventually to problematize the construction by a Pygmalion, such as Higgins, of the identity of a Galatea, such as Eliza. At the core of Shaw’s play is the tension between the fiction of reality and the fiction of the fictive that later writers examine.

Shaw’s version of the Pygmalion tale offers two basic revisions of Ovid’s story: the change from supernatural agency to natural explanations, and the replacement of physical creation by linguistic transformation. The relationship between the supernatural and natural in Shaw’s play is evident at the beginning as the scene opens in a storm possessing, as Errol Durbach points out, “all the portents of supernatural awe,” with lightning and thunder to accompany the meeting of Eliza and Freddy, which initiates all that is to come. Yet Durbach also notes that the play itself does not sustain this mythically auspicious beginning: “[Shaw] empties the process of all its mystery and insists upon the commonplace nature of the transfiguration” (23). Durbach sees this emptying as reason enough to ignore the classical roots and search elsewhere for influence. Irrespective of influence, Shaw’s revision of the story allows him to collapse the distinction between the creator-god and the creator-artist, between the supernatural and the natural. By replacing Ovid’s Pygmalion-Venus duo with Higgins alone, Shaw raises
issues of morality and ethics relevant to his audience. A goddess can, perhaps, be forgiven for meddling in human affairs, for acting to satisfy the whim of one petitioner by manipulating the life of another. But does it necessarily follow that a Higgins can receive the same forgiveness? The ills that potentially could result from Higgins's "experimentation" are social ills as well as individual ones, exacting a higher toll on a larger number of people than just Eliza. By providing natural explanations as a replacement for Ovid's supernatural interventions, Shaw removes the play from the realm of absolute morality, from questions of absolute good and absolute evil, and instead situationalizes the morality. By replacing supernatural agency with natural, Shaw forces the tale squarely into the center of turn-of-the-century society, making Pygmalion more than a legend or fairy tale, making it an indictment of stratified, class-based values, or, at the very least, a cause for thought.

Shaw's attempt to place the tale in a frame of reference familiar to his audience resulted in the need to shift the focus from that of physical creation, since physical creation is impossible to effect on a natural level. The focus becomes language, rather than stone, as medium for the artistic endeavor. Just as physical creation gave Galatea human life, linguistic creation gives Eliza social life. In this, Shaw aligns himself with earlier novelists. Tony Crowley notes that in late nineteenth-century novels "the bitterness and dangers which surround 'Standard English' are insistently portrayed."7 Shaw uses this nineteenth-century notion of language as, in Crowley's words, "crucial to the making of the social self,"8 to explore questions of selfhood. As Jean Reynolds points out, Shaw "attacked . . . the popular belief that every human possesses a stable and unchanging essence, or self."9 Such a social-constructivist stance allowed Shaw to span the gap between the Victorian concern with social issues and the objective world of which a character was a part, and the current concern with the individual and subjectivity, with the thoughts and emotions of the character who realizes his or her separateness from other minds. On such a dual level, between self and other, between internal and external, Eliza's story becomes one that examines not only the ramifications of providing a spoken English at odds with a speaker's background but also demonstrates that the formation of Eliza's new identity owes as much—if not more—to factors outside Higgins's control as it does to his tinkering and training. Eliza's own observations, for instance, of how Pickering's treatment of people differs from Higgins's provide her with more insight into quality social interactions than do Higgins's directives on behavior.

In essence, Shaw's revisions of Ovid come down to a shift from ontology (Galatea's physical creation) to epistemology (a consideration of how Eliza's identity was formed), a movement that anticipates differences in the handling of identity between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century
narratives. Nineteenth-century fiction dealt largely with the social world; it tended to portray the everyday, often excising the supernatural in favor of the credible.\(^6\) Both Patricia Waugh and Charles Glicksberg note similar ideas prior to Alexander’s work. “The individual,” Waugh writes, “is always finally integrated into the social structure,”\(^7\) a state of affairs that results in the self being, in Glicksberg’s words, “conveyed in terms of its social coordinates.”\(^8\) Higgins’s assessment of Eliza provides an excellent example. Social identity, class, education, manners, socioeconomic background, accent—these are the pedigree by which a Higgins can “know” an Eliza. Identity is merely breeding, a “realist” understanding of self that suffers from an inability to resolve paradox. What, for instance, should be done with an Eliza Doolittle whose new accent contradicts her economic status and her parentage? In such a situation, it becomes easier to ignore the duality than to address it; Clara embraces Eliza’s “bad speech” as the new small talk because she cannot otherwise assimilate it into the understanding of Eliza she has formed based on Eliza’s sophisticated, upper-class appearance and physical location at Mrs. Higgins’s at-home day. The nineteenth-century mind-set of characters such as Clara suffers from the “confident belief that there is a true self to be found”\(^9\)—with self as notably singular and “real.”

