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Teaching George Bernard Shaw's

Pygmalion

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to Pygmalion

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW WAS A man of strong convictions and opinions, and many of his beliefs are explored in his plays. *Pygmalion* is no exception. Shaw was a teacher and student of language, a feminist, and a socialist, and all of these aspects are represented in the play.

Shaw sees the artist's role as that of a teacher who makes his or her work "intensely and deliberately didactic." For those who argue that art should never be didactic, Shaw maintains in the preface to the play that art should never be anything else. Through the characters in *Pygmalion*, the author creates a vehicle for commenting on phonetics and language and how those ideas are tied to social status.

The female characters in Shaw's plays, particularly in *Pygmalion*, typify Shaw's feminist leanings. Whereas many authors of the time posed women as either victims or decoration, Shaw created vibrant, intelligent, forceful female characters in control of their own destinies, despite the societal constraints of the time period in which he was writing.

Deeply influenced by his extensive reading of economics and social theory, Shaw became a dedicated socialist supporter. He contended that each of the social classes strove to serve its own ends—the upper and middle classes reigned successful in their struggles while the working class perpetually lost due to the greed of their employers, impoverished living conditions, ignorance, and apathy. Students can see evidence of Shaw's socialist leanings in *Pygmalion*, particularly in the character of Henry Higgins and his attitude towards manners with reference to social equality.

The plays of Shaw's time, for the most part, did not portray real people discussing real social problems or ideas. *Pygmalion*, despite the comedic format, addresses serious issues of class, science, and moral responsibility.

Sean O'Casey, in his book *A Whisper About George Bernard Shaw*, writes, "Shaw's main fight, armed with all his logical art and wit, was to force forward a system of thought that would, in the long or short run, evolve a sane and sensible life for all."

He made his plays a forum for considering moral, political and economic issues, possibly his most lasting and important contribution to dramatic art.

Formalist Theory Applied to *Pygmalion*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining the Allusion to the Pygmalion Myth as a Source of Unity

1. Copy and distribute Notes on the Formalist Approach and the handout: *Pygmalion*: Formalist Activity One Graphic Organizer: The Myth of Pygmalion.

NOTE: You may want to have students do a short research activity the night before on the Pygmalion myth. A short paragraph summarizing the details of the myth would suffice if you have not already discussed this allusion to the Greek myth in class.

2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
3. Have students search for a minimum of four **direct** or **indirect** references to the Pygmalion myth and complete the Graphic Organizer. Instruct students to read the text immediately before and after the reference to inform and enhance their explanations.
4. Reconvene the class and discuss the following:
 - Within the context of each occurrence, what does each Pygmalion reference have in common? How is each different? Compare and contrast.
 - Does the *recurring symbolism* of the Pygmalion myth change throughout the play? If so, in what way(s)?
 - How can the Pygmalion myth be seen as both a *literary* and a *visual motif*?
 - How does the Pygmalion myth create *tension* and *conflict* in the play?
 - When does the Pygmalion myth *foreshadow* future events?
 - How do the allusions to the Pygmalion myth contribute to the play's *themes*?
 - In what ways does the Pygmalion myth *drive* the work as a whole?
 - How does the Pygmalion myth serve to *unify* the work as a whole?

Feminist Theory Applied to *Pygmalion*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Examining the Role of Gender in Determining One's Future

1. Copy and distribute Notes on Feminist Theory.
2. Write the following quotation on the board:

Take my advice, Governor: marry Eliza while she's young and don't know no better. If you don't you'll be sorry for it after. If you do, she'll be sorry for it after; but better you than her, because you're a man, and she's only a woman and don't know how to be happy anyhow. –Doolittle, end of Act II

3. Write the following list of characters on the board:

- Eliza
- Higgins
- Pickering
- Mrs. Pearce
- Clara
- Mrs. Eynsford Hill
- Freddy

4. Have students answer the following questions:

- To what is Doolittle specifically referring in this quotation? From a Feminist perspective, what is significant about his word choice here?
- With reference to the characters listed on the board, explain the ways in which gender *has* determined what path their lives have taken or will take.
- With reference to the characters listed on the board, explain the ways in which gender has *not* determined what paths their lives have taken or will take.
- What *character traits* have allowed some characters to evade traditional gender roles?
- What *circumstances* have allowed some characters to evade traditional gender roles?
- Which characters reject traditional gender stereotypes? How so?



Marxist Theory Applied to *Pygmalion*

Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Analyzing the Characters' Views on Wealth and Social Standing

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Notes on the Marxist Approach and *Pygmalion*: Marxist Activity One Graphic Organizer.
2. Divide the class into five small groups or a number of groups divisible by five.
3. Assign each group one of the following characters:
 - Eliza
 - Higgins
 - Mrs. Pearce
 - Mrs. Eynsford Hill
 - Doolittle
4. Instruct the students to complete the Graphic Organizer.
5. Instruct students to answer the following questions, writing on the reverse side of the Graphic Organizer:
 - How does the character handle money and issues of social standing?
 - What do money and social standing mean to the character?
 - How does the character spend his or her money and time?
 - How do money and social standing confer power on the character?
6. Have each group report to the class about how their character looks at money and social standing based on specific scenes in the play. Have students record other groups' findings on their Graphic Organizers.
7. Reconvene the class and discuss the following questions:
 - How early are money and social standing mentioned in the play? What does this fact immediately suggest to the reader?
 - What role do money and social standing play in the work? That is, if the issues of money and social standing were absent from the play, would the story itself exist? Why or why not?
 - How do the issues of money and social standing suggest a hierarchical power structure in the London society in which Shaw sets his play?