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Shaw's Serious Jokes: Carnivalesque Laughter as Resistance in *Pygmalion*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of carnivalesque laughter as a form of resistance in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque as a framework. The study examines how Shaw employs humor, irony, and satire to critique and subvert rigid class structures and societal norms in Edwardian England. Characters such as Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins mirror Bakhtin's vision of carnival, where traditional hierarchies are inverted, and the established social order is challenged. By focusing on language, character dynamics, and the subversive nature of humor, this paper explicates how carnivalesque laughter in *Pygmalion* serves as a tool for questioning and destabilizing oppressive social structures. The analysis demonstrates that Shaw's strategic use of satire reflects a spirit analogous to that of Bakhtin's carnival, promoting a discourse of social change and renewal. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Shaw's literary techniques and the power of laughter as a vehicle for cultural and social critique.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, Mikhail Bakhtin, carnivalesque, satire, social resistance, Edwardian society, transformative humor, folk humor.

Introduction

In 1965, Michael Bakhtin (1895-1975) presented a revolutionary idea in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965); a concept of carnival that challenged the Stalinist-dominated academia during that period due to its subversive nature; for, at its core, Bakhtin's carnival represents an upheaval of established norms and societal hierarchies. In fact, he delves deeper into this notion by illustrating how, unlike dogmatic systems where ranks are clearly defined and respected, the essence of carnival opposes authoritarianism and dictatorship altogether. By questioning the rigidity of traditional social structures, Bakhtin introduced a new way of thinking about power dynamics within society - one that promotes inclusivity rather than exclusivity. He adds:

> [O]ne might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical

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> ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (Bakhtin 1965, 10)

This study aims at achieving the transposition of the Bakhtinian carnival into the language of Bernard Shaw's (1856–1950) literature as "a language of artistic images that has something in common with [the] concretely sensuous nature" of carnival (Bakhtin 1965, 122). The transposition of the Bakhtinian carnival into the language of literature, and in this specific case, into Shaw's literature, essentially means to uncover the vital attributes, values and themes of carnival, in this case defiance of authority through laughter, into and within the text. Such transposition allows the literature to reveal itself as a space where established ideas, norms and dogmas are questioned, inverted and played with, mirroring the rebellious and liberating spirit of the carnival.

As one might expect, Bakhtin's idea was not to be popular with the established norms of Stalinism at the time of its inception; so, despite having finished his thesis in 1940, it was not to be examined until 1947, due to the fact that it was considered confrontational, daring to speak truth to both the powerful and the powerless through an aesthetic, metaphoric form; that of the carnival and the unofficial laughter of the carnival "folk". This indirectly confrontational approach is remarkably compatible with the laughter generated in Shaw's drama and specifically, in this case, *Pygmalion* (1913). The play seeks to counteract the formal, unchanging hierarchy put in place by the ruling class, to which Bakhtin also refers as the 'official feast'. Laughter becomes a liberating force that challenges established, unquestioned, unchanging beliefs. In his work, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of the Comic* (2012), Bergson argues that

> To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL [sic] signification. (Bergson 2012, 5b)

The obvious relevance of Bakhtin's concept of carnival to Bernard Shaw's comedy in specific is traced in detail in this article. However, that is not to say that the carnival itself is a mere literary phenomenon; instead, as Bakhtin states in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1999), "its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination—is one of the most complex and most interesting problems in the history of culture" (Bakhtin 1999, 122). This article is concerned with what Bakhtin identifies as carnivalization, which is using both the complex and humorous language of carnival to achieve the transposition of the elements of carnival into the language of literature (Bakhtin 1999, 122). Therefore, it traces the de-crowning of well-established dogmas and dominant cultural hierarchies as elements of carnivalization presented within Shaw's *Pygmalion*. David Lodge expounds the compatibility between comedy - such as Shaw's in this instance - and Bakhtin's theory by stating that:

> But perhaps what makes Bakhtin's literary theory particularly valuable (certainly to the present writer) is that it is centred on prose fiction and comedy rather than on the genres of tragedy, epic and lyric privileged by traditional poetics. Bakhtin explains why the modern era has been dominated by the novel as a literary form, and at the same time offers a new and illuminating description of its formal character - a poetics of the novel. (Lodge 1990, 1)

Therefore, this article sheds light on the interactions between the text and the carnival, which, as mentioned previously, leads to the carnivalization of the literary text, highlighting the way literature can be perceived as a means to destabilize norms and challenge oppression.