At the opposite extreme from this fiction of reality, the fiction of the fictive sees the self as “stripped of ontological truth.”\(^10\) Rather than a singular “reality,” the self is a multiplicity of tenuous and easily discarded roles. Even the social identity of the fiction of reality lacks continuity when seen through the lens of twentieth-century understanding. As linguist and semiotician M. A. K. Halliday explains, “social roles are combinable, and the individual, as a member of society, occupies not just one role but many at a time, always through the medium of language. . . . Here the individual is seen as the configuration of a number of roles defined by the social relationships in which he enters; from these roles he synthesizes a personality.”\(^11\) The only “real” self in the twentieth century is this multiply created one. Cedric Watts claims that the importance of literature as a field of study rests on this very fact: “We all, in our lives, are partly fact and partly fiction. We are partly independent selves . . . and partly inscribed selves, inscribed by social custom, tradition, the media; we make stories of our lives and try to live stories.”\(^12\) Watts’s assessment of humanity’s penchant for storytelling applies to the characters in narratives as well. They tell stories about their lives and try to live stories, much as Eliza longs to live the “flower shop story.”

Watts’s notion of inscription is an important one for Shaw and the twentieth century. Linguists such as Elinor Ochs emphasize the role played by language for “construct[ing] not only [one’s] own identit[y] but the social identities of other interlocutors,”\(^13\) while novelists such as John Fowles complain of characters writing lives of their own rather than living the one
their author tries to write for them. Dramatists such as Luigi Pirandello send characters out searching for an author to complete their story. The point of agreement among the three is inscription: "selves" can inscribe their own identities and those of others. As Robert N. St. Clair explains, "People are not only playwrights, because of the way in which they create their own roles and scripts in life, but are also actors who must perform these plans of social behavior. In addition, they are also the audience who socially edits their performance, and the critics who must evaluate them." St. Clair's metaphor of the drama is an apt one for the fiction of the fictive. As Pygmalionesque creators, individuals are involved in both creative and performative acts. They create "selves," roles for themselves—personae that allow them to celebrate, exonerate, indulge, protect, or deny who they really are. For others, they create selves that enable understanding, control, or even mere dismissal. The Shawian combination of the two fictions—the real and the fictive—joins this inner role-scripting and role-playing with outer societal impacts. Shaw's play asks, for instance, what is to be done with Eliza once she moves to a higher linguistic class without the corresponding financial means?

Eliza's plight highlights Shaw's joining of the two fictions. Ovid's version of Pygmalion deals largely with identity as physical self. Shaw and the twentieth century have refocused toward other conceptions of selfhood. Beyond the physical self, there exist other ways of thinking about identity or personhood. People have psychological selves, sociological selves, philosophical selves, and linguistic selves. Identity in twentieth-century narratives is formed of a composite of these selves. Higgins may change Eliza's linguistic and even physical selves so that she passes as a duchess, but Eliza herself changes her psychological and philosophical selves, largely through the auspices of her sociological self interacting with others such as Mrs. Higgins and Colonel Pickering. Shaw's work takes the concern with the external sociological self, common to much nineteenth-century literature, and merges it with other elements of selfhood, with the interior selves that concerned Modernists and the multiple selves emphasized in postmodern views. Shaw's handling of selfhood thus offers an ideal framework with which to analyze later narratives filled with "fictive" as well as "real" selves.

The central core of Shaw's Pygmalion project is this tension between the fiction of reality and the fiction of the fictive. As far as Higgins is concerned, Eliza's "reality" is merely her voice—initially "guttersnipe," eventually "duchess"—a diametrically opposed duality. Yet Shaw ensures that readers see the error of this viewpoint by having the socially accomplished Eliza revert to guttersnipe speech in moments of stress or excitement. As Lisa S. Starks asserts, "Eliza . . . learn[s] how to perform the 'feminine masquerade.'" The duchess "self" is thus only one of the assorted collections of stories that individuals, such as Eliza, can tell about
themselves, or that others can tell about them. Eliza’s “reality” is Shaw’s postscript—marriage to Freddy, flower shop, and all. Her “fiction” involves the entire collection of personae she has inhabited, whether or not they occupied legitimate social space. Thus Shaw asserts the primacy of both modes in locating a “real self,” collapsing the artificial dichotomy in order to include both external and internal factors in the piecing together of an individual identity.

