



The Characterization of Mrs. Pearce in Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion: A Cognitive Stylistic Study

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Abstract:

Bernard Shaw makes use of detailed stage directions which provide a basis for the characterization of the major characters in his plays. However, the minor characters are not always thoroughly described by the playwright as they're generally categorized as unsurprising hence, flat characters. This study challenges the initial observation of the minor character named Mrs. Pearce as a flat character to the final observation of being a round character. Jonathan Culpeper's model of characterization considers scaling of the categories of the characters which is based upon the interplay between the textual/authorial cues as well as the prior knowledge of the readers. This paper focusses upon the literary stylistic analysis of the textual as well as the authorial cues in forming an impression of Mrs. Pearce in Pygmalion.

Keywords: characterization, cognitive stylistics, authorial, textual, flat characters, round characters

Introduction

The term characterization entails a lot of meanings such as the art of the creation of the characters by the author, or the descriptive analysis of the features or the characteristics of the character or the character impression formed in the readers' minds. However, the characterization model of Jonathan Culpeper is concerned with the latter issue which arises in the process of characterization. The reader forms impressions through two sources and they are the prior knowledge and the textual cues available in any form be it direct(explicit) or indirect(implicit). When J. L. Styan remarks about the playgoers that they absorb meaningful impressions, Culpeper refutes the idea by stating that "the mind is not a passive recipient of information, but an active manipulator of that information". Hence, both the textual cues and the prior knowledge of the readers or the audience play an important role in the interpretation of any text or the performances of the plays. Mrs. Pearce has been presented as the minor character in the play by Bernard Shaw but her representation in the play signals that she is also an important character in the play. This paper presents a stylistic analysis of the characterization of Mrs. Pearce in Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion from a cognitive approach to highlight the cognitive as well as the social aspect of her character in the play.

Cognitive Stylistics Approach to Characterization

There are various approaches to characterization which try to locate the ontological status of the characters such as the humanizing and the dehumanizing approach. While the humanizing approach tends to locate the characters on one extreme end of humanization, the dehumanizing approach places the characters on the other end of it. Culpeper addresses this issue with the dual approach adjusting to the humanizing scale for the interpretation of the characters.

As Semino states, "Cognitive stylistics combines the kind of explicit, rigorous and detailed linguistic analysis of literary texts that is typical of the stylistic tradition with a systematic and theoretically informed consideration of the cognitive structures and processes that underlie the production and reception of language". Austin also in his seminal work puts, "*How to do Things with Words*" notices that when makes

statements regarding anything, they also convey information about their own cognitive structures as well. Thus, characters can be inferred through the self-presentation and the other-presentation as well.

Hence, this dual approach follows the cognitive patterns in the process of characterization along with the textual cues present in the text.

Culpeper's Model of Characterization

Culpeper argues that "characters arise as a result of a complex interaction between the incoming textual information on the one hand and the contents of our heads on the other"

Hence, the study of both the textual and the cognitive aspects form the basis of the process of characterization. This cognitive analysis combines both top-down and bottom-up processes. The top-down process includes the prior knowledge which is usually concept-driven such as schema and prototypes. The bottom up processes are also referred as content driven processes. They include the explicit and the implicit textual cues along with the authorial cues present in the text.

Prior knowledge

Prior knowledge is the information stored in the long-term memory of the readers. When understanding the character our prior knowledge is activated through various schemas and prototypes that are already present in our minds. Schema theory and prototype theory account for the activation of prior knowledge in the readers mind. Culpeper states "the first impressions of characters are guided by schemata, which once activated, offer a scaffolding for incoming character information". If the first impression of a character remains the same throughout the text, then that character comes under the category of schema reinforcing characters which are usually the flat characters. On the other hand, if the schema for a character undergoes a complete set of change, then it falls under the category of schema refreshing character which is the possibility for the round characters in the text.

Following that, there are classifications done on the basis of various prototypes available in the text. Prototype theory is the theory of categorization where the activation of various categories is based upon the function of the groups included. There are various cognitive categories such as personal categories, social role categories and the group membership categories. Placing a character in any such social group prompts one to "make inferences about the character" and arrive at the reason why that character behaves in a certain way. Thus, behavior of a person account for attribution theories which make inferences based upon the observation of the character's behavior which is usually the cause of a person's disposition in a text. Culpeper refers to Kelly's covariation theory which helps in identifying the location of the cause of a behavior in a character either depends upon the person, the stimulus or the environment.