In the carnival, all that constitutes the structure of the well-established, that is the ordinary, be it right or wrong, is suspended. That includes "The laws, prohibitions and restrictions" (Bakhtin 1965, 123); consequently, all resulting oppression, inequality, and repression practiced by the authority, through the laws they put in place and constantly maintain, seem decimated, hence bringing forth a sense of equality and equilibrium among all. When Bakhtin's ideas first emerged in Stalinist Russia, they were met with a tone of disdain, given that the concept of the carnival at that time was clearly frowned upon. However, Bakhtin explains why someone might not be enthusiastic about engaging in such a theory and giving it credence. He states that, in the carnival, "The behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate" (Bakhtin 1965, 123). That non-carnivalesque vantage point manifests itself in a person who tries to look at the carnival from the outside, which is essentially the established distance between the ruling class, which constitutes the manners of interactions between the general public and the ruling class. This chasm within the societal hierarchy is an issue to which Shaw dedicates this particular play.

According to Lachmann et al., "the morphology of the extra-ordinary carnivalesque culture, […] undermines the prevailing institutions of power through its symbols and rites of laughter" (Lachmann 1988, 124). In this way, the carnival can be seen as a form of expressing resistance against the oppressive structures of power and authority in society. Another vital aim of this study is to investigate how the carnivalesque approach of confronting injustice through the utilization of humor and laughter is evident in Shaw's satire and criticism of what he sees as the faults in the status quo. It seeks to illustrate the effort such great minds, author and philosopher, have put in their work towards raising self-awareness and self-reflection, thereby initiating a process of rejuvenation within society.

Laughter: Shaw's Serious Jokes

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw brilliantly presents the dominant societal hierarchy using many signifiers such as language, appearance, and gender; signifiers that are highly compatible with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque view of society. For instance, Shaw presents Higgins as a sophisticated linguistics professor, clearly defining his elevated social status. Mainly because he possesses a great mastery of the English language, one that gives him the ability to overpower many of the play's characters, Higgins is portrayed not just as a man that belongs to the upper class within the English society at that time, but also

as a maker and destabilizer of that class. In proper Shavian fashion, however, the seriousness of Higgins' position is demonstrated through laughter, especially when it comes to the significant contrast between the way he views himself and the way he appears to others, including the audience.

Throughout the play, Shaw draws laughter by creating ironic situations through which he heavily criticizes the artificial class distinctions. A glaring example of these ironic situations is when Eliza raises questions about her aunt's fate, insinuating that she was murdered. Eliza does so while speaking in an attitude almost like that of a duchess after a couple of months of training under Higgins' watchful eye. Almost seamlessly, she seems to assimilate in her elegant speech and dress, though not in the lowly and horrid content of the words, presenting herself as one that truly belongs to that social standing. She declares in the same conversation, which is one of the play's funniest parts, that her aunt was killed, stating that, "Them she lived with would have killed her for a hat-pin, let alone a hat" (Shaw 2002, 39). The discrepancy here is that she thinks this is the normal way to talk about health among rich people, a subject she is advised to stick to. Such a hilarious scene represents the epitome of Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque laughter, a flower girl in a duchess' attire breaking the upper-class social protocol. Freddy's reaction to Eliza's mini-speech stating, "The new small talk. You do it so awfully well" (Shaw 2002, 40), demonstrates how Eliza's new speech makes her original status almost unrecognizable, which blurs the lines of class identity.

Notably, Shaw's utilisation of laughter in this sense can be regarded as the commencement of the process of rejuvenation, a process of high importance to the carnival. Bakhtin states in *Rabelais* that the feast of being and rebirth is the carnival, in the sense that it is antagonistic to anything and everything that is unchanging (Baktin 1965, 10). The carnivalesque rejuvenation in this context can be understood as the means that allows for the expression of voices or perspectives which are usually marginalized or silenced, in this case Eliza's voice or perspective. What rejuvenation through laughter does here is provide an opportunity for renewal, for the emergence of new ideas and forms of expressions. Bakhtin argues that such subversive laughter can be closely linked to changing seasons, "To the phases of sun and moon, to the death and renewal of vegetation, and to the succession of agricultural seasons. In this succession all that is new or renews … is emphasized as a positive element expressing the people's hopes of a happier future" (Bakhtin 1965, 81). What the carnival does, as illustrated by the aforementioned situation involving Eliza, is blur boundaries, creating this sense of rejuvenation through the blending of the poor and rich, in a seamless fashion.