Twentieth-century critics and novelists seem willing to further Shaw’s project, exploring the nature of identity through narrative and theory. For J. Hillis Miller, “prosopopoeia, Pygmalion’s creative gesture, is the correct name for what author, narrator, and reader do.”17 In a sense, then, every author, narrator, and reader is a Pygmalion, a Higgins, bringing to life or giving identity to the various selves of the story. Twentieth-century novelists, in their experimentation with narrative form and subject matter, have gone beyond what Miller suggests. If, as Miller argues, “what Pygmalion does is a usurpation of divine power,”18 then the Pygmalion project in the hands of modern and contemporary novelists must be changed to reflect their questioning of the omniscient, godlike role accorded to the Victorian author.

Perhaps the most well known instance of this questioning is John Fowles’s novel The French Lieutenant’s Woman.19 The novel is both a narrative and a theoretical treatise on the nature of the creative process of writing narratives. On the one hand, Fowles’s narrator admits to being a Pygmalion-figure, creating identities by virtue of his role as artist: “these characters I create”;20 on the other hand, as Silvio Gaggi points out, he also admits that “his characters can achieve an autonomy that makes them independent of his intentions and outside his control.”21 Although Fowles’s narrator sets out to tell—and control—the story according to the identities he creates, the characters may circumvent this by changing direction, as Charles does when he “gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy.”22 Fowles admits that the idea of the novelist as “stand[ing] next to God”23 is convention rather than fact, that the characters take on a life of their own. Whatever identity an author or narrator gives to characters may thus be superseded by identities characters create for themselves.

Many of Fowles’s characters play the role of Pygmalion-Higgins to an Eliza. Charles, for example, wears disguises to “conceal [his] true identity and to control the situation in which he finds himself”24—as when he plays the perfect gentleman rather than displaying his own disappointment over his disinherita. More significantly, as Frederick M. Holmes asserts, he also tries, much like Higgins does, “to possess [Sarah—his Eliza] by creating around her an explanatory fiction which he hopes to realize in action.”25 It is in the character of Sarah that we see the Pygmalion role collapsed with that of Galatea. “Unlike the other characters,” Holmes writes,
“[Sarah] is aware that the fiction she creates . . . is a fiction . . . design[ed] to move herself beyond the pale of conventional Victorian morality.” Rather than attempting either to construct identities for those around her or to assign herself a single role behind which she might hide, Sarah fashions her own identity as a shifting mask, which engages those around her by encouraging them to “see through their first mistaken identities . . . [and to] separate their real identities from their roles in the godgames,” which in this case equal society’s ploys. Here we see what Shaw’s Pygmalion tale hinted at: the full flowering of the concern with the self in all its performative multiplicity.

Fowles theorized overtly about these issues, but other novelists of the twentieth century have also followed Shaw’s lead and examined the epistemology of the self. Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier opens with the words “This is the saddest story I have ever heard,” a phrase that immediately casts Dowell, who claims to be retelling that story, in the role of artist and thus Pygmalion-figure. Ironically, Dowell fails to recognize or to acknowledge what his readers see quite clearly: that his presentation of characters is inconsistent. On the one hand, he claims to render them realistically, using facts, family histories, descriptions, adjectives, and images. Their identities, he seems to argue, are stable, the composite of all the little sociological details he provides. On the other hand, Dowell acknowledges that human nature is a “queer, shifty thing” and questions whether or not anyone can know “anything of any other heart—or of his own,” a more modernist attitude toward the self. Through Dowell, Ford’s rendering of a Pygmalion’s role shows it as an escape, an excuse or justification for one’s actions, and thus negative rather than creative and positive. Unlike Ovid’s Pygmalion, who creates a woman surpassing human beauty, or Shaw’s Higgins, who improves Eliza’s speech and provides the milieu that enables her to improve her thought-life, Dowell uses his creator prerogative to whitewash the truth, that he lacks the qualities his characters possess: passion, control, and a seeing eye.

Muriel Spark’s novel The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie also offers a picture of the tension between reality and fiction and between the external and internal aspects of a twentieth-century Pygmalion’s work. Miss Brodie, a teacher at a girls’ school, chooses a group of girls to be hers “for life.” She assigns them identities based on externals—math, vowel sounds, beauty—which they further with such externals as the way in which they wear a hat. These are balanced by internals—“training them up in her confidence” or enlisting their support against the “gang” that opposes her. The resulting group identity exists as a way for Miss Brodie to control the situation but more important as a way for her to define herself. Her methods for creating her “set” in fact construct for the girls her own identity in two ways. By telling stories of her past—and especially ones that change to fit the new
situations of daily life—she sets herself up as a character in a story. Thus “Miss Brodie” floats around as a person in her own right, beyond merely her physical identity as “teacher,” useful for thought and full of creative potential. Sandy and Jenny, two of her “girls,” invent both the true love story of Miss Brodie and her correspondence, for example.

