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Blending Social Classes in "Pygmalion"

During the modern era in Britain, the class system began to dissolve. People were beginning to go "beyond the pale," and "stand outside the conventional boundaries...of behavior, or social class" (2111). In Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," the characters Eliza Doolittle and Professor Higgins go "beyond the pale"; Eliza tries to go from being a simple, poor flower girl to a "lady in a flower shop" who can "talk more genteel" (2228) and Professor Higgins mannerisms are similar to those of one who does not understand proper, upper class etiquette.

At the beginning of the play, the audience is introduced to Eliza Doolittle, a girl who sells flowers to earn a living. Her description, "Her hair needs washing rather badly...she wears a shoddy black coat...her boots are much worse for wear"(2219), identifies her as a lower class woman. Her speech as well, being "without a phonetic alphabet" (2219), shows that she has no education. However dirty and ill-spoken she may seem, Eliza is actually the one who understands that there is no difference between human beings and that social class shouldn't separate them, "I've a right to be here if I like, same as you" (2223). But Eliza also understands that to the people around her, social class meant everything, and in order to make life better for herself, she must become one of them, or by our definition, go "beyond the pale."

Professor Higgins is an interesting character, in that he pretends to be this upstanding, upper class citizen, but the way that he treats people and the way he conducts himself in his own home, would not fit in with the upper class society, and would more likely fit with the stereotype of the lower class of England. In the scene set up for Act 2, the audience is given a brief description of Professor Higgins temperament. "His manner varies from genial bullying when he is in good humor to stormy petulance when anything goes wrong" (2226); this seems that Higgins is not the sort of person you would want to be around as he always seems to be either rude or ill-tempered. However, "he remains likeable even in his least reasonable moments" (2226); this statement is not only ironic, but it is also a double standard. When Eliza has her "least reasonable moments," she is yelled at and threatened with a beating. When Professor Higgins acts up, he is simply met with a sigh and exclamation of "nonsense, sir" (2230). This shows that although Professor Higgins may be acting as a lower class man, he is treated as the upper class man that his name and status gives him. This blending of his character shows his journey "beyond the pale."

His etiquette within his own home is also an example of the blending of social classes. Mrs. Pearce asks Professor Higgins to "not swear" and "not to come down to breakfast in your dressing gown, or at any rate not to use it as a napkin to the extent you do" (2235-6), as it would be a bad example for Eliza for the proper etiquette of an upper class person. Particularly with the swearing, Mrs. Pearce tells Professor Higgins that Eliza has already uttered a "certain word...when she began to enjoy her bath" (2236) and that Professor Higgins himself uses it to describe "your boots, to the butter and to the brown bread" (2236). Both characters are shown having the same habits and mannerisms, showing that there really should not be a separation between human beings that use the same words, and eat the same way.