Moreover, Shaw utilizes his comedy of manners, grounding the play's characters in reality to aid the audience in comprehending the functionality of the laughter generated within the play. The purpose of said characters is to present a perspective on a specific institutionalized idea. In the previously selected scene from the play, the idea of the fragility of class distinction would later be dismantled as he displays the superficiality and pretentiousness of the upper class, and highlights the ways in which social norms are used to maintain the status quo. In his *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (2007), Pericles Lewis states that "[Shaw's] work introduced the theater of ideas to the English stage; where Ibsen turned melodrama into naturalism, Shaw parodied melodrama in order to develop an intellectual comedy of

manners" (Lewis 2007, 44). The play begins with Eliza being a simple flower girl, selling her flowers in the streets of London, later becoming one with the aristocratic quarter of London. By following the transformation that Eliza goes through, one is also able to identify the analogous carnivalization within the text, especially when considering Bakhtin's statement that, "The free designs represent chimeras (fantastic forms combining human, animal, and vegetable elements), comic devils, jugglers performing acrobatic tricks, masquerade figures, and parodical scenes-s-that is, purely grotesque, carnivalesque themes" (Bakhtin 1965, 96). Higgins' original quest to present Eliza at the garden ball as a duchess, thereby reversing her actual position in society, a process of transformation that Shaw displays to highlight the rampant hypocrisy of the English high class at the time, can also be directly linked to Bakhtin's continuation of his aforementioned argument, adding, "But at the same time these [carnivalesque] images had moved from the marketplace to court masquerades" (Bakhtin 1965, 102). In essence, Bakhtin underscores the emphasis on transformative, mobile and adaptable nature of the carnivalesque, highlighting the tension between institutional power and popular culture, one that is also being dissected by Shaw through laughter which crosses societal boundaries.

Carnivalesque Reversal: The Ironic Transposition of Alfred Doolittle's Status

Bakhtin maintains that in addition to the serious tone that the official (non-carnivalesque) feast upholds, laughter is a strange concept in such a feast; however, that is utterly reversed within the carnival, and in this specific case, within the dialogues that take place among the characters in *Pygmalion*. Holquist, in the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, thinks that "His [Rabelais'] folk are blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical, reveling in oceans of strong drink" (Bakhtin 1965, xix). When attempting to draw a connection between such Bakhtinian presentation of "folk" and the Shavian presentation of characters, Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, fits as a lively example of such a carnivalesque description. As his name suggests, Doolittle is not willing to work hard and to be a providing father and husband. The main reason why he is content with his place as a simple dustman in the lower class at the beginning of the play is that he avoids being subjected to the conventional morality of the middle class, as opposed to belonging to the lower class where morality does not have room to exist, let alone thrive.

By the end of the play, however, a carnivalesque transformation of folk takes place, and ironically, Doolittle is no longer a simple dustman but a wealthy man of morality. Before that transformation takes place, the socio-economic situation that Doolittle has been subjected to is exposed. As a very poor dustman, he was willing to sell his daughter for fifty pounds to Higgins and Pickering, an extreme circumstance that Shaw creates to highlight the marginalization of the moral situation of the poor. He foreshadows his sudden rise in status stating, "I ain't pretending to be deserving. No, I ain't. And I ain't asking for any charity," (Shaw 2002, 27). This reinforces the arbitrary nature of his soon-to-be newfound social status, emphasizing the carnivalesque inversion of roles. This Juvenalian circumstance can also be seen as a retelling of Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), through which he heavily satirizes both the Irish and the English governments' inaction towards fixing the horrifying socio-economic situation in Ireland.