Miss Brodie constructs herself most fully, however, through constructing the girls’ individual identities. The identity she desires for herself—that of a woman in her prime—is the composite of the identities she creates for her girls. In splitting the girls into one-dimensional selves—Sandy has insight and Rose has instinct, for example—Miss Brodie dissects her “prime,” each girl representing one aspect of it. The identities she has given to them are really also parts of her own identity, so that, taken together as a “set,” the girls form one Miss Brodie. The reader learns, far before Miss Brodie does, that her methods will fail, as the girls variously betray her or shake off her influence. Ultimately, in Spark’s novel, identity involves some tension between inner and outer and between real and fictive. Like Shaw’s Higgins, Miss Brodie shapes identity; as does Shaw’s Pygmalion, she creates something unpredictable and ultimately beyond her control—girls with minds of their own, each an Eliza-Galatea who would choose to move out and marry Freddie rather than fetch slippers for the rest of her life.

Such instances of Pygmalionism persist in more recent narratives as well. John Le Carre’s The Little Drummer Girl offers the story of one person living a theatrical part scripted in order to catch a terrorist. After the terrorist is caught at the novel’s end, when the heroine Charlie’s several fictions collide, her leading man in the theater invents lines to cover her lapse on stage. Charlie’s unspoken reply highlights the Pygmalion role played by Joseph, her agent-runner in what Le Carre called the “theater of the real”: “You need a Joseph,” Charlie thinks, “Our Jose here will do you lines for all occasions.” The novel as a whole deals with the question of whether an individual can wear another identity, can act as a Galatea under the command of a Pygmalion, without actually becoming that identity, without adding that role as one more aspect of her self.

More recently still, Ian McEwan’s Atonement, published in the twenty-first century, offers a glimpse of how current novelists may view Pygmalion’s acts. Although it is too early in the century to state definitively, it seems that narrative writers’ current view of Pygmalion ascribes (in McEwan’s novel, to Briony) a self-awareness of the problems caused by playing with another’s identity, and the inability to refrain from it nonetheless. McEwan’s book initially just tells a story, that of a young female author-to-be; partway through we learn that she is writing what happened as an atonement for the problems caused by her earlier Pygmalionesque activities. This section of the novel claims to be the “real” story, but a second
first-person ending supposedly written years later openly discusses the character-novelist's return to a godlike role by having added a false happy ending to that "real" story. McEwan's novel emphasizes the problems that occur when a Pygmalion figure sees an external event and presumes that she knows and understands the internal aspects of it, as when Briony observes Cecilia and Robbie making love in the library and assumes that Robbie is attacking Cecilia rather than that it is mutual, ascribes to him the identity of rapist, and goes on to have him convicted of a later half-witnessed crime he did not commit. Just as Higgins reshaped Eliza's life, Briony reshapes the course of Robbie's. However, unlike Higgins, Briony becomes aware of it as a failing or a sin, yet she continues to reshape Robbie's story even after his death.

The period from Shaw's Higgins to McEwan's Briony encompasses almost one hundred years, yet today's writers of narratives remain concerned with issues that Shaw brought to life through Higgins's bet: that identity is something more than simply its external social markers; that there is a process by which identities are formed; and that there are social ramifications in the reshaping. Although a Higgins-Pygmalion may focus largely on external details in his identity-creation project, the actual transformation transcends the superficial: Galatea lives and breathes; Eliza becomes self-aware—of her past, her changes, and her inability to fit into Higgins's social structures. In literature, as in life, individuals are "active, creative, experiencing beings . . . who participate in the construction of their own identities" as well as in attempting to construct the identities of others. At times debased, at times reshaped, the tale of Pygmalion—the creation of a living being—nevertheless appears repeatedly in literature. The twentieth-century novelist is a Pygmalion creating numerous other Pygmalions, each one unable—or merely unwilling—to cease playing with identity. Just as Higgins meddled in Eliza's life, Eliza will persist in meddling in Higgins's, even as she rearranges Freddy's; each Pygmalion becomes someone's Galatea; each Galatea, someone's Pygmalion, so that the once godlike author has perhaps not so much absconded as been overrun by too many creative fingers in the narrative pie.

Notes


PYGMALION AS NARRATIVE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE CENTURIES

4. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Ibid., p. xi.
18. Ibid., p. 9.
20. Ibid., p. 104.
23. Ibid., p. 104.
26. Ibid., p. 195.
29. Ibid., p. 16.
30. Ibid., p. 141.
32. Ibid., p. 164.
33. Ibid., p. 15.
38. Shaw, Pygmalion, pp. 109–19.