Original Paper

Psychological Growth of the Protagonist in *Pygmalion* from Ecological System Theory

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw was an Irish playwright, critic, polemicist and political activist. His influence on Western theatre, culture and politics has extended all over the world from 1880s up until now. He wrote more than sixty plays, including major works such as Man and Superman, Pygmalion and Saint Joan. With the great capacity of using play to reflect the reality, Shaw became the leading dramatist of his era. Shaw's Pygmalion is one of the most popular of his plays. It has been staged all over the English speaking world. And even a film based on the play called My Fair Lady has proved to be an immense success, and has made everyone knows about this play. Its popularity has been perennial and universal.

Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, one day overhears a flower girl named Eliza Doolittle and mocks the common way she talks. The next day, Eliza shows up and asks Higgins to teach her talk properly. But his friend Colonel Pickering bets him that he can't make Eliza talk like a lady in six months' time. During the time that he accepts the challenge and teaches Eliza, Eliza has many psychological growth. Based on the ecological system theory, this paper makes an analysis of the positive influences of the environment on Eliza from different people and society in reference with five dimensions— microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The influence from Eliza's original family, especially from her father, the guidance and deeds of Higgins, and some effects from the society as the microsystem provide positive help for the psychological growth of Eliza. And the interactions among the microsystem, which construct the mesosystem, together with the exosystem and macrosystem make Eliza, a flower girl, grows into a Duchess Eliza with pride and self-consciousness.

Keywords

Pygmalion, ecological system theory, psychological development

1. Introduction

1.1 George Bernard Shaw and His Work Pygmalion

George Bernard Shaw is an outstanding modern realistic playwright in Ireland and a world-renowned master of language who is good at humor and satire. At the same time, he is an active social activist. His influence on Western theatre, culture and politics has extended all over the world from 1880s up until now. He wrote more than sixty plays, including major works such as *Man and Superman*, *Pygmalion* and *Saint Joan*. With the great capacity of using play to reflect the reality, Shaw became the leading dramatist of his era. Shaw's *Pygmalion* is one of the most popular of his plays. It has been staged all over the English speaking world. And even a film based on the play called My Fair Lady has proved to be an immense success, and has made everyone knows about this play. Its popularity has been perennial and universal.

Pygmalion, romance in five acts by George Bernard Shaw, produced in German in 1913 in Vienna. It was performed in England in 1914, with Mrs. Patrick Campbell as Eliza Doolittle. The play is a humane comedy about love and the English class system. Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, one day overhears a flower girl named Eliza Doolittle and mocks the common way she talks. The next day, Eliza shows up and asks Higgins to teach her talk properly. But his friend Colonel Pickering bets him that he can't make Eliza talk like a lady in six months' time. During the time that he accepts the challenge and teaches Eliza, surprisingly, Eliza has made herself grow psychologically.

The influence from Eliza's original family, especially from her father, the guidance and deeds of Higgins, and some effects from the society also provide positive help for the psychological growth of Eliza. And all of these influence factors make Eliza, a flower girl, grows into a Duchess Eliza with pride and self-consciousness.

1.2 Literature Review

Since its publication, this work has attracted a lot of attention. It has been analyzed from different perspectives. Most of the scholars, both foreign and domestic, analyze it from feminist perspective, especially female awakening，focusing on how Eliza fight for her right to equality, self-respect and the right to true love. Saeed points out that in the play *Pygmalion*, Shaw shows his ideas and support for the feminist cause of gender equality, empowering women, and rising their position in society through education and learning (p. 1). In "On Female Awakening in *Pygmalion*", the author states that Elisa is a typical representative of the awakening of feminism, who shows readers that women should be brave enough to break through the boundaries of social prejudice, seeking true equality, self-esteem and true love (p. 1). Chen also highlights in her paper that "With the creation of woman as its theme, the woman figure is certainly pre-patterned, and the position of woman in society is no doubt the lowest. The woman character is seen only as an object for experiment" (p. 2).

Some other papers pay close attention to the perspective of linguistics. For example, Sabine Kowal and Daniel C. O' Connell use the book, script and the audiotape of the motion picture of *Pygmalion* to investigate how actors use interjections to express emotions (p. 1). Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Fatemeh

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Shahpoori Arani explores the discourse of education, its effects on other discourses - particularly that of class - and the knowledge and power it produces with emphasis on Foucault's theories about power, knowledge, and discourse (p. 2). Guo Ling takes Cooperative Principle by Grice as the fundamental theoretical framework, using pragmatic analysis of *Pygmalion* verifies the feasibility and applicability of applying pragmatic theories to the study of literary works and the important stylistic significance presented by the stylistic study of the play in terms of characterization and social theme construction (p. 3).