Textual cues

The second source of character interpretation is the bottom-up process, which relies on using the new information gained from a text through various textual cues. Textual cues are further divided into three groups namely explicit, implicit and authorial cues. Explicit cues are those where we can find characters presenting themselves or presenting others explicitly by making statements about themselves (i.e. self-presentation) or about other characters (other-presentation). Implicit cues are the cues in which we need to infer character information from linguistic behavior including lexis, social markers, accent and dialect, visual features (e.g. facial expression). Authorial cues are the cues where direct character information is presented by the author in the form of stage-directions in plays or narratorial description in the novels.

The Characterization of Mrs. Pearce in Pygmalion

Pygmalion is a comedy play by Bernard Shaw. In the comedic plays, prototypical distortions are evident as the characters portrayed can lie in the extreme end of any adjectives such as the eccentric character of Higgins is unusual for the real-world scenario. Mrs. Pearce has a realistic outlook towards the problems Higgins approaches with a careless attitude. Mrs. Pearce is nominally placed at the minor characters list by Shaw though her realistic views are somehow the driving force in the play. Mrs. Pearce is the house-keeping lady of one of the main character Prof. Higgins. Initial observation of Mrs. Pearce is activated through the authorial cue of the stage direction where her movement and tone of voice is shown in the play. The first impression of Mrs. Pearce includes initial categorization of her qualities as portrayed by the author through

direct and indirect representation. Her social occupational role is of a house-keeper who doesn't simply comply with the orders given to her but also presents her views without any fear. Her age is not precisely mentioned by the playwright but indirectly as being elderly to the other major characters in the play. Mrs. Pearce is indirectly characterized by Shaw through self and other-presentation. When Prof. Higgins places the bet for transforming Eliza in six months from a flower girl to a duchess, Mrs. Pearce warns Higgins to consider what will become of Liza after the experiment. Higgins interaction with Mrs. Pearce also leaves a great deal of impression about Mrs. Pearce. Higgins is the Prof. of Phonetics who is of an ignorant disposition and is indifferent to other people's emotions and their presence. Mrs. Pearce categorically tells Higgins not to swear in front of Eliza in her course of stay in his house. She portrays the voice of responsibility and reason in the play. She has a caring image where she looks after the house as well as the people residing in it. She is respected and feared in the house. In the stage direction of the second act of the play Colonel Pickering straightens himself in the presence of Mrs. Pearce. Mrs. Pearce also knows her place and others too. She obliges with Higgins and doesn't send the flower girl away as she knows the eccentric character of Higgins. Her schematic behavior is context sensitive as circumstances force her to perform her duty of obliging with Higgins but she knows how to handle the situation with dignity and poise. Later she develops a bond with Eliza and also helps her leave without informing Higgins so as to defend Eliza from him. She doesn't fit in a single category of being a housekeeper. The behavior shown by Mrs. Pearce contradicts the initial behavior where she doesn't send Eliza away without the permission of Higgins but later in the end of the play she lets her leave with her clothes without taking the permission of Higgins. She becomes a friend of Eliza in the process. According to Culpeper, "schema-based characters are the prototypical, unremarkable and totally forgettable characters that inhabit fictional worlds, blending in with the background." However, the minor character of Mrs. Pearce adds a greater dimension to the play by her insightful interpretation of the situation of other major characters in the play. The housekeeper schema is recategorized in the end and hence the minor character of Mrs. Pearce emerges as a round character showcasing her reasoning capabilities around the other characters in the play.

Self-presentation by Mrs. Pearce and Other-presentation of Mrs. Pearce by Eliza

"Mrs. Pearce: Well, sir, she says you'll be glad to see her when you know what she's come about. She's quite a common girl, sir. Very common indeed. I should have sent her away, only I thought perhaps you wanted her to talk into your machines. I hope I've not done wrong; but really you see such queer people sometimes- you'll excuse me, I'm sure, sir—"

In the given dialogue by Mrs. Pearce, she expresses herself according to the present situation. Hence, according to Searle's classification of the speech acts, she is apologizing for not sending Eliza away. In her defense, she emphasizes upon the nature of Higgins and asserts with a valid reason for not been able to send Eliza away. But the irony of the situation lies when Mrs. Pearce helps Eliza in taking her leave without considering the approval of Higgins. So, in Eliza's escape, Mrs. Pearce finds a relief for herself as Eliza mentions here in the other-presentation about Mrs. Pearce,

"LIZA. Oh, you ARE a devil. You can twist the heart in a girl as easy as some could twist her arms to hurt her. Mrs. Pearce warned me. Time and again she has wanted to leave you; and you always got around her at the last minute. And you don't care a bit for her. And you don't care a bit for me."

