

**PORTRAIT OF WOMEN IN OSCAR WILDE'S *A WOMAN OF NO
IMPORTANCE* AND GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S *PYGMALION***

ARTICLE



Submitted as a Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for Getting the Post Graduate Degree of Language Department
at Muhammadiyah Surakarta University

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**PROGRAM STUDI PENGAJIAN BAHASA
POST GRADUATE PROGRAMME
MUHAMMADIYAH UNIVERSITY OF SURAKARTA
2014**

ADVISORS' APPROVAL

ARTIKEL PUBLIKASI ILMIAH

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to find out the social class structure of the women characters in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* based on sociological perspective.

The qualitative research is carried out by making use of the descriptive method. The researcher analyzes the data by using sociology of literature and feminist approach. The analysis is used for: describing the social class of the women and analyzing the women struggle to fight for the inequality of rights.

Based on the result of the data analysis, the research findings are: there are social classes reflected in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* in the Victorian age which bring misery to the poor people or lower social class; (2) giving the opportunity of equal education to the working class especially for the women will make them have an option to get the same level or in other words there is no social class distinction and gender inequality.

Keywords: social class, social inequality, Victorian age

INTRODUCTION

A Woman of No Importance is one of Oscar Wilde's popular plays that published in 1893. This play tells about a woman, Arbuthnot, who has to send away from the society since she has a son from her affair with an upper class man, Illingworth. It happened twenty years ago, when she was young and did not know anything about life. She was so plain to know about love and trust. It was too late when she recognized that she was false, giving her love to a man who did not accomplish his promise to marry her. She asked Illingworth to marry her as his

promise, after she knew that she was pregnant but all she got is the contrary. Illingworth and his family refused to marry her, even Illingworth mother proposed her a sum of money so that she could go from Illingworth's life. Illingworth's family did not give her approve because she was from different social class strata. Illingworth was an upper class man while she was a working woman.

At that time, Victorian age, people are classified into classes. It means people interacts, gathers or even gets married is based on their class. People were encouraged to get marry within the same class, they could marry someone from the social class lower than them but it meant they married beneath themselves. As Soames states that Victorians were encouraged to marry within the same class (remember the views on social mobility!). They could marry up, but to marry down meant marrying beneath yourself. In general this play highlights about the social class inequality.

The same issue about social class inequality can also be found in *Pygmalion*. George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* was published in 1912. It portrays the life of the common flower girl Eliza Doolittle who, living in a class-based society. Eliza Doolittle whose physical appearance is not attractive makes her suffer as the good appearance and way of speaking is the important thing to socialize in the society. Moreover, as a working class, she was portrayed as a woman who wears a little sailor hat of a black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed. Her hair needs to be washed. She wears a black shoddy coat that reaches nearly to her knees and

is shaped to her waist. George Bernard Shaw shows to the readers that one's social class can be determined by her language. Someone with improper English way of speaking is associated of uneducated person. Thus people will assume someone poor language as a working class (Pygmalion, 1912 : 9).

In doing this research, the researcher does not stands alone there are some other researchers do on the same plays. The first research is done by Anni Aalto (2010) entitle *Queer Representations of gender, sexuality, marriage and family in Oscar Wilde's comedies*. In her research, she attempts to explore the representation to the parts of gender, sexuality, family and marriage in the plays that do transgress late-Victorian norms. The next is a research done by Tugba Tekin (2006). The title of his research is *Oscar Wilde Concept of Comedy as Reflected in his Society Comedies: Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance and The Importance of Being Earnest*. He tried to explore tried to explore Oscar Wilde's concept of comedy as reflected in his society comedies. The next research is done by Chen Lihua (2006). His research entitled *A Feminist Perspective to Pygmalion Une Perspective Feministe Sur Pygmalion*. In his research he attempted to explore to play from the feminist perspective. Another research is done by Zennure Koseman (2011) which his research entitled *The Reappraisal of "Nature Versus Nurture" Debate in George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion And Willy Russell's Educating Rita*. In his research he tried to explore the alluring association between George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912) and Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* (1985) in respect to the mythic tale, *Pygmalion* in

which “nature versus nurture” debate is reflected to demonstrate the significance of education on social ascendancy in life.