Nevertheless, no scholar at home and abroad use the ecological system theory to analyze the play Pygmalion and focus on the growth environment of Eliza, which is also a new perspective worth doing.

2. Ecological System Theory

2.1 Origin and Development

Ecological system theory is also known as human ecological theory, which is introduced by American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, who claims that human development is affected by their surrounding environment. This conclusion is based on his observation of children's behaviors and actions in daily life, home and school and the environment, in which the child is being influenced, is called ecological system. Bronfenbrenner's thinking can be traced back to his doctoral thesis. In his paper "Socialization and Social Class Through Time and Space", he argued that "in assessing social status and structure, both individuals and social groups need to be considered as developing organic units" (p. 411).

And then in 1977, he wrote "Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development", suggesting that the environment of the child is a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next. He organizes them in order of how much of an impact they have on a child and named these structures the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem (p. 515).

And the framework of this theory was further developed in 1979. Influenced by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and Lewin's behaviorism, Bronfenbrenner published his work The Ecology of Human Development. He stated that "a person's development was influenced by everything in the surrounding environment and social interactions within it" (p. 435) and human development ecology is the study of the interaction between growing organisms and their changing environment. The interaction between organisms and their immediate environment is influenced by the relationship between various environments and the larger environment in which these environments exist (p. 434). The book fully expounds the orientation of the ecological theory of human development research, and provides a new theoretical perspective on human development: a new concept of the evolving interaction between man and the environment, a new concept of developing man and a new concept of the environment (p. 433). At the end of the ecological system improvement phase, Bronfenbrenner also added time, the chronosystem, that focuses on socio-history or events associated with time (Hong & Dorothy, p. 318).

Bronfenbrenner's theory has indeed changed the way developmental scientists think about the environment in which people develop. For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, developmental scientists

might examine the role of some aspect of a child's upbringing environment and attribute all differences between children to differences in that aspect of the environment. However, as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem are interrelated, the influence of one system on a people's development depends on its relationship with the others.

Although Bronfenbrenner's thoughts are still not applied extensively in China, it has to be admitted that the new potential of Bronfenbrenner' s theoretical perspective is bound to have a wide influence. With the continuous understanding and wide study of Bronfenbrenner' s theory by scholars at home and abroad, his thoughts will attract more and more attention and are bound to gradually expand.

2.2 Major Contents

Bronfenbrenner believes that the natural environment is the major source of influence on human development, which is often overlooked by scholars who study development in artificially designed laboratories. He explains that the environment or natural ecology is "a set of nested structures, each nested within the next, like a Russian nesting doll" (p. 435). In other words, the developing individual is in the middle or nested within several environmental systems ranging from the immediate environment (like the family) to the indirect environment (like the broad culture). Each system interacts with other systems and individuals, affecting many important aspects of development.

Firstly, the innermost layer of the ecological level is the microsystem, which refers to the direct environment of individual activities and interactions or closest proximity to home, school, daycare, peer group, community environment of the child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p. 820). This environment is constantly changing and developing. So, in order to understand the development of children at this level, it is necessary to notice adults influence children's reactions deeply.

The second ecological level is the mesosystem, which refers to the connections or interrelationships between the microsystems. According to Bronfenbrenner, if there is a strong positive connection between the microsystems, development of people may be optimized. Conversely, inactive connections between microsystems can have negative consequences (p. 515).

The third ecological level is the exosystem. It refers to those systems in which people are not directly involved but still have an indirect impact on their development (p. 515). For example, if a family member dislikes the child's peer, and claims it openly and criticizes him or her without paying attention to their child, the child may experience conflicting emotions and may have low chance to develop a positive attitude toward others. Similarly, if parents like the child's peers and invite them for a visit, the child will be likely to develop a more positive attitude towards other people, especially their peers.

Macrosystem is the fourth ecological system, which refers to the culture, subculture and social environment that exist above the former three systems. The macrosystem is actually a broad ideology. The concepts are different in different cultures, but these concepts also exist in microsystems, mesosystems and external systems, which directly or indirectly affect the acquisition of people' s knowledge and experience. Poverty, cultural values, the role of women in society, a wealth of the country,

the role of religion in society, socioeconomic status, etc, all of these are the cultural factors that will influence the development of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515).

