

# Intertextuality of Characters in *Pygmalion*

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The renowned dramatist George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, which combines many factors of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and delivers his ideas on woman's social status in his society, exemplifies the application of intertextuality in drama from three aspects: the image of characters, the behavior of character, and the relationship between characters.

*Keywords:* intertextuality of characters, George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*

## Introduction

Intertextuality, which was firstly mentioned by Julia Kristeva in her works—*Word, Dialogue and Novel*, refers to the interrelationship between texts. Now, the theory of intertextuality turns to be an effective device in interpreting literary works, showing us a new perspective in researching “intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 65). This is especially feasible in studying George Bernard Shaw's famous play—*Pygmalion* in which readers could easily found the intertextuality between this play and Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*.

George Bernard Shaw's interest in drama originated from his friend William Archer who was an ardent supporter of the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. Later, in 1891, Bernard wrote commentary on Ibsen's plays and also got influence from Ibsen's writing techniques. Bernard's *Pygmalion* is a story about a flower girl—Eliza who is treated as an experiment article and trained to behave as an up-class lady. Although this story is similar to Ibsen's, there are differences in characters. It is the difference that conveys Bernard's insight of his own society and stands his play out to a large extent. This paper puts emphasis on the researching on the intertextuality of characters including in the image of characters, the behaviors of characters, as well as relationship between characters, trying to find new interpretation of old story from the perspective of Bernard and to provide reference for drama writing and playing.

## Intertextuality of Image of Characters

Intertextuality for Alfaro refers to the fact that texts “are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures” (Alfaro, 1996, p. 268). From this point, the image of characters in Bernard's *Pygmalion* such as Eliza could be deemed as a repetition and transformation of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Compared with Nora, Eliza enjoys more freedom in her life, although both of them play traditional female roles in society.

Nora, in *A Doll's House*, is a traditional housewife. All that Nora need to do is to finish her work such as “needlework, crochet-work, embroidery, and that kind of thing” (Ibsen, 2008, p. 7, act. 1), to manage her

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housework such as purchase Christmas tree, decorations, and clothes for children, as well as to arrange everything according to her husband's taste. Based on the image of Nora, Bernard creates a similar lady—Eliza in *Pygmalion*. Although Eliza is not Mr. Higgins wife, she acts as a housewife who takes care for his life during her training course. For instance, Eliza helps Mr. Higgins remember his appointments, tells Mrs. Pearce to prepare coffee for him, arranges his things, orders food for Mr. Higgins, etc. She even remembers the suitable size of gloves and the color of suit for Mr. Higgins, which fully reflects her housewife-like role in Mr. Higgins' house. Just as Li Yuping claims, the value of intertextual study is the difference between similar texts (Li, 2006, p. 112). What differs from Nora deserves more attention.

Firstly, they come from totally different living conditions. Compared with Nora who is born with a silver spoon, Eliza has to work very hard to earn her bread. Once it rains, she would worry about the sales of her flower. However, Eliza who is ostensibly more pitiful than Nora has more choices on her life since she has her own job. Unlike Nora's dependence on her husband, Eliza is independent in her relationship with Mr. Higgins. Another different point is that Bernard's Eliza volunteers to be a subject of Mr. Higgins' experiment rather than accepts the doll's life passively like Nora. Once she knew that Mr. Higgins could make her life different by creating a new speech for her, she visits Mr. Higgins' House as soon as possible. More importantly, she draws her own map for her future. Before accepting Mr. Higgins' training, she has the idea that she will be a boss of a flower shop. On the other hand, she never thinks she will receive free training, and she plans to pay for her change in appropriate price. Although what Eliza does in six months is just following Mr. Higgins instruction like a marionette, she acquires the skill of how to pronounce like a lady, which could get a job for herself as a teacher later. All of these symbolize the awareness of independence for female though it might be not so mature at Bernard's era, which is the main point to which Bernard wants to draw attention.

### **Intertextuality of Behaviors of Characters**

With regard to intertextuality, Tong Ming maintained, "There are traces from other texts in all texts" (Tong, 2015, p. 86). The behavior of Eliza could be regarded as a good proof to Tong Ming's idea. Receiving much inspiration from Nora's behaviors, Bernard endows Eliza with behaviors similar to Nora. Meanwhile, Bernard reveals his understanding of Nora and shows his excellent skills of writing in *Pygmalion*.

