Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка

Видавничий дім Дмитра Бураго

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***Shopin P.Y.***
*(Luhansk, Ukraine)*

## THE MYTH OF LANGUAGE IN G.B. SHAW’S *PYGMALION*

*У статті мова йде про міфологізацію мови в п’єсі Бернарда Шоу «Пігмаліон». Автор пропонує розглядати мовну дійсність в п’єсі Шоу як засіб міфотворчої діяльності та аналізує діалектичне протиріччя між сутнісним та інструментальним характером мови головного персонажа.*

***Ключові слова:*** *діалектика, метафора, міф, мова, сутність.*

*В статье речь идет о мифологизации языка в пьесе Бернарда Шоу «Пигмалион». Автор предлагает рассматривать языковую действительность в пьесе Шоу как способ мифотворческой деятельности и анализирует диалектическое противоречие между сущностной и инструментальной природой речи главного персонажа.*

***Ключевые слова:*** *диалектика, метафора, миф, сущность, язык.*

*The article is intended to show that language is a myth in Shaw’s “Pygmalion”. The author suggests that language is a means of creating mythology in the play and analyzes the dialectic contradiction between language and human essence which is manifested through the alleged transformation of the main protagonist.*

***Key words:*** *dialectic, essence, language, metaphor, myth.*

George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1912) can be read as a bold endeavour toward radical demythologization of the Pygmalion myth in the age of modernity. Through the study of

Galatea's education and her socialization, one can explain how the Pygmalion myth is problematized by Shaw, and why the metamorphosis Galatea undergoes is controversial. In the play, education and language metaphorically stand for the forces behind the animation of Galatea. Language appears to be a tool for emancipation and social recognition, and becomes highly ambiguous; as Eliza is both empowered and enslaved by the new language she learns [1: 2]. Higgins cannot change the social order with his pronunciation classes and Universal Alphabet, since instrumental reason is unveiled as a myth. Paradoxically, language is mythologized in the eyes of Pygmalion only to reveal its impotence and illusory power. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno stated that '[t]he demythologization of language, taken as an element of the whole process of enlightenment, is a relapse into magic' [2: 164], and Shaw's *Pygmalion* adduces evidence to this dialectic. Pygmalion is deluded into thinking that a human being is defined by class and language, and therefore his conception of education is limited to pronunciation, because the correlation between language and human nature is so authentically real for him. After all, Galatea has not *been animated*, for she was animate already at the beginning of the play. In Ovid, the statue is animated thanks to the self-deception of Pygmalion and the delirium of his love in the first part of the story. In Shaw, Pygmalion does not love Galatea, and the process of animation is thereby rationalized. The dialectic of the Pygmalion myth makes the rationalization of the metamorphosis destroy the possibility of animation and prove that Pygmalion's initial belief in the coming miracle was a self-delusion. Moreover, Pygmalion is no longer the master of his work, as it is now the result of technology and instrumental reason.

In Higgins's eyes, Eliza is like 'a pebble on the beach' [3: 724] which he picks up, and he is not afraid of throwing her out once the experiment is over: 'when I've done with her, we can throw her back into the gutter; and then it will be her own business again; so that's all right' [3: 725]. This disinterested object manipulation becomes a much more alienating practice than the passionate incestuous love of Ovid's or Rousseau's Pygmalion. In Shaw, Galatea is handled like an inanimate object and not even loved by her creator. Eliza attempts to persuade the audience that she is 'a respectable girl' [3: 717]. She repeats several times that she is a *good girl*, but for Higgins she 'utters such depressing and disgusting sounds' [3: 720] that she has no right to speak, or even live. Because of her speech, Higgins mockingly warns Eliza not to forget that she is 'a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech' [3: 720]. Eliza's lamentations that her 'character is the same . . . as any lady's' [3: 719] irritate Higgins and offend his ear. Notice how two conceptual oppositions come into play here. First, Eliza's appearance and essence are in conflict. Her inner character, or her soul, is certainly the same as 'any lady's', something that cannot be seen in the appearance but is equally present in everybody. However, her appearance indicates to Higgins that she is not a human being and may have forgotten about her essence. For Higgins, Eliza's appearance and language – being only conventions and not reflecting her inner self – directly correlate with her essence. The folk theory of essences [4: 347-348] is used by Pygmalion to think of Galatea's essence as language and social position. But the play masterfully refutes such correlation and destroys the correspondence between appearance and essence, rendering human essence as something ineffable. There is no answer to the question what human nature is, and the old myth of human essence as class consciousness and language is problematized. Secondly, Eliza looks up at Higgins; she is a *lowly* character in