Theoretically, there is an explanation of the social phenomena reflected in *A Woman of No Importance* and *Pygmalion*. It is the social class structure reflected in *A Woman of No Importance* and *Pygmalion* relate to the real fact in Britain society. One of the important information that can describe the relation between the social class structures reflected in the work of art and the real situation in the society is by analyzing them through the perspective of sociology of literature. Literary work especially play is not only the author’s result of imagination but also consisting of the information that relates to the real social background in the society. The works of art reflect the social facts. As the social facts, the works of art do not only show the social reality, system of values, norms and customs which cover the thought of the author’s responses to the social phenomena in the era.

Based on the facts above, the research aims is to identify the social class structure of the women characters which becomes the social phenomena in Britain society in the early nineteenth century.

Research Method

Based on the types of the data, the research belongs to a qualitative research. The object of the investigation, type and data source, technique of data collection and technique of data analysis will be described as the following explanation.

The object of the research is the electric edition of Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912) published by the Electric Book Company.

The research uses texts consisting of words, phrases, sentences or utterances in the novel as the data source. Besides using the novel as the primary data source, the investigation also uses the secondary data source such as books related to Oscar Wilde's and George Bernard Shaw's life, Britain history in nineteenth century, related articles on social class structure and gender inequality.

The technique of data collection in this research is library research by collecting the utterances in the play related to the research problem. The data collection makes use of documentation.

The data is analyzed sociologically based on the social, economic, political and cultural aspects. The sociological analysis is going to understand the relation of the plays and the condition of Britain in nineteenth century. In examining the social classes according to Richard Schmitt *Introduction to Marx and Engels : A Critical Reconstruction* (1997: 160), he states that the idea of classes has three distinct aspects. They are (1) groups of individuals (2) who are

united by having the same relation to something, and (3) the relations that serve to define a group of people as a class are economic relations. Moreover, he gives three significances of the concept of class; the first refers to the different roles in the economy of a country and the people who fill those roles. It means that class here in the sense to classify people without paying any attention to their experience or their political positions or their economic role is relevant to their economic class position. The second is class as a collection of people whose life experiences are similar because they live under similar conditions. People group themselves into different social classes to the degree as they live under very different conditions.

Third sense of class is the term refers to collective political actors. The associated capitalists, organized into many organizations, have over whelming power not only in the economy but also in politics in a capitalist society. They form an economic as well as a political class. They are probably also a social class insofar as their wealth and power allows them a set of experiences not available to the rest of the population.

Then according to Peter Saunders (2001), *Social Class and Stratification*, he classifies social classes into four categories; they are *capitalist or upper class*, *middle class*, *working class* and *underclass*. First, the *capitalist class* is a group of people in the society who usually comes from elite families with great wealth who dominate the economic system. The second is *middle class*. He moreover divides the middle class into three categories; they are *petty bourgeoisie*, *service class* and

the lower middle class. Petty bourgeoisie consisted of people who made their living through ownership of property but lacked any high level managerial or professional training and qualifications. The *service class*. This division comprised people like civil servants, technicians and various professional groups who could command high incomes by virtue of their training and qualifications. The *lower middle class* is here taken to refer to people in routine clerical and service occupations, as well as those in low-level technical jobs and individuals such as foremen whose work entails some supervision of manual workers.

The third is the *working class*, there are three categories of the working class, they are first skilled workers such as fitters, bus drivers and trained coalface workers; the second semi-skilled workers like machinists, bus conductors and storekeepers; and the third unskilled workers such as laborers, refuse collectors and cleaners. The last is *Under Class*; it means it is usually connected to British society which the idea is people who do not regularly participate in the formal economy.

