Robert Hatton

Professor Froehlich

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Class and Gender in My Fair Lady

The film My Fair Lady, released in October of 1964, was one of the last great musicals of its time. My Fair Lady is a film about two men who make a wager on whether or not Professor Higgins, a phonetician played by Rex Harrison, can transform Eliza Doolittle, a lower class flower girl played by Audrey Hepburn, into a lady and pass her off as one at a ball in Buckingham Palace. This film has underlining themes involving social class oppression and gender roles. The film My Fair Lady reveals social class oppression and male gender role dominance during 1964 in American culture.

My Fair Lady is a dramatic romance movie about a wager between two British high society men. Professor Henry Higgins takes a bet from Colonel Pickering that he can transform a trashy Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, into a lady and pass her off at the Embassy Ball. Professor Higgins is successful and Freddy Eynsford-Hill, a British aristocrat, falls head over heels in love with Eliza. Higgins then takes all the credit for Eliza’s transformation and she leaves him in a tantrum for Freddy. Then, of course, Professor Higgins realizes that he is in love with Eliza and the film ends.

First the social class oppression begins from the very start of the film. The opening scene, after the overture and credits, shows the upper class leaving an opera. All the ladies are dressed in decadent gowns and the gentlemen in spiffy suits. Then comes Eliza dressed in an old, raggedy dress with dirt on her face, trying to sell the upper class people flowers, to make a living. They distinguish the differences of the social classes right away with their attire, without any hesitation. Later on in the film, Mr. Higgins orders his maid to take Eliza away, clean her, and burn her clothes. Eliza was even dressed in her best dress, cleaned herself, and took a ride in a taxi, which was very unusual for a person of the lower class. “She is not one to submit to the still obscure customs and refinements of a society that is alien to her” (Crowther). But, she does to better herself. Mr. Higgins then tells his maid to fetch her some new decent clothing worthy of a lady. That action further exemplifies that her lower class possessions were not fit enough to make the journey of her transformation into a lady.

Another example of social class oppression is when Eliza learns to speak properly. Mr. Higgins and Colonel Pickering decide to take her to a horse track to test out her skills. The track, of course, is dominated by the upper class. They are all dressed up in gorgeous gowns and nice suits. When Mr. Higgins’ mother finds out about Eliza coming to the horse track, she is disgusted that her son invited a common flower girl to her private box. The upper class does not take too kindly to the lower class. They enjoy and respect their differences, sometimes even push it. While at the track, Eliza screams at a horse to move its “bloomin’ arse,” in her native lower class, unrefined, tongue. The people of the horse track are appalled at the sound and language of her voice. After that, Colonel Pickering wants to call off the bet with Mr. Higgins. He does not believe Eliza could be taught to walk and present herself as a lady at the Embassy Ball. Then, just the fact that they have to go to the Embassy Ball to see if she can pass as a lady is farfetched. The ball, of course, is full of nothing but the upper class and a few royals. They are all decked out in extravagant gowns and suits with top hats and canes. Eliza is dressed in an expensive gown with jewelry. This shows that the upper class has a set of characteristics that truly distinguish them from any other social class.

Next is the issue of gender roles, specifically the male being the dominant one over the female. Mr. Higgins orders Eliza to sit down when she is in his home asking for phonetic lessons. Then immediately after, Mr. Higgins tells his maid that if Eliza gives her any trouble while she is being made presentable, to wallop her. Next, when they talk about what is going to happen to Eliza after all is said and done, Mr. Higgins says, “When we’re done with her we’ll throw her back into the gutter.” The male gender in this film has a distinguished dominance over their female counterparts.

To add onto the issues of male dominance and social class oppression, Mr. Doolittle, Eliza’s father, asks for money from Mr. Higgins for him taking in Eliza. This shows what a father thinks of his daughter coming from the lower class. He thinks he should get a little penance for his daughter and he does indeed receive it from Mr. Higgins. Next, it seems as if Mr. Higgins’ maid does more work than the male butler in the house. It seems as though that women in this movie are made out to be, somewhat, property rather than people. Mr. Higgins even says, “The gentle sex was made for man to marry.” Another statement made by Mr. Higgins is, “If you had a woman in your life and you invite internal strife.” These statements further implicate that the female gender is less than the male gender, in this film.

The conclusion of the film further shows the male dominance over the female gender. Mr. Higgins takes all credit for Eliza’s transformation into a lady and gives her none. Mr. Higgins says he can go to bed without dreading the next the day after they all return from the ball. Then, Higgins tells Eliza, as he’s leaving the room, to leave a note for his maid about breakfast, and to put out the light when she leaves the room. He leaves and comes back to look for his slippers and finds Eliza still in the room, crying. Higgins calls Eliza a devil when she is crying. She shows her temper to him and he calls her a cat and tells her not to show her temper to him. Higgins further calls Eliza a “heartless guttersnipe,” and he later leaves the room. Eliza leaves Mr. Higgins house that night and in the morning Mr. Higgins and Colonel Pickering look for her and do not find her. They argue a little bit and then Mr. Higgins says, “I paid for Eliza and he wants her back.” Then they go out and look for her. Mr. Higgins later finds Eliza at his mother’s house and he orders Eliza to come back to his house to fulfill her duties. She refuses and he calls her baggage. All of this clearly shows the male dominance over the female gender.

The gender role of male dominance is evident in American Culture at the time which My Fair Lady is released. And this decade of the 1960’s is when the second wave feminist movement in the United States begins (“Feminism”). Women start to want equal pay and opportunity to their male counterparts (“Feminism”). They suffered from sex discrimination and were not allowed to hold managerial jobs. The hardships that Eliza went through are somewhat the same as what real women were going through.

In the end, the film My Fair Lady indeed shows social class oppression and a clear gender role of the male counterpart being the dominant of the two. The upper class is shown just as they should be. They all wear nice, clean clothes in the movie and they frown against the lower class people in the film. They are disgusted when Eliza yell’s at the horse while at the track. Mr. Higgins’ mother is appalled when she hears that Eliza is a simple flower girl. Then on the issue of gender roles, it is clearly shown in the film that the male gender is the so called superior gender of the two. Mr. Higgins orders Eliza around, yells at her, and talks down to her. Her father even comes around to Mr. Higgins’ house to ask for a penance and Mr. Higgins obliges. Then the second wave of feminism shows the cultural attitude towards the gender roles taken place in the film. Thus, social class oppression and a male dominant gender role are evident in the film My Fair Lady. Works Cited

Crowther, Bosley. “Screen: Lots of Chocolates for Miss Eliza Doolittle.” New York Times. 22 Oct. 1964: 41. Proquest. Penn State U. Lib., Hazleton, PA. 16 March 2009 <http://www.proquest.com>.

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My Fair Lady. Dir. George Cukor. Perf. Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison. Warner Brothers Pictures, 1964.