Bronfenbrenner's model also includes the chronosystem, or called diachronic system, which use time as a reference system for studying psychological changes in individual growth. He emphasizes the change or development of the people by combining time and environment to examine the dynamic process of people's development. Newborns are exposed to a certain environment from birth and affect the environment through their own instinctive physiological responses. They obtain necessary substances for survival through actions, such as crying to get breastfeed and to get their diaper changed.

On the other hand, people also adjust their behavior to the external environment. As time goes by, the microsystems environment in which people live is constantly changing. Environmental changes may be caused by external factors or by human factors due to the subjective initiative of people themselves. Thus, they can choose the environment freely. The choice over the environment is the result of the accumulation of individual knowledge and experience over time. Bronfenbrenner calls this environmental change an "ecological transition" and each transition is a stage in the development of an individual's life, for example, entering school, getting married or retired, etc., can be called an "ecological transition". While Bronfenbrenner's time system focuses on every transition point in life, he divides transitions into two categories: normal category like entering school, adolescence, getting a job, marriage, retirement, etc. and abnormal category like death or serious illness in the family, divorce, relocation, lottery winning, etc. These transitions are often the driving forces of individual's development, and they also have indirect effects on the development of individual by affecting the family.

All in all, Bronfenbrenner's theory is mainly constructed by microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, which focuses on the influences of external environment on people. As a result, this theory is perfectly suitable to understand the psychological growth of Eliza in *Pygmalion*.

3. Psychological Growth of Eliza from Ecological System Theory

3.1 The Influence from Eliza's Father

Microsystem refers to the direct environment of individual activities and interactions. And people is the most important element in microsystem as the most direct factor that influences the environment and character of others. And for Eliza, her father is the most important family member as the most important factor that influence her growth and character.

First of all, in the microsystem, Eliza's father is the direct environment that Eliza has relationship with. From this play, it is obvious that Eliza is brought up by her father who has many bad influence on her. To fully understand the character of Eliza, it is important to analyze his father--Doolittle. In this play, the appearance of Doolittle is for money. And his daughter means nothing but for a good treat. As he himself says, "As a daughter she's not worth her keep; and so I tell you straight. All I ask is my rights as a father; and you're the last man alive to expect me to let her go for nothing. Well, what's a five pound note to you? And what's Eliza to me" (p. 33). It shows Doolittle as a covetous and impudent man, who is even

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not deserved to be called as a father. What's worse, he is disrespect for women is outrageous. "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" (p. 35). For him, woman is just a belonging for her husband and does not have any right to be happy or enjoy happiness. According to John M. McInerney, "he has cohabited with seven women, counting Eliza's mother, and hasn't married one of them! Indeed, his straightforward selfishness and his refusal to bother with rules or niceties give him much in common with Higgins" (p. 198). As a result, Doolittle's world view and his attitude towards his daughter and women leads to Eliza's low and humble character and her vigilance to others as well as her longing for the love and acceptance from Mr. Higgins.

And after Doolittle comes into a windfall, he shows his attitude to the upper society and shows his cruelty to Eliza even more. To prevent his money spent by Eliza, he says, "as you wish, lady. Anything to help Henry to keep her off my hands" (p. 69). And after becomes rich he doesn't feel real happiness "who asked him to make a gentleman of me? I was happy. I was free. I touched pretty nigh everybody for money when I wanted it, same as I touched you, Henry Higgins. Now I am worried; tied neck and heels; and everybody touches me for money" (p. 65).

3.2 Insult and Guidance from Mr. Higgins

Secondly, another major factor that constructs the microsystem is Henry Higgins. At the beginning of this play, from the comparison of the action of Mr. Higgins taking notes and the reaction of Eliza shows the great disparity of status of them two. The calm and confidence of Mr. Higgins and the scared of Eliza is well described. The words that describe Mr. Higgins are "with quite interests", "good-humored" and so on. On the contrary, the writer uses phrases like "springing up terrified", "still hysterical" and "far from reassured" to describe the flower girl—Eliza. It also shows Higgins' selfishness, although he know that his deed of taking note makes Eliza uncomfortable and terrified, he continues to put the status of phonetics above human beings. And he even says "A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live. Don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon" (p. 12).

And the way he says about women shows his arrogance and disrespect.

> "Have you ever met a man of good character where women are concerned? Well, I haven't. I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance. I find that the moment I let myself make friends with a woman, I become selfish and tyrannical. Women upset everything. When you let them into your life, you find that the woman is driving at one thing and you're driving at another". (p. 26)

He takes Eliza as his personal belonging, and show her no care but indifference. In addition, in his opinion, the difference of pronunciation leads to the gap of social status and soul of people. "But you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being

by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul" (p. 52).