THE RESEARCH FINDING AND CONCLUSION

The portrait of Women in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw describe the women characters as in Victorian age to be the persons who have to be faithful to the male rules and have few roles in the society. Both authors Oscar Wilde and George Bernard

Shaw want to show in their play most of upper class people feel that they are superior in the society.

1. Portrait of Working Class Women

Rachel Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* is portrayed as the working class woman. Her character is show as a woman who has strong belief. It can be seen how she keeps refusing Illingworth's offer to share her son. Although when Illingworth asks Arbuthnot's son, Gerald, to convince her that he really wants to responsible for his past mistaken. By narrating her story into another girl, she tells Gerald a story about an unfortunate young girl. In this narrative she highlights that the girl is lack of knowledge and is made to fell in love a young man who knows everything. That finally his love is thrown away by him. Overall she wants to reveal that only women who suffer from the actions of the man.

In *Pygmalion* the working class women are represented by Mrs. Pearce, Higgins' house keeper and Eliza Doolittle. Eliza is portrayed as a flower girl who has strong motivation and wants to be a duchess. She does all the best she can do to get her dream. When she heard Higgins' statement that he can change her into a proper lady then she appears at Higgins' laboratory on Wimpole Street to ask for speech lessons, offering to pay a shilling. Even though, she has not enough money, she insists Henry Higgins, phonetic professor, to give her course. By having the lesson from Higgins, she believes, it will change the condition of her life and she then will have a proper life

condition. She wants to change her condition so that other people will respect her. By having speech course from Henry Higgins she transforms into a lady just like any women from the upper class.

The next working class woman found in *Pygmalion* is Mrs. Pearce. She is a Professor Henry Higgins' maid. The character of Mrs. Pearce in *Pygmalion* as a mother for Eliza, she guides her how to a good woman, how does Eliza have to act and to behave with another person. Even Mrs. Pearce is a maid but she is quite educated woman knows what is proper to do or not. She is a person who believes in good a manner and always emphasizes the importance to have a good behavior. Even she is a maid that actually is not in the same strata social class to Eliza, she is higher status than Eliza. This means that she can order Eliza, but she must know her place when she is with Higgins and Pickering, as they are upper class, meaning they are of a higher status than Mrs. Pearce.

2. The portrait of upper class woman

In *A Woman of No Importance* there can be found several upper class women, among of them are Lady Hunstanton, Lady Caroline Pontefract, Lady Stutfield, Mrs. Allonby and Hester Worsley. Most upper class women personalities in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* have similarities in behavior and way of speaking when they socialize with other people who are in same social strata or lower than they, they proudly show their self-identity

by degrade lower the others people self-esteem. In other words they think their social class is superior in the society.

The character of Mrs. Allonby is portrayed as woman who does as she wants and does not think if it is proper or not, she also does not care about the boundaries she do something through her individual concern. She is not a loyal wife when she utters that she gets bored with her husband. Wilde illustrates Mrs. Allonby as a woman who annoys when one says a truth as Hester does not like the London dinner party. Mrs. Allonby says that the clever people never listen, and the stupid people never talk, but Hester says the opposite that the stupid people talk a great deal. Mrs. Allonby never cares about the morals as she acts through her pleasures and her desires without thinking about the consequences. It seems from her joke to challenge Lord Illingworth to think about Hester Worsley.

Lady Carolin is an arrogant upper class woman who has a sharp tongued woman, and always thinks the worst of people. She is good at making laugh of people even though to her husband. She intimidates her husband, Sir John, constantly telling him what to do, and cannot allow him to be in the business of another woman, she treats him as if he were an infant. She is a woman with has a little tolerant to others mainly people who are in the lower class.

The next upper class woman is Lady Stutfield she is a rather talkative woman who always seems to use double adjectives for emphasis and appears

always to agree with whatever anyone else says. She seems quite anxious to find a man and to be well thought of by everyone. Her function in the play is unclear, except that she is presented as a social type and could be either irritating or amusing, depending on the actress who plays her.

