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Materialism as Social Attribution: Study of Eliza Doolittle's Characterization in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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Abstract:

Materialism, also called as physicalism, posits the philosophical view that the minds of human beings are dependent upon the material processes. Materiality contributes in varied ways in forming the societal as well as the psychological aspect of the individuals as well as the society as a whole. Materialism and identity formation are widely studied together from a variety of trans-disciplinary perspectives but they haven't been specifically presented as the tools for language processing variables. This paper directly analyses the dialogues of one of the main characters named Eliza Doolittle in the specified play and its contribution in the understanding of the situational or the dispositional influences on her behavior. Both internal as well as the external factors accommodate the behavior of the characters in a text. Thus, this approach tends to overview the identity formation of a character in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* through Kelly's theory of attribution.

Keywords: attribution, behaviour, identity, language, materialism, physicalism, disposition.

Introduction

Materialism asserts the philosophical view that human minds depend upon the material processes and economical structures of society. The state of being material embodies

meaning and value derived from the material objects. Material objects are perceived to be the social markers of an individual since posterity. Materialism deals with the preoccupation with the material structures or processes which bring about the formation of the “social” as well as the “personal” sensibilities of an identity. Material culture shapes the self as pointed out by Sartre who defined being by having. Aristotle also asserts on the material to be one of the causes of being. Materiality contributes in varied ways in forming the societal as well as the psychological aspect of the individuals as well as the society as a whole. Materialism and identity formation are studied together from a wide array of trans-disciplinary perspectives but they haven't been specifically presented as the tools for language processing variable including social attribution. This paper directly analyses the dialogues of one of the main characters named Eliza Doolittle in the specified play and its contribution in the understanding of the situational or the dispositional influences on her behavior. Both internal as well as the external factors respond to the behavior of the characters in a text. The approach of social attribution by Kelly ensures whether the cause of a behavior is located in the person or in the surrounding of that person. Thus, this approach can be studied to overview the identity formation of a character in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Material possessions act as the markers of the identity of a person on the level of social class. They also act as personal markers of identity of a person such as the values, etiquettes, and even life-history. All these factors contribute in the construction of an identity of a person. The characters in the play are also described by the material possessions and that helps in the interpretation of these characteristics in a character as well. The attribution theories are helpful in the interpretation of personality as well as environment-based perceptions regarding the characters.

Social attribution

Social attribution can be helpful in interpreting the identity of a character as put forward in a model of characterization by Jonathan Culpeper. Kelly's model of attribution constitutes of analyzing the similarities between the behaviors in different contexts. Discussing characterization, Culpeper points at,

“An assumption underlying the process of extracting personality information from the behaviors of people we meet is that people act in ways consistent with their personalities. Thus, behaviors ought to be diagnostic of personality.” (Culpeper, 145)

However, this assumption cannot always be true for real world scenario but for a literary character, the closed text is the summation of that character's whole life which tends to be finite. Attribution theory tends to identify the causes behind a particular behavior of a person. These behaviors may have a predictable cause as well as an unpredictable one. The unpredictable causes may or may not be linguistically realized as they have a tendency to be ambiguous. Thus the context of the particular interaction plays an important role in inferencing the behavior of a particular person or a fictional character. Covariation theory of attribution by Kelly lays stress on finding the locale of the cause whether it is in the person or in the environment. Thus, there are three kinds of attributions by Kelly namely a "person, a stimulus, or a circumstance attribution. Kelly suggests,

"The effect is attributed to that condition which is present when the effect is present and which is absent when the effect is absent." (Kelly, p.194)

The nature of a person determines the person attribution, while the senses pertaining to a stimulus identify the stimulus attribution and the outside influence is determined by the circumstance attribution. Thus, drawing inferences from the context may help in analyzing the causal loci of the behavior of a character in a text. Therefore, the dialogues of a character present an interactional environment to extract the social attribution while bearing in mind the situational constraints available in the finite text. As Culpeper suggests,

"We tend to make correspondent inferences about a person's dispositions on the basis of behavior in spite of situational constraints". (Culpeper, p.137)

Ross (1977) describes it as a fundamental error of attribution which is defined as-

"the tendency to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors in controlling behavior". (Ross, p.183)

The manipulations by the perceiver's biases can be avoided to a greater extent by looking through the character's eyes as suggested by Culpeper,

"We might be brought closer to a character, if we have, 1: first-person narration, as opposed to third-person; 2: internal narration (i.e. the expression of a character's thoughts and feelings),

as opposed to external; 3: more direct speech and thought presentation, as opposed to less". (Culpeper, p. 147-148)

Bernard Shaw famously writes detailed stage directions which express the inner thoughts of his characters as well as the situation they are involved in. thus his plays offer a rich source of characters to be studied linguistically combined. However, this study presents the material aspect to the foreground of the characterization of the character namely Eliza Doolittle.