Higgins is a crude character who doesn't care for anybody and Eliza here signals that Mrs. Pearce has always wanted to leave him but Higgins has always refused to let go of her. Although she has not been able to leave the house of Higgins, she has made a respectful place in his house for herself. As she performs her duty diligently and is never afraid of putting her opinions whenever she feels the need to do so. High consensus regarding Mrs. Pearce behaviour falls on the characteristic of her stern behaviour. According to the attribution theory, the character needs to be free from external constraint while emphasizing about a character's disposition. She interrupts Higgins again and again while taking control of the topic often in the second act of the play. She is not afraid of asserting her opinions in front of Higgins, her master. This clearly points at her tough nature. She knows how to handle the situations and the crude characters like Higgins and Alfred Doolittle. She exhibits certain control over the actions of the other characters in the play. She uses both stern and soft language to claim her assertiveness in any situation. From the following dialogues between Mrs. Pearce and Higgins, inferences can be made about her character and the dialogue is as follows;

“MRS. PEARCE [unmoved] No, sir: you’re not at all particular when you’ve mislaid anything or when you get a little impatient. Now it doesn’t matter before me: I’m used to

it. But you really must not swear before the girl.

HIGGINS [indignantly] I swear! [Most emphatically] I never swear. I detest the habit. What the devil do you mean?

MRS. PEARCE [stolidly] That’s what I mean, sir. You swear a great deal too much. I don’t mind your damning and blasting, and what the devil and where the devil and who the devil—

HIGGINS. Really! Mrs. Pearce: this language from your lips!

MRS. PEARCE [not to be put off]—but there is a certain word I must ask you not to use. The girl has just used it herself because the bath was too hot. It begins with the same letter as bath. She knows no better: she learnt it at her mother’s knee. But she must not hear it from your lips.

HIGGINS [loftily] I cannot charge myself with having ever uttered it, Mrs. Pearce. [She looks at him steadfastly. He adds, hiding an uneasy conscience with a judicial air] Except perhaps in a moment of extreme and justifiable excitement.

MRS. PEARCE. Only this morning, sir, you applied it to your boots, to the butter, and to the brown bread.

HIGGINS. Oh, that! Mere alliteration, Mrs. Pearce, natural to a poet.”

There are equal number of turns between Higgins and Mrs. Pearce but here she is in control of the topic which is also initiated by her. She is interrupted once here but she answers back quickly using the same strong expletives such as the “devil” used by Higgins. Thus, her stern and strict character is described in the stage direction in the later part of the play where playwright defines her as a woman of “difficult disposition.” Higgins is trying to initiate a lighter mood by answering to her questions and requests with humour but she remains stern throughout the conversation. She is thus rightfully be considered as a strict character withholding the values she believes in intact within her. Even the stage directions used by the playwright for her are “unmoved, stolidly, not to be put off”. All of these signals to her stern behaviour at all times. After going through the context of the play Mrs. Pearce doesn’t appear to be an all-time strict person. The way she handles Eliza and cares for her, she in a way becomes her friend and lets her leave without making a fuss. Her relationship with Eliza is backgrounded as it is never explicitly mentioned by the playwright. In the later part of the play, the playwright mentions about the distribution of the work load for Mrs. Pearce after the arrival of Eliza in the house of Higgins. Their companionship is not directly explored in the play. Therefore, her character is represented mostly through the implicit cues available in the text. Robyn Lakoff states about tag questions and hedges (what if, sort of, I think) to be used by the women the most that demonstrates the inferior status of women. Mrs. Pearce doesn’t use any of the hedges and tag questions in the play and is assertive unlike the stereotypical woman characters. Therefore, the authorial as well as the textual cues present in the play help in making an inference about the character of Mrs. Pearce.

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