the play, whereas Higgins is *above* her. He describes Eliza as 'deliciously low' [3: 723]. This spatial orientation is reminiscent of the same situation of vertical domination at the moment of animation in Ovid. Galatea looks up at Pygmalion and is subservient to him. Power is unconsciously understood as being in a higher position. The primary metaphor *More Is Up* [4: 51] is at play here. The *higher* social and economic position of Higgins makes him *superior* to Eliza. Both the idea of full correspondence between Eliza's appearance and essence, and the spatial orientation of Eliza with respect to Higgins are challenged in the play, as the audience can see towards the end of the experiment.

The correspondence of Eliza's poor appearance and language to her essence as a human being is problematized to the point of dissociating language and self. When Eliza acquires the necessary technique and takes the expected appearance of an artificial duchess, she claims that her inner nature has never changed. It is the attitude towards Eliza that has changed and not her own self: 'the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated' [3: 746]. Pygmalion is now not one person but the whole society which animates Galatea in its perception. The impossibility of metamorphosis, the mythical nature of the language in the play, can be implicitly conveyed at the very outset, when – on learning the name of the flower girl – Higgins and Pickering recite a children's rhyme 'Eliza, Elizabeth, Betsy and Bess' [3: 722]. Although Higgins is 'declaiming gravely', the seriousness of comedy at this moment may escape the reader's attention. Yet this rhyme could implicitly decipher the process of Eliza's transformation from the state of a 'draggletailed guttersnipe' [3: 723] to a 'talking doll' and finally a 'lady'. All these names describe one and the same human being: they turn out to be appearances which fail to define the human soul. Galatea's human essence, instead, remains a mystery, a myth by itself. Pygmalion is misled by thinking that technology, language, and appearance would animate Galatea. Language deceives Pygmalion, and at the end of the play he understands that he never wanted to achieve this kind of animation. The education of Galatea turns out to be in vain, for 'the greatest teacher alive' [3: 723] cannot animate the already animate human being. The task of Pygmalion becomes superfluous and self-defeating. One has first to alienate Galatea and deny her human nature to be able to animate her.

Pygmalion becomes a disinterested creator, whose primary goal is to prove the possibility of animation. In these circumstances, there is no room for romance. If Gilbert's play is a comedy with tragic implications, Shaw's *Pygmalion* is certainly not a romance. Given that Eliza is constantly humiliated and bullied by her educator, there can be no affection between Eliza and Higgins. The play never allowed for Eliza and Higgins to be lovers: 'Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion: his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable' [3: 757]. At the end of the play, Pygmalion's domination is to be overcome not only through Galatea's assertion of freedom and independence, but also due to the failure of animation. It is not accidental that the end of the play has been changed a lot of times [5], including the first performance [6: 209]. The audience and even actors wish for a happy ending in the play, not realizing that they thereby prolong Pygmalion's subjugation of Galatea and reassert the myth of animation.

After Eliza's metamorphoses, Higgins informs the audience that he was not only thinking about 'her confounded vowels and consonants' [3: 737], but also watching 'her soul, which is the quaintest of the lot' [3: 737]. Did Higgins really see Eliza's soul? Did he manage to 'take a human being and change her into a quite a different human being by creating a new speech

for her' [3: 737] and hence close 'the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul'? For Higgins, pronunciation and soul come together, and he believes that improving Eliza's pronunciation he has improved her soul. Pygmalion's experiment ends in failure because of this false presupposition of a correlation between appearance and essence, speech and soul. For Eliza, any metamorphoses were out of question: she only wanted to be herself, 'to be natural' [3: 750].

