

The Analysis of Differences between *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*

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Abstract: George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* and the musical-film adaptation *My Fair Lady* share a highly similar narrative framework, yet differ profoundly in narrative logic, aesthetic effects, and thematic implications. Drawing upon adaptation theory and the perspective of intertextuality, this paper conducts a comparative analysis from three dimensions: narrative medium, audio-visual rhetoric and characterization, revealing the fundamental shifts of the two art forms between intellectual debate and sensory immersion, as well as social critique and romantic myth. The analysis shows that the film's apparent fidelity to Shaw's text is merely superficial; its genre conventions, especially the Hollywood musical's preference for closure and emotional gratification, systematically dilute Shaw's satire on class hypocrisy and patriarchal oppression, while softening Eliza's final rejection of Higgins into an ambiguous, potentially reconciliatory finale. The study thus contends that adaptation is never a neutral transfer but a culturally embedded reinterpretation, and this finding provides a critical reference for evaluating screen adaptations of classic literature, particularly in terms of how medium-specific constraints and ideological contexts reshape narrative meaning.

Keywords: *Pygmalion*; *My Fair Lady*; Cross-media narrative; Adaptation theory; Class and gender

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1. Introduction

Written in 1913, George Bernard Shaw's five-act play *Pygmalion* takes the Greek myth in which a sculptor falls in love with his own statue as a metaphor to delve deeply into the intricate connections among language, social class and identity. Boasting sharp social satire and an open-ended anti-romantic ending, the play stands as a landmark of theatrical innovation during Britain's Edwardian Era ^[1]. Half a century later, *My Fair Lady*, the musical-film adapted from this play, came out in 1964. It won eight Academy Awards and gained far-reaching global popularity exceeding that of the original play.

However, such breadth of dissemination often comes at the cost of simplified meaning. As Linda Hutcheon points out in *A Theory of Adaptation*, adaptation is not a "faithful copy" of the original, but "an

independent act of creative translation”—every medium shift is accompanied by a recoding of narrative grammar and ideological positions ^[2]. Existing scholarship has largely focused on comparisons of plot and dialogue, with few systematic analyses grounded in medium ontology—that is, the fundamental difference between the “conventionality” of the stage and the “documentary realism” of cinema. This paper conducts a comparative study from three dimensions: narrative mediality, audio-visual rhetoric of scenes, and the reconstruction of character images. It examines how *My Fair Lady* transforms Shaw’s intellectual debate into a romantic spectacle under the operational logic of commercial genre films, and in the process, eliminates the original work’s sharpest class critique and feminist consciousness of independence.

2. Adaptation context and theoretical framework

To understand the fundamental differences between the two works, artistic media and historical contexts should be taken into consideration. Play is defined by the limitations of time, space, and the symbolic nature of its expression. The sets, props, and movements on stage are all “conventional” symbols—the audience must accept that stage properties can represent a certain setting, and the lengthy monologues serve as the direct externalization of a character’s inner world. This kind of imperfection is precisely what constitutes theater’s unique charm, which compels the audience to engage their imagination in constructing the narrative, thereby focusing more intently on the clash of ideas within the characters’ dialogue. Shaw exploited this characteristic, shaping his plays into an argumentative “theatre of ideas” in which audiences are guided to “listen” rather than merely “watch,” and thus rational thinking prevailed over emotional resonance.

By contrast, the film medium, grounded in mechanical reproduction via the camera, inherently leans toward documentary-style visual presentation. Cinematic images possess “compelling realism,” capable of depicting characters’ expressions, costumes, surroundings, and even shifts of light and shadow with unprecedented detail ^[3]. On the one hand, this visual power endows the narrative with rich sensory experiences; on the other hand, it also carries risks. When viewers are drawn in by the magnificent sets, catchy songs, and star appearances, the social themes that require deep reflection in the drama are often simplified into visual spectacles. *My Fair Lady* emerged during Hollywood’s golden age of musicals. This genre calls for happy endings and episodic entertainment, which stands in innate conflict with Shaw’s commitment to an anti-romantic stance.

Furthermore, from the perspective of intertextuality, *My Fair Lady* is not a one-way derivative of *Pygmalion*. Instead, it rewrites the original against the backdrop of post-war American consumer culture ^[4]. In the 1960s, Hollywood needed a motivational myth about “the ugly duckling turning into a swan,” rather than a cold fable about a linguistics professor arrogantly destroying the dignity of lower-class women. Such differences in social context underpin all the specific comparisons discussed later.

3. Mediational differences in narrative strategies

In terms of narrative structure and time-space handling, the differences between the two texts stem directly from the distinct characteristics of their media. The play *Pygmalion* follows a modified version of the classical three unities rigorously. The plot progresses linearly according to the causal relationship, and all scenes must be elaborated through dialogue. By contrast, the film *My Fair Lady* makes full use of montage and moving camera work to present sweeping wide shots of scenes including the racecourse, horse racing

ceremonies, and Covent Garden Market. Spatial narrative is essentially a cross-media narrative ^[5]. So, there are mediational differences between these two versions.