In the beginning, Nora loves her husband—Mr. Helmer so much that she dares to do illegal things with the purpose of saving her husband. Moreover, she respects Mr. Helmer's manly independence and hopes to protect their mutual relations. But when hearing her husband's fierce words towards her sacrifice, she becomes awakened in her position in marriage and determines to move out of her home. As a reader, Bernard thinks Nora is a brave lady who dares to fight for cruel treatment. Nevertheless, Bernard considers that there should be more things done by Nora. Thus, he rewrites Nora's behavior and creates Eliza. Same as Nora, Eliza falls in love with a man—Mr. Higgins during her training. Even though Mr. Higgins quarrels with her, she still cherishes the ring which Mr. Higgins buys for her. When the ring is dashed violently into the fireplace by Mr. Higgins, "Eliza goes down on her knees on the hearthrug to look for the ring" (Liu & Zhu, 2004, p. 271, act. IV). Shortly after having discovered the truth that she is only a jetton for Mr. Higgins to win his bet, and that Mr. Higgins does not care about her future, Eliza moves out of Mr. Higgins' house unhesitatingly. Just as Zamora said, "writers and readers respond to their textual traditions in different ways and for different purposes, often according to the importance given by a culture to its own history and the history of its interactions with other cultures" (Zamora, 1997, p. 127). Being a reader, Bernard lives in a time where there are more and more

women who step out of their homes to win their rights. Meanwhile, he is a writer who supports woman's right. Thus, Bernard creates *Pygmalion*, exactly a work showing his understanding of women's status of his era. All these factors bring about the difference between Nora and Eliza in behaviors. Under Bernard's pen, Eliza suffers less restraint from patriarchal society but has more rights to follow her hearts. Before meeting with Mr. Higgins, Eliza leads a thrifty but happy life. While Nora was thinks all days about what to be put on the Christmas tree and how to protect her husband's authority, Eliza hanged a picture of a beautiful star in her room to enrich her spiritual life, which marks the difference in their social status. Namely, Eliza is more independent than Nora, which directly contributes to her ending with various possibilities. Another thing needs to be mentioned is that Eliza is still care about Mr. Higgins' daily life even though she moves out of his house, leaving readers or audience more space to image the possible relationship of these two people in future. The kind of writing skill shed light on Bernard's remarkable writing techniques, inspiring later drama creating to a large degree.

### **Intertextuality of Relationship Between Characters**

If the relationship between characters could be conducive for writers to elucidate their thoughts of what happens in society, then the intertextuality of relationship between characters is a display for writers' management of previous text and their innovative understanding of their times. In *Pygmalion*, the intertextuality of relationship between characters is a noticeable point that underlays Bernard's support of women's rights. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen gives Nora a close friend—Mrs. Linde who cares about Nora and could try her best to help Nora when in need. But this relationship does not prevent Nora from being hurt in her marriage. Bernard creates a similar lady for Eliza in *Pygmalion*—Mrs. Higgins. Things are different because Eliza receives protection from being hurt by Mr. Higgins's bad manners due to her relationship with Mrs. Higgins. As a considerate lady, Mrs. Higgins does not show any interest in her son's experiment but criticizes her son that “you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards” (Liu & Zhu, 2004, p. 256, act. III). She cares about Eliza future very much so she feels so angry at her son's absurd plan that she should give up her writing thirdly and exclaims “Oh, men! men!! men!!!” (Liu & Zhu, 2004, p. 257, act. III) Once she got the news that the problem of Eliza's future is solved, she was very glad. More often than not, Mrs. Higgins performs as more a fighter against patriarchal control than an old woman. When Eliza asks her for a shelter, Mrs. Higgins does not hesitate to invite her to live in her house. Besides, she protects Eliza from her son's rude manner in talking through requiring her son's promise. “If you promise to behave yourself, Henry, I'll ask her to come down. If not, go home; for you have taken up quite enough of my time” (Liu & Zhu, 2004, p. 281, act. V). Faced with her son's complaint about Eliza, Mrs. Higgins prefers to trust Eliza's words that her son treats Eliza brutally. However, it could not be ignored that Eliza is a stranger to Mrs. Higgins before the training, so Mrs. Higgins worries about Eliza's future ostensibly but does not take any action for Eliza like Nora's Mrs. Linde. Rather, Mrs. Higgins behaves more as a genteel and warm-hearted lady from up-class society instead of an intimate friend. That's why Eliza could not get real comfort from her relationship with Mrs. Higgins. In the end of the play, her relationship with Mrs. Higgins not only hints her predicament after her moving out of Mr. Higgins' house, but also increases the uncertainty of her future. In addition, the relationship reflects the trend of alienation among people which might remind readers of their relationship with others in real life.

### Conclusion

According to above analysis, intertextuality is an effective tool for us to research on the impact of previous works such Ibsen's *A Doll's House* on Bernard's *Pygmalion*, which proves Kristeva's opinion that a text refers to "all other texts". Bernard refers Ibsen's play in the perspective of image of characters, behavior of characters, relationships between characters, ingeniously enriching the old story with new features, which not only reflects his own understanding of Ibsen's play but also shows us woman social status at his era. It also offers reference for latter play-writing.

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