The consequences of transformation are not foreseen by Higgins and Pickering; their only preoccupation is the metamorphosis itself. After the end of the experiment, Eliza does not know what to do. She has to live by the rules of the middle class but does not belong to it. She becomes homeless at home and is uprooted from her background without finding a new place in the higher social class. She is desperate when she deliberates on her position: 'What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?' [3: 741] Higgins suggests Eliza could marry 'some chap or other who would do very well', to which Eliza retorts: 'We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court Road' [3: 741]. The metaphor of domination as spatial orientation is convincingly reinterpreted by Eliza. Higgins's conception that he was superior to Eliza is now reversed on ethical grounds.

While language becomes Eliza's means of emancipation, her moral uprightness has never wavered. Her soul and ethics stayed the same. When Eliza manipulates language to outwit Higgins, he is outraged because his student uses his knowledge to ridicule the teacher: 'Don't you dare try this game on me. I taught it to you; and it doesn't take me in' [3: 746]. Higgins wants Eliza to cast away her false appearance, and he revels in his victory when she pronounces her 'A-a-a-a-a-ah-ow-ooh', seeing 'her father's splendour' [3: 747]. Eliza said she could never go back to her old way of speaking, but here the spectator sees her return to the *Lisson Grove lingo*. Higgins is beside himself and exclaims: 'Victory! Victory!' [3: 747]. His impotence to change Eliza for good seems in his delirium to be a victory. Shavian irony at its best in this frantic ejaculation! Higgins eventually recognizes his loss when he admits that his technology does not allow him to animate Eliza. Her voice and looks are not what he aspires for: 'I can't turn your soul on. Leave me those feelings; and you can take away the voice and the face. They are not you' [3: 749]. In the end, Pygmalion understands the meaninglessness of the transformations he has achieved in Galatea and sees a chasm between Galatea's appearance and her essence. Language is unmasked as a mere tool and not an end in itself.

Pygmalion's instrumental reason grants him magical powers and enslaves him when he pledges blind allegiance to his trade. Shaw makes Pygmalion demonstrate that his powers are but an illusion. Pygmalion mistakenly revels in his failure to animate Galatea, who becomes the true subject of the play. Her transformations emancipate Galatea, but also enslave her in the social order of appearances. The text dismantles the correlation between appearance and essence and breaks the rigid opposition between high and low. Language is demythologized, and the relationship between words and power is proved to be rather precarious. In contrast, the audience mostly looks for re-enchantment and reinstallation of the myth in the play, because the contingency of the social order is reflected in the mass consciousness and any challenges to the myth are inevitably resisted. Thus, Shaw's drama becomes a romance in the eyes of the audience and asserts the Pygmalion myth as a myth of animation through learning a new language rather than demythologizes the story.

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***Баранова І.О.***
*(Бердянськ, Україна)*


## ЛІТЕРАТУРНА ТРАДИЦІЯ ЯК ДІАЛОГІЧНЕ РОЗУМІННЯ МІЖЛІТЕРАТУРНИХ ЗВ'ЯЗКІВ
### *(родо-жанровий та стильовий аспекти)*


*У статті розкривається визначальна роль традиції при генеалогічному вивченні літератури на формально-структурному та змістовому рівнях. Коментується категоріальний апарат, аналізуються формальні та рецептивні жанрові теорії, розглядається варіант вирішення дихотомії «сталості-рухливості» жанрових формацій як схема дослідження літературної традиції.*



***Ключові слова:*** *традиція, літературний рід, жанр, стиль, діалог.*



*В статье раскрывается определяющая роль традиции при генеалогическом изучении литературы на формально-структурном и содержательном уровнях. Комментируется категориальный аппарат, анализируются формальные и рецептивные жанровые теории, рассматривается вариант решения дихотомии «постоянства–подвижности» жанровых формаций как схема исследования литературной традиции.*



***Ключевые слова:*** *традиция, литературный род, жанр, стиль, диалог.*