 Resource 16 – Pygmalion and British culture



George Bernard Shaw

* Lived from 1856-1950
* Very outspoken about politics and often criticised for his “radical” views
* Won Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925
* Believed that the **transformation of the individual** could lead to the transformation of social values and beliefs

Activity one:

Complete the cloze passage

George Bernard Shaw was the third and youngest child (and only **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**) of George Carr Shaw and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw. His father was **first** a government employee and then an unsuccessful grain merchant, and George Bernard grew up in an atmosphere of **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**, which to him was more **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** than being merely poor. At first Shaw was tutored by a clerical uncle, and he basically **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** the schools he then attended; by age 16 he was **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** in a land agent’s office.

Shaw developed a wide knowledge of music, art, and literature as a result of his **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** influence and his visits to the National Gallery of Ireland. In 1872 his mother left her **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** and took her two daughters to London, following her music teacher, George John Vandeleur Lee.

In 1876 Shaw resolved to become a **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**, and he joined his mother and elder sister (the younger one having died) in London. Shaw in his 20s suffered continuous frustration and poverty. He **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** upon his mother’s pound a week from her husband and her earnings as a music teacher. He spent his afternoons in the **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** Museum reading room, writing novels and reading what he had missed at school, and his evenings in search of additional **\_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** in the lectures and debates that characterized contemporary middle-class London intellectual activities.

His fiction **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** utterly. His next four novels were similarly refused, as were most of the articles he submitted to the press for a decade. Despite his failure as a novelist in the 1880s, Shaw found himself during this decade. He became a vegetarian, a socialist, a spellbinding orator, and tentatively a **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**.

He became the force behind the newly founded (1884) Fabian Society, a **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** socialist group that aimed at the **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** of English society not through revolution but through “permeation” (growth from within) of the country’s intellectual and political life. Shaw involved himself in every aspect of its activities.

But Shaw truly began to make his mark when he began writing his own plays. Possibly Shaw’s **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** masterpiece, and certainly his funniest and most popular play, is *Pygmalion* (performed 1913). It was claimed by Shaw to be a **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** drama about phonetics, and its **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**, Henry Higgins, is a phonetician, but the play is a humane comedy about **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** and the English class system. The play is about the training Higgins gives to a **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** flower girl to enable her to pass as a lady and is also about the consequences of the experiment’s success.

Activity two:

Reread the Cloze passage and highlight events that may have influenced the formation of Shaw’s values and attitudes towards British culture, education and females.

Setting

 

* London, 1912
* During this era, both in the play and in real life, there were huge differences between the rich and the poor.
* Social classes were clearly defined, and it was hard to move from one class to another.
* Women did not have the same rights as men and were often looked at as inferior.

How is class shown today?

Activity three:

1. Brainstorm the ways your Social class can be reflected.
2. Rank these features from most important to least important.

British class culture

The social structure of the United Kingdom has historically been highly influenced by the concept of social class, with the concept still affecting British society in the early-21st century. Although definitions of social class in the United Kingdom vary and are highly controversial, most are influenced by factors of wealth, occupation and education.

Given that Pygmalion is set in London, class culture and a desire to **transform** out of one’s class plays significant role in the play.

Upper

Class

Middle class

Working classes

Activity four

Rigid class culture comparison

Compare the way your class was reflected in 1912 versus the way it is reflected now. For the 1912 box, in one colour, highlight the features that exclusively apply to men and in another colour, those features that exclusively apply to women. What have you discovered about the way women were treated?



*Wat’s UR* SOCIAL CLASS?

Which social class do you think you belong to? (Hands up)

| Your name: | Tick one box only |
| --- | --- |
| Upper class |  |
| Middle classes |  |
| Working class |  |
| Under class |  |

Visit the ABC website to find out whether you are [working class or affluent](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-28/social-class-survey-where-you-fit-in-australia/6869864)

Historical context

Class Culture

* Upper Class: didn’t work, noble men and women
	+ In the play: Host and Hostess of the Embassy Ball
* Upper Middle Class: worked but were employed in safe, clean jobs (lawyers, doctors, professors)
	+ In the play: Henry Higgins, Colonel Pickering
* Lower Middle Class: worked in dangerous jobs and unsanitary conditions
* Lower Class: did not work or worked little, had no financial freedom, were often servants
	+ In the play: Eliza Doolittle

Activity five

Although a play, Shaw placed a significant amount of emphasis on the way he critiqued the way people spoke. He believe it reflected class, position and education.

The play Pygmalion focuses on Higgins teaching Eliza the proper way to speak.

* Why is voice and speech so important do you think?
* Do you think voice and speech still play a significant role in today’s society?

Activity six:

Watch [My Fair Lady: English pronunciation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKxd30lQ1f0) (duration 4:43)

How does the video show the impact of conflicting cultural worlds on the individual?