Specifically, there are many scenes that are full of dialogue and conflicts in *Pygmalion*, and these scenes gradually develop to the climax and make up the end of the play according to the established logic. For example, in the drama, Eliza's evening dress, diamonds, flowers, and all the trimmings are described in great detail. And some of her facial appearance is also presented to the readers. Such a narrative allows the readers to imagine her bad mood and really feel the character's heart.

While in the film, *My Fair Lady* uses the lens to tell the whole story. It contains both dramatic and non-dramatic plots. The non-dramatic plot indicates that the film focuses on exploring the emotional conflict of the character's inner thoughts, and pursues reality, freedom, and liveliness to capture the audience's minds. In the film, many scenes may suddenly stay still and then turn from static to lively. For example, when Eliza goes back to the gutter, she suddenly thinks of Mr. Higgins' words that it will keep her in the gutter till the end of her days without requiring better English. The scene in this section turns from static to lively. When Eliza has an emotional shift, people keep the static, so it is difficult for the audience to understand her inner heart, and her emotional outburst later on is also unknown to the audience.

In terms of narrative time and space, it is well known that drama is a stage art. So it has strict limits on space and time. Take the horse-racing scene, for example; the play describes the scene and can only rely on symbolic or implied narrative. However, the limitations of narrative time and space are relatively few in the film, because there is no limitation of space. In the film, the audience is free to approve or deny the setting, environment, and other aspects. For example, the dress of the ladies in the horse-racing scene in the film impressed the audience deeply, especially the different hairstyles of the ladies and their decorations, such as umbrellas, straw hats, handbags, and so on. So it can be concluded that the advantage of film in narrative space and time is evident.

The use of music in films is one of its highlights in the film narrative. Drama relies solely on dialogue and silence to create tension. Eliza's anger, confusion, and awakening are all conveyed through the sharpness of the words and the emphasis of pauses; in films, the emotional peaks are almost entirely carried by songs. A large number of songs were added to the dialogue. For example, Eliza objected to Higgins teaching her vowel sounds because she thought it was a very difficult job. She expresses her anger through the song "Wait and See," which perfectly conveys her feelings; in the scene of horse-racing, the knight, duke, duchess, and so on sang together; their singing became the label of the British upper class at that time. In another way, the song distinguishes not only the class to which people belong, but also the culture of their respective classes; and at the end of the film, Higgins is on his way home, and the audience can tell from his appearance that his heart is full of anger. But through the song "I've Got Used to Her Face," the audience can clearly feel Higgins's feelings for Eliza. Thus, it can be concluded that music makes the film have certain advantages that drama cannot compare with in narrative.

For the second part, *Pygmalion* is also very different from *My Fair Lady* in the way it portrays the scenes. In fact, in *Pygmalion*, the scene of horse-racing does not exist. The reason should be the limitations of the stage performance of this scene. While in the film, watching horse racing is a sensory treat for the audience. For one thing, it's not like horse racing in real life, because racegoers come from the upper classes; they usually keep quiet while watching the races. For another, they behave and speak in the same way. Thus, the audience can sense the hypocrisy of the upper classes: it seems that they all wear the same uniform, are

always acting, and their lives are far from the words “simple” and “natural.” This may be a typical case of the writer’s criticism of reality in the film.

4. Scene recreation and character restructuring

Differences in scene-handling manifest not merely in narrative scope but also signal a shift in critical stance. Take the climax of the whole story, for example. The theatrical version relies entirely on retellings from Freddy and other characters to convey the tense atmosphere; Shaw does not even depict Eliza’s stunning effect directly, for that was never his concern. What Shaw intended to explore was the power dynamics embedded within language training itself.

The film generously showcases the opulent banquet hall, Eliza’s white gown and dazzling diamonds, and deliberately interweaves suspenseful scenes in which Higgins’s former student (a linguist) uncovers Eliza’s true identity. When the prince finally declares her to be a Hungarian princess, audiences feel relieved and entertained. However, this adaptation subtly shifts the original work’s focus from “language as a tool of social violence” to a point about “whether Cinderella can pass the exam.” While the visual suspense absent in the stage play undoubtedly enhances its entertainment value, it comes at the cost of diluting the serious themes.

Adapted plays not only retain the theme and plot, but also consider the subjective characteristics of opera ^[6]. And it is said that identity is a process of construction, a process that is both evolving continuously and evolving as it continues ^[7]. To talk about the characterization, this adaptation tendency is even more pronounced, which includes two characters, Eliza and her father.

