Pygmalion

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An interpretation of Class Relations in Pygmalion

In Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion, there is a distinct variance in class relations and the way that early 20th century Britains were perceived as being different by their speech, money, wealth, style, manners, and appearance. Being a lady or a gentleman was an acquired status desirable among most of London's society. However, in Pygmalion, Shaw tells a story about the transition of a homeless young woman with the aspiration to become a respected lady.

Eliza Doolittle is an 18 or 19 year-old young women, making a living from selling old flowers on the streets. When she comes across a rude Professor, named Henry Higgins, he sarcastically offers her to "learn how to speak beautifully, like a lady in a florist's shop…..at the end of six months you shall go to Buckingham palace in a carriage, beautifully dressed." This is what he proposes to Eliza when she comes to ask for English lessons from the Professor. He then makes a bet with another man, Colonel Pickering, who says he will pay for her new clothes and English lessons, if Higgins can make a lady

out of her in six months. The deal is made, and Eliza is immediately washed up and put into new, clean clothes. The play begins like this, which sets the plot for the rest of the story.

An example of modern day class relations with speech can be described by linguistic anthropologists, and in an article called "Suite for Ebony and Phonics" by John R. Rickford. In this article, he discusses the African-American speech Ebonics, and the negative impact it has across America. Being called "lazy English," "bastardized English," and "poor grammar," it seems to be the same thing that was going on in England during the time Pygmalion was written. I'm sure that if we were to ask Henry Higgins if that is what he thought about the way Eliza spoke he would whole-heartedly agree. However, the poor English that Eliza spoke was never considered as becoming a legal language in England.

The play begins off on a rainy night on the streets, with a lady and her daughter waiting for a cab. In this first act, Eliza asks them to buy a flower from her, with the response from the daughter, "Do nothing of the sort, mother. The idea!" When the mother gives her some change, the daughter again exclaims, "Make her give you the change. These things are only a penny a bunch ...

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...he rats. Aristocrats ran society, and they had no need for the homeless and poor.

In relating this subject to anthropology, there are a lot of points that can be made between the comparison of class relations and other issues similar to it. The study of Ebonics is a very good comparison to Pygmalion, and the way that someone speaks can effect how other people view them. Even though some think it is not an issue today, it can still be compared to early 20th century England and the way upper class looked down upon others. In the same way, many people do look down upon people speaking the too familiar sound of Ebonics.

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