Eliza Doolittle

Eliza Doolittle is one of the central characters in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. She belongs to the lowest rung of social class as characterized by Shaw in the opening act of the play. her characteristics are predetermined by the reading of the material possessions described in the stage direction as follows,

"she wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed. Her hair needs washing rather badly: its mousy color can hardly be natural. She wears a shoddy black coat that reaches nearly to her knees and is shaped to her waist. She has a brown skirt with a coarse apron. Her boots are much the worse for wear. She is no doubt as clean as she can afford to be: but compared to the ladies she is very dirty. Her features are no worse than theirs: but their condition leaves something to be desired: and she needs the service of a dentist". (Shaw, p.4-5)

The poor condition of Eliza is basically described by the material possessions which are circumstantially substantiated by the fact that she lives without the care of her parents in a dingy place. She is a girl of eighteen who sells flowers on a roadside curb for a living. Her condition is explicitly responsible for her behavior of being over-apologizing to the people she meets in the opening of the play. When another character namely Professor Higgins claims to teach her the manners and language of a lady, Eliza seems to realize that it can help in the up-gradation of her station in life. Higgins attempts to tempt Eliza to accept his offer by telling her that she can have "barrels full" of chocolates, as many taxis she wants, and gold, and diamonds. The material instincts of being a lady in a florist shop drive Eliza to accept Higgins offer and she tries with all her mental prowess to be good at learning Standard

English in a time span of over six months. There is a small instance in the opening of the play where her appearance transforms her identity when she is wearing a new Japanese Kimono which makes her own father mistakenly identify her to be someone else. The difference between the description of Eliza by Shaw in the opening act of the play and the third act of the play is at extreme ends. In the first play Eliza is described as unattractive but by the third act when she has acquired beautiful clothes and the mannerisms of a lady she is being described as,

“...exquisitely dressed, produces an impression of such remarkable distinction and beauty as she enters that they all rise, quite flustered.” (Shaw, p. 45)

The scene in the third act constitutes of the same characters that were also present in the first act of the play namely Freddy, Clara and their mother Mrs. Emsford Hill. These characters displayed a different set of behavior when they met Eliza for the first time in the very first act. Her condition signaled her poor station in life as it is being described by the playwright through a brief account of the materialistic objects in her possession as follows.

“She wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed. Her hair needs washing rather badly: its mousy color can hardly be natural. She wears a shoddy black coat that reaches nearly to her knees and is shaped to her waist. She has a brown skirt with a coarse apron. Her boots are much the worse for wear. She is no doubt as clean as she can afford to be; but compared to the ladies she is very dirty. Her features are no worse than theirs; but their condition leaves something to be desired; and she needs the service of the dentist.” (Shaw, p.4-5)

The above-mentioned stage direction indicates that materialistically Eliza belongs to the lower class of society as her possessions define her being a poor character in the play. Her characteristics are predetermined by the reading of these material possessions described in these stage directions by the playwright. They play an important role in making an initial characterization of Eliza in the play. The social attribution theory determines the disposition of the character according to the repeated patterns of the behavior of a character. Jonathan Culpeper states in his characterization model that social attribution theory by Kelly is helpful in deciding about the

"...complementary perspective to the problem of inferring person or character information."
(Culpeper, p.127)

He further suggests that,

"It provides a basis for ruling out contextual causes of behavior, as well as for reducing the correspondence of unintentional behavior..." (Culpeper, p.127)

Therefore, the attributional theories regarding the characterization of Eliza focus on the pattern of her behavior in accordance with the other characters in the play. At the end of her transformation, the same character from the first act, i.e. Freddy is completely smitten by the presence of Eliza whom he had casually knocked away in the first act of the play. There is a considerable difference in the treatment meted out to Eliza by the other characters simply on the basis of her material possessions. Thus, materialism has played an important role in the characterization of Eliza Doolittle in the play.

Social attribution theory about Eliza may confound to the elements of materialism when she hears Higgins talk about his occupation which made her realize that she can upgrade her station in life. While she was selling flowers, a note-taker was making notes about her pronunciation and the on-lookers thought of that note-taker to be a policeman. The note-taker was Higgins and was making notes about the accent of Eliza. She liked the idea of learning the standard grammar and reaches Higgins' home to learn standard English from him. He gets infuriated with her at first but then she says she will pay for the lessons. Higgins reacts disparately which tells about his eccentric characteristic in the play. Eliza's behavior tells about her disposition which is driven by the material instincts of her being a

"...lady in a flower shop instead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road".(Shaw, p.17)

When Higgins offers to give Eliza his silk handkerchief to wipe off her face, she snatches it from the hands of his care-taker Mrs. Pearce who thinks it's no use in giving that handkerchief to her. Another character named Colonel Pickering places a bet with Professor Higgins to make Eliza duchess-like for the garden party of an ambassador in six months. He

ensures to pay for the expenses of Eliza's lessons. Eliza behaves cheerfully to this state of affairs.

Higgins teaches Eliza the standard grammar and pronunciation and she passes the duchess test with flying colors. After coming back from the ambassador's party, there is a change in Eliza's behavior, she becomes "brooding and