Let us start with the central character, Eliza. Two different forms of text present a similar Eliza to the audience: an ordinary tramp in the streets of London. As Eliza’s voice coach, Mr. Higgins often dominates their interactions and language choices. His power discourse exerts a significant influence on Eliza’s psychological transformation and behavioral decisions ^[8]. Higgins describes her as deliciously low, horribly dirty, and a draggle-tailed guttersnipe. She often says that she is a respectable girl, but her words and manners betray that she is vulgar and lacking in refinement. After Mr. Higgins and Mr. Pickering’s training, she becomes a graceful duchess, and with her own understanding and judgment, Eliza leaves abruptly. This is also the peak of her character’s development: her self-esteem is reflected, and she can rethink her relationship with Higgins and wonder about her desire for him and how her departure will affect him.

In Bernard Shaw’s work, Eliza’s departure represents the ultimate manifestation of her independent personality. She did not leave because of a failed love affair, but because she realized that Higgins had never regarded her as an equal person. Her awakening of self-respect enabled her to bravely venture into the unknown. In the film, due to the aforementioned song and the guiding effect of the camera shots on the viewer’s gaze, Eliza’s feelings for Higgins are implied to be a suppressed, unspoken love. Her departure is more like an escalated version of a quarrel between a couple. This kind of adaptation also changes the original intention of the drama text to a large extent because there is too little foreshadowing of the relationship between Eliza and Higgins in the film.

The feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey once pointed out that mainstream Hollywood films often portray women as “spectacular objects to be observed.” In the film, apart from emotions which can be manipulated, every character and role is played and shaped by the actors ^[9]. In *My Fair Lady*, Audrey

Hepburn's elegant appearance and the exquisite close-up shots made Eliza's "transformation" a feast of aesthetic appreciation under the gaze of men. The alienation and pain she endured as a display at the banquet were concealed by her glamorous appearance. The dignified declaration in the original work that "I sell flowers, but not myself" was greatly diluted in the romanticized ambiguous atmosphere of the film ^[10].

To talk about Eliza's father, the description of her father in the film is not the same as in the dramatic text. The adaptation of Eliza's father, Doolittle's character, reveals the deliberate avoidance of class issues by the filmmakers. In the dramatic text, Doolittle, as a "jovial rogue," is portrayed by Shaw as the spokesperson for his criticism of the moral hypocrisy of the middle class. After he unexpectedly inherited his fortune and was forced to enter the upper class, he painfully realized that he had been "kidnapped by decency," losing the right of the common people to freely mock themselves. This transformation directly points to the absurdity of upward mobility in capitalist society. Wealth does not bring true liberation; instead, it merely replaces one set of more refined shackles with another.

By contrast, the character is underrepresented in the film. In the film, Doolittle's transformation is presented as a comedic subplot. His complaints are merely directed at Higgins for interfering in matters that don't concern him, rather than being an indictment of the social structure itself. This approach is largely due to the fact that Hollywood musicals avoid sharp political criticism and tend to present class differences as a playful "accent issue" rather than a structural "power issue." As a result, Shaw's mordant socialist satire is reduced to gentle warmth and humor that middle-class audiences can consume without discomfort.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, although the drama *Pygmalion* and the film *My Fair Lady* share a high degree of structural similarity in terms of plot framework and character relationships, they belong to two distinct spiritual spectra in terms of narrative grammar, aesthetic tendencies, and ideological expression. The original text is a rationalist theater of ideas. Through the ambiguity of language and the tension of silence, it forces the audience to confront the harshness of class barriers and the difficulty of female independence. In contrast, the film is a sensoryist audio-visual feast. With magnificent scenes, beautiful melodies, and the charm of celebrities, it reconstructs a social experiment into a romantic myth about the education of love.

However, this does not mean the film adaptation is entirely without merit. Its achievements in expanding narrative time and space and enriching character dimensions—especially its use of music to depict inner psychology—perfectly demonstrate the irreplaceable emotional power of the cinematic medium. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that every cross-media adaptation constitutes an operation of cultural power. When Shaw's Eliza shuts the door of Higgins' house, she leaves the audience with a back that refuses to be labeled or possessed; by contrast, Hollywood's Eliza wanders behind that door, suggesting the possibility of a return. In this opening and closing, there is a profound divergence between two eras of spirit and two artistic ethics.

From an academic perspective, the success of *My Fair Lady* and its deviation offer us valuable insights: In the post-classical narrative era, the film adaptation of literary classics is no longer a competition of faithfulness, but rather a practice of striking a delicate balance between "dissemination" and "alienation."

Only by viewing through the lens of media characteristics and stripping away the disguise of conventional types can people both appreciate the artistic charm of the film and not forget Shaw's resounding

postscript at the end of the play: Eliza chooses to leave not for lack of love, but for the sake of becoming herself. This remains a timely and sobering reminder for the audience who are currently wrapped up in countless romantic narratives.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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