And the climax of the play begins when they come from the dinner party. Although Eliza does very well and shows her tiredness and exhaustion. Mr. Higgins pays no attention to them. "Eliza flinches violently; but they take no notice of her; and she recovers herself and sits stonily as before" (p. 55). For Eliza changing her accent can help her get a decent job, which could be life-changing for her. However, for Mr. Higgins, it's no more than an interesting bet. And even he eventually successes, Eliza is just his masterpiece, not a lady, and would never be a respectful lady for him.

All these deeds change Eliza a lot. Eliza's sense of self is constantly awakened. From the desire to sell more flowers on the street to the desire of being a flower shop clerk to the determination to teach phonetics as a new identity for more independent life. This is Eliza's inner psychological development. At first, she is lack of self-confidence and begging Mr. Higgins for help. But after she learns how to pronounce properly and gains respect from other high social rank people, she says "I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish you'd left me where you found me" (p. 59). As Qu says "In each stage, Shaw shaped Eliza is a prominent personality, self-respect, self-improvement, tenacious endeavour role. From Eliza, we can clearly see the "vitality" in Shaw's creation of evolution" (p. 103).

What's more, Eliza turns from a girl who is always amenable to Mr. Higgins' ideas into a woman who is capable to show her emotion and rage. "Eliza tries to control herself and feel indifferent as she rises and walks across to the hearth to switch off the lights. She sits down in Higgins's chair and holds on hard to the arms. Finally she gives way and flings herself furiously on the floor raging" (p. 56).

After that, Eliza's mood changes again. "Eliza enters, sunny, self-possessed, and giving a staggeringly convincing exhibition of ease of manner. She carries a little work-basket, and is very much at home. Pickering is too much taken aback to rise" (p. 69). She begins to put herself in the first place and learns to love herself.

On the one hand, Eliza is bullied by her peers; on the other hand, she is still under the feet of the upper class. In Lu's idea, "despite the double pressure of the both sides, Eliza has always retained a good personal character, and keep the upward attitude towards life, trying to improve the life through her own efforts and live a happy life" (p. 1).

The second ecological level is the mesosystem, which refers to the connections or interrelationships between the microsystems. From the conversation between Doolittle and Mr. Higgins, Eliza may feel a little warm from Higgins. For instance, Higgins do not understand why would Doolittle sell his daughter just for 50 pounds, which may lead to Eliza's longing for Mr. Higgins affirm and concern.

3.3 The Effect of the Society

The third ecological level is the exosystem. It refers to those systems in which people are not directly involved but still have an indirect impact on their development (p. 515). And the exosystem for Eliza in this play is mainly constructed by the people who she doesn't know when Mr. Higgins taking notes.

When she feels scared, there are still some people who would speak for her. "Taking down people's words! Girl never said a word to him. What harm if she did? Nice thing a girl can't shelter from the rain without being insulted" (p. 8). The warmth and kindness of some people make Eliza remain some hope towards this world and good faith towards other people.

What's more, macrosystem is a rather broad ideology. This play is aim to attack the decadent and conservative sense of hierarchy in Britain at that time. As Eliza lives in the society that men hold the power, it is inevitable what Eliza goes through and it is more rare that a poor flower girl finally accepted by the high-rank society.

Chronosystem use time as a reference system for studying psychological changes in individual growth. It emphasizes the change or development of one by combining time and environment to examine the dynamic process of his or her development. In terms of chronosystem, Eliza is self-abased at first. But with time goes by, Eliza knows to express her feelings and begins to love herself first. And understand the importance of self-esteem, self-respect and being independent. Just as Vicki said "Higgins may change Eliza's linguistic and even physical selves so that she passes as a duchess, but Eliza herself changes her psychological and philosophical selves, largely through the auspices of her sociological self interacting with others such as Mrs. Higgins and Colonel Pickerin" (p. 76).

4. Conclusion

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* shows a story that a lower class flower girl tries to learn the speech of the upper class through voice training, struggling for the achievement of the class crossing.

Based on the ecological system theory, this paper analyzes the influences of the environment in terms of Eliza's father, Mr. Higgins and the society from five dimensions—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Although Eliza may never achieve the true class crossing, her spirit and insistence is worth learning for everyone. George Bernard Shaw portrays Elisa, with her own upbringing and her own independent personality. Especially after her linguistic training, her self-awareness slowly rises and she is no longer willing to be anyone's servant and be called around. What's more, she shows people that women should be brave enough to break through the boundaries of social prejudice and seek true equality, self-respect and true love.

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