Alfred Doolittle's presentation in the play somewhat parallels Eliza's in the sense that Shaw highlights his excellent innate ability to be a public speaker and moral teacher despite his lower-class status and education, especially when compared to Higgins and Pickering; thereby undermining the barriers of entry raised by the denizens of high class. After Higgins' interaction with Doolittle in act two and as a professional linguist, he understands he is facing a man with great eloquence, talent and wit. Even Eliza alludes to the fact that her father has hidden potential and that his true calling is to be a laborer, not a simple dustman. To shed more light on the utilization of Doolittle as a Shavian character introduced to undermine the established societal rules set in stone, Higgins jokingly initiates a paradoxical dilemma within Doolittle when he writes a letter to Ezra D. Wannafeller, asserting as reported by Doolittle, "that the most original moralist at present in England, to the best of your knowledge, was Alfred Doolittle, a common dustman" (Shaw 2002, 58). The carnivalesque element within this paradox is highlighted by Doolittle's reaction to his newly acquired respectable status and the way his mistress reacts to the fact that she and Doolittle are getting married at St. George's, Hanover Square. He tells Eliza, who is worried about being insulted by her stepmother, "Don't be afraid: she never comes to words with anyone now, poor woman! Respectability has broken all the spirit out of her" (Shaw 2002, 65). This funny reversal of received values and dogmas is one of the most vital elements of the folk festival. As Bakhtin theorizes, a crucial element of the carnival is "a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop or archbishop was elected at the 'feast of fools,' and in the churches directly under the pope's jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen" (Bakhtin 1965, 81). He is emphasizing the transformative nature of the carnival. The deliberate inversions of societal roles within the play and the carnival itself, not only act as entertainment but also offer profound critique on social structures at the time. They highlight Bakhtin's belief in the potential for literature and culture to resist, challenge and defy dominant narratives and dogmas.

The Shavian deep-cutting satire in *Pygmalion* aims to expose the fragility of the system constructed to prevent class mobility, while also loudly declaring that the socio-economic circumstances of people cannot be separated from their morality. Doolittle answers Pickering's question about whether or not Doolittle has any morals, is surprisingly profound: "Can't afford them, Governor. Neither could you if you was as poor as me" (Shaw 2002, 27). Here one finds a clear indication of Shaw's socialist sentiment towards the role that material conditions of people play in shaping their characters, and how it is that Doolittle has been forced into being the man that he is now.

The reason for highlighting the moral issue at hand within this funny and satirical interaction between Doolittle and Pickering is also to ascertain that by shedding light on the topic of the material condition of people in England at the time, Shaw seeks to generate solutions to this matter. This initiates a process of societal rejuvenation, given that the first step towards fixing a problem is acknowledging its existence. The laughter generated during this interaction is one of a subversive type, the laughter that exists within the Bakhtinian carnival. Bakhtin, throughout *Rabelais*, presents laughter as a philosophically complex activity. To an extent, it is a methodology of interpreting societal relations, which goes hand in hand with Shavian activism through humor and laughter. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist in their

work *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1985) write that, "the festive laughter engendered by carnival keeps alive a sense of variety and change" (1985, 301), as opposed to the immovable, absolute and unchangeable. As displayed in the example above it can be observed that generating laughter does not occur at the cost of reader instruction, but rather occurs in tandem with the process of educating the reader. It is important to point this out as Bakhtin makes a clear distinction between the carnival laughter, which is transposed in Shaw's work in this instance, and most modern parody and satire, stating that modern parody and satire are essentially negative, reductive and aimless laughter, meant to ridicule with an underlying tone of cynicism and sarcasm. The carnival, however, is entirely different from modern parody and satire, considering the fact that it aims to revive and renew, as opposed to halting at negating without proceeding to offer a solution (Bakhtin 1965, 11).

The parodical and satirical senses of the carnival bring forth an entirely alien discourse to the heavily hegemonized societies at large. For instance, it presents a complete reversal in what defines societal relations, the roles of classes within communities, and the status-quo well-established so-called rational rules. Bakhtin asserts in *Rabelais* that the carnivalesque feast is one, "of becoming, of change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed." (1965, 11). The carnival has a massive capacity for change from within, and this vast capacity of change holds within it many various carnivalesque elements; all attempting to destabilize the established norms, offering solutions to complications put in place by the ruling class, ones which the carnival has exposed.

A clear example of such established standards in Edwardian society at the time is the seriously unrealistic expectations placed upon women, declaring that perfectionism in all facets of life concerning women is a must; a norm to which Shaw responds immediately with the title of his work, invoking Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, alluding to the Greek myth of the sculptor Pygmalion. The sculptor tries to create a statue that represents his view and vision of what the concept of woman should entail, similar to Higgins and Pickering's effort in moulding Eliza into becoming the perfect Edwardian English duchess, the type that Higgins declares, "the streets will be strewn with bodies of men shooting themselves for your sake before I've done with you" (2002, 17).