The next upper class woman character is Lady Hunstanton. She is an upper class woman character who still has good moral as a good example since another character does not have. She helps Gerald to get a new job as a secretary to Lord Illingworth since she knows Gerald's mother.

The last upper class woman is Hester is a pretty young American lady, an open-hearted and honest character who loves the beauty of her country, and talking about it with pride. She is a young spirit woman with pure soul, thus she is described as a person who hard to say lie when she sees a true fact. Oscar Wilde creates Hester as a critique of the upper class women to lessen the distance of social strata in the English society.

As an American, she does not own the similar cultural background as the other female characters. It is easy for her to criticize the situation as she does not grow up in English Victorian environment. Her character is seems to be ambiguous as she looks down upon English society and its people, but she prefers to live among them, she criticizes the English for valuing money too highly, but is herself is rich lady. All these factors give further support to the statement that Wilde rather criticizes the English morality.

The same behavior also shown in the *Pygmalion*, when the upper class shows their arrogant to the class lower to her. Mrs. Eynsford Hill thinks at first time that Eliza is a prostitute when she calls her son Freddy as someone she knew before: look wh' y' gowin (*Pygmalion*, 9: 1912). Mrs. Eynsford Hill just sees Eliza from her physical appearance which shows Eliza's real social status, as perhaps at that time is hard for someone from the lower class and tries to get a job. The similar arrogant behavior also shown by another upper class, when they see someone from the lower class with unattractive appearance they will underestimate and give little respect to her. Henry Higgins, an upper class man, calls Eliza as a Squashed cabbage leaf he sees her physical appearance and the way of she speaks.

The upper class women in *Pygmalion* are represented by the Eysford Hills, Clara Eysford Hills and Mrs. Eysford Hills, and Mrs. Higgins. There is a slight difference between the Eysford Hills and Mrs. Higgins. In the play it is described that Clara Eysford Hills and Mrs. Eysford Hills escape from reality and prefer an illusion, they are lacking money, but refuse to earn their own living. It can be seen from how difficult she finds a cab for herself and her mother to get home when the rain falls; it symbolizes the economic difficulty and their problems in functioning on a level of society familiar to use cab.

Clara, the daughter of Mrs. Eysford Hills, is an impatient and arrogant girl who really concerns to the latest fashions but shows poor judgment as to what is in fashion. Her behavior views that she is spoiled very much by her

mother, everything she needs and she wants should be done at once, she does not want to her objection from someone. It seen, from the first act how she asks Freddy, her brother, impatiently to find a cap for her and her mother needs a cap as it was rain. Moreover, how she rudely speaks to Eliza when she met first at the Covent Garden. She saw that as if Eliza was not importance to her. Clara also rudely speaks to Higgins when she has a different opinion. She is typical of a woman who needs to serve.

Another character of upper class woman in *Pygmalion* is Mrs. Higgins. She is Higgins' mother, an ideal woman to Higgins' mind. She reflects the character of upper class woman, how she behaves always emphasizes in good manner. She is a curious mother who always encourages her son to get married soon. Her character reflects as a wise woman when she knows her son's project to transform Eliza into a lady, she concern for what will be done with the girl after the experiment. Her position among the upper classes shows that she is not only just like a good model for upper class, how she behaves based on the norm and mind, but also as a good teacher, she gives good advice to the others characters when they face problem.

Conclusion

The investigation relates to the social classes in Oscar Wild's *A Woman of No Importance* and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. As being analyzed in the previous chapter, the researcher found that:

First, In Victorian England, people's lives were generally ruled by the class into which they were born. People were encouraged to marry within the same class. They could marry someone from the social class beneath him it means he marries someone beneath himself.

Second, upper class and middle class women were not expected to earn their own living and women rarely had careers, most professions being closed to them. In marriage, women were treated as lesser beings by the law rather than equal stakeholders.

Third, education is the one of several ways to make the social strata of people equal. Since it could open up vast opportunities for social improvement, people at that time went to school to have education. Although at that time it was very difficult to have proper education for working class.

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