Bakhtin highlights two worlds that exist side by side, the world of the official feast and the unofficial world of proper feasts, throughout his presentation of the carnival. Both worlds are transposed into *Pygmalion*; for instance, Eliza, who has been molded, though externally, into the typical institutionalized English lady, is still rebellious, relentlessly resistant to the established Victorian and current Edwardian hegemonic misogynistic dogmas and is capable of having an intellectual debate with Professor Higgins in the final scene of the play. Addressing him earnestly and confidently, she says, "Don't try to get around me. You'll have to do without me" (Shaw 2002, 67), echoing Nora's determination in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* when she finally took matters into her own hands, slamming the door as she exited, a slam that reverberates within Eliza's arguments towards the end of the play. The differences between these two worlds, the official and the unofficial, according to Bakhtin, can be discerned through several perspectives, one of which being that the world of the official feast is void of humor, creativity, and change, unlike the unofficial world of proper feasts which is dominated by folk humor.

The De-crowning of Higgins and Eliza's Carnivalesque Triumph

The Shavian presentation of the character of Higgins as a professor in linguistics serves a wide-ranging purpose in Shaw's satirical and methodical deconstruction of many of the shallow dogmas anchored in the English society at the time, such as the connection between language and identity, which is a vital element within the carnival. A leading figure in Bakhtinian studies, Michael Holquist writes in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*:

> Bakhtin's carnival, surely the most productive concept in this book, is not only not an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself. Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic. The sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church or state, but from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival. (1965, xvii)

Holquist notices in Bakhtin's book that the carnival is essentially a forceful revolution beyond the power of the appointed status quo. Such a force drives Eliza to prove that despite Higgins' superb mastery of the English language, she is not intellectually lesser than him. Eliza proves that she is an impeccably quick learner, to the point that she is able to easily win Higgins' bet for him, with Pickering stating, "I was quite frightened once or twice because Eliza was doing it so well. You see, lots of the real people can't do it at all" (Shaw 2002, 49). The irony that Pickering is missing here is also vital when he uses the word 'real,' given his status and education compared to Eliza. His inability to comprehend that the easy success of Eliza only exposes the fact that the well-established standard of "real people" is easily penetrable and proves that Eliza is just as clever as he or Higgins is. This decrowning of official truth is what Simon Dentith alludes to, arguing that, "The book, *Rabelais and His World*, undoubtedly articulates an aesthetic which celebrates the anarchic, body-based and grotesque elements of popular culture, and seeks to mobilize them against the humorless seriousness of official culture" (Dentith 1994, 60). This humorous seriousness is epitomized by Higgins' treatment of almost everyone he interacts with as a subject for experimentation with no feelings to consider. A seriousness that Eliza undermines and penetrates by the end of the play, invoking a rare human-like emotion from Higgins when he suggests that Eliza should stay and live with him and Pickering, all three bachelors under one roof.

In the context of Shaw's dramatic technique, Higgins' grave demeanor, infused with humor, aims to provoke laughter among audiences and readers, even though his actions may be deemed unacceptable. As mentioned previously, his seriousness regarding his vacation leads him to treat people in the manner displayed in the play, a comedic effect that Shaw puts to expert use. However, it is vital also to point out that this invoked laughter in reaction to Higgins' actions is analogous to the festive laughter generated within the carnival. In Act III, Shaw reveals the false facade of harmony among the educated upper class through Higgins during Mrs. Higgins' social gathering. Beneath this illusion lies the characters' true selves, as illustrated by Higgins' conversation with Mrs. and Miss Eynsford Hill, highlighting their pretense of knowledge and sophistication:

> MISS EYNSFORD HILL. (who considers HIGGINS quite eligible matrimonially) I sympathize. I haven't any small talk. If people would only be frank and say what they really think!
>
> HIGGINS. (relapsing into gloom) Lord forbid!
>
> MRS EYNSFORD HILL. (taking up her daughter's cue) But why?
>
> HIGGINS. What they think they ought to think is bad enough, Lord knows; but what they really think would break up the whole show. Do you suppose it would be really agreeable if I were to come out now with what I really think?
>
> MISS EYNSFORD HILL. (gaily) Is it so very cynical?
>
> …
>
> HIGGINS. You see, we're all savages, more or less. We're supposed to be civilized and cultured – to know all about poetry and philosophy and art and science, and so on; but how many of us know even the meanings of these names? (Shaw 2002, 37-38)

With the transposition of the carnival elements within this specific interaction, it becomes clear that the laughter produced as a reaction here is one that keeps a sense of renewal and change alive. Bakhtin adds that during the carnival, people are liberated from the weight of notions of things being everlasting, static, definite and constant. Instead, they experience the world's light-hearted cheerful side that celebrates its evolving open nature and the happiness of transformation and rejuvenation. Bakhtin emphasizes a point that Shaw brings up in the conversation quoted above and throughout his overall challenge to all societal dogmas put in place; that the carnival breaks away from the eternal past and brings forth a new sense of freedom and happiness.

According to Bakhtin, it is vital for the existence of the official feast that the unchanging rules be forcefully maintained, preventing any transgression against predetermined boundaries and norms, the same norms that, according to Shaw and his socialist ideology, are put in place by capital holders, by the high class. In act two, in response to the sounds Eliza produces when she is addressed as Miss Doolittle by Pickering for the first time, Higgins not only mocks her reaction, but also attempts to direct Pickering to forcefully order Eliza to do his bidding, convincing Pickering that it is the only way to deal with her, stating that he ought to "Give her orders: that's what she wants" (Shaw 2002, 20). Higgins, in this interaction, puts on the uniform of an official at the official feast, clinging onto prebuilt conventions and rules of nobility, and the correct definition of a lady. Furthermore, he asserts through threats that if Eliza breaks those preset rules of nobility, she will be punished. Eliza however, despite her low standing in society already sets in motion in her mind a series of actions, ones that go hand in hand with what Bakhtin refers to as "complete withdrawal from the present order" (1965, 275). Eliza's inversion of official values and her anti-dogmatism manifests itself and materializes in act four, with her launching pad towards carnivalesque emancipation being the act of her launching Higgins' slippers at him.

Higgins: Facilitator of the Carnival

In his work *The 101 Greatest Plays: From Antiquity to the Present* (2016), Michael Billington argues that the, "whole point of Shaw's play is to offer an ironic *inversion* of standard romance and to raise provocative questions about the class system's dependence on income, accent, and posture as much as genetic inheritance" (italics added; 2016, 223). Billington's argument can be further bolstered when discussed from the Bakhtinian carnivalesque point of view in the sense that the carnival initiates a complete reversal in what defines societal relations, the roles of classes within communities, and the well-established so-called rational rules of the status-quo. Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* argues that one of the more essential and indispensable elements of the carnival is, "a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the 'feast of fools,' and in the churches directly under the pope's jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen" (1965, 81). Such reversal is a pivotal tool used to critically demonstrate the true nature of those hierarchies, and this can be highlighted within the play when also dissecting the character of Higgins.

Despite the fact that Higgins tries to maintain the façade of an officer at an official feast, threatening Eliza as mentioned previously, that if she destabilizes the preset notions and rules of nobility she will be punished, he unknowingly submits to the subversive nature of the carnival, thereby initiating the carnivalesque process of change throughout the entire play. Higgins in many ways embodies the spirit of the carnival by disrupting the social order through his invitation of Eliza Doolittle into his upper-class abode. This invitation not only defies the rigid class boundaries of Edwardian society, but also serves to challenge the expectations of those who adhere to the prevailing societal codes. His unorthodox experiment, aimed at transforming Eliza, further exemplifies the carnivalesque by destabilizing the traditional understanding of social mobility and status. Moreover, the relationship between the characters within the play in general, and Higgins and Eliza in specific, mirrors the dynamics of the Bakhtinian carnival by fostering an environment of mutual mockery, ridicule and playfulness. Benjamin Shepard expounds the idea of playfulness within the carnival stating that it integrates "the liberatory nature of humor, culture, performance and the possibility of play" (2012, 211). This playful irreverence dissolves the social distance between Higgins and Eliza, allowing both characters to engage with each other, or with others, in a manner that defies their class distinctions. For instance, Eliza famously exclaims, "Not bloody likely! I'm going in a taxi" (Shaw 2002, 40) when she was asked whether or not she was going to walk home.

Furthermore, Higgins' residence contributes to the carnival-like atmosphere within the play. Shaw presents the setting, Higgins' home, as a laboratory of linguistic and phonetic experimentation, which stands in stark contrast to the traditional domestic spaces of the Edwardian era. It becomes a site of transformation, resistance and rebellion, where Eliza learns to imitate the speech and mannerisms of the upper class, ultimately subverting societal expectations. The result of Higgins' actions, ironically and ultimately, asserts Eliza's independence and her refusal to conform to her mentor's expectations. This act subverts the traditional power dynamics between them and serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of the carnival. Higgins' role, therefore, can clearly be presented as a creator of

the carnival within the play. It is substantiated through his breaking of class boundaries, subversion of societal norms and the establishment of an environment that fosters transformative change.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates connections between Bakhtinian carnival and the carnivalesque motifs that are integral to Shaw's *Pygmalion*. This carnivalesque, celebratory atmosphere evokes Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque within the confines of Shaw's play—a space in which class boundaries become indistinct and social issues are contested. The narrative Shaw constructs through characters such as Higgins and Eliza critiques the constraints of Edwardian society and its structural oppression, while simultaneously inviting the audience to engage with the carnivalesque through laughter, inversion, and renewal.

The carnival's transformative capacity is most profoundly manifested in the deconstruction of class distinctions through linguistic and phonetic experimentation that facilitates Eliza Doolittle's transformation. Notably, Higgins, an individual who in the play endeavours to maintain his own status within a world anchored by and established within a hierarchical structure, perceives himself as traditional; yet he inadvertently advocates for precisely the carnival inversion that the play represents. Higgins remains a paradoxical figure: on one hand, he strives to mold Eliza into a respectable lady according to societal norms; on the other hand, his actions simultaneously highlight and demonstrate the inherent absurdity of these same norms; though one may argue that the two notions are tied.

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw disrupts the established social order by subverting class boundaries, transforming Victorian society into a carnivalesque atmosphere. Noting the distinction between Rabelais and Bakhtin, Clark and Holquist state that like Rabelais, Bakhtin throughout this book is exploring the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial” (298). This tension is at the core of Shaw's created characters such as Alfred Doolittle, whose unsolicited acquisition of wealth and rank only further accentuates the precariousness of class structures. Doolittle begins to satirize society for the arbitrary nature of monetary and reputational status, underscoring the notion that class stratification is not as impermeable as it appears.

The laughter elicited by the absurd situations presented in the play serves as a potent mechanism for challenging rigid social hierarchies. Laughter, as conceptualized in Bakhtin's notion of carnival, engenders scepticism towards dominant ideological perspectives. This laughter, the irrepressible mirth that eludes the control of Higgins and Shaw, functions as a formidable instrument—manifested in Eliza's transformation into selfhood and her ultimate rejection of Higgins’ influence—even more efficacious than it appears in Pygmalion. Indeed, by interrogating the expectations of her mentor, Eliza asserts her autonomy, and considerable humor arises from the resultant laughter that disrupts the status quo as effectively as a carnival defying authority in celebration of change.

نكات شو الجادة: الضحك الكرنفالي كمقاومة في بجماليون

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الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة دور الضحك الكرنفالي كونه شكلاً من أشكال المقاومة في مسرحيّة "بجماليون" لجورج برنارد شو، مستعينة بنظرية ميخائيل باختين في الكرنفال، وتُحلل الدراسة مسرحية (شو) كونها تجسيداً لأفكار باختينيه، إذ يستخدم الضحك والسخرية ليس فقط كأدوات فنية، بل كأدوات للنقد الاجتماعي والسياسي، وتُحقّق الدراسة في كيفيّة استخدام (شو) للفكاهة وديناميكيات الشخصيات في "بجماليون" لتحدي الأعراف والتقاليد الاجتماعيّة القائمة، مع التركيز بصورة خاصة على التمايزات الطبقيّة وجمود المجتمع الإدواردي، ومن خلال فحص لغة المسرحيّة وتفاعلات الشخصيات وطبيعة الفكاهة التحريضيّة، تُبرز الدراسة القوة التحويليّة للضحك الكرنفالي في الأدب كأداة للتساؤل وزعزعة الهياكل القمعيّة، ويُظهر استخدام شو الاستراتيجي للسخرية والتهكم في تصوير شخصيات مثل إليزا دوليتل وهنري هيغنز، كما يعكس روح التمرد في كرنفال باختين، مُروّجًا لخطاب التغيير والتجديد، وتُساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم تقنيات (شو) الأدبيّة والآثار الأوسع للضحك كونه وسيلة للمقاومة الثقافيّة والاجتماعيّة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جورج برنارد شو، بجماليون، ميخائيل باختين، الكرنفالي، الضحك، السخرية، المقاومة الاجتماعيّة، التمايزات الطبقيّة، المجتمع الإدواردي، الفكاهة التحويليّة، الفكاهة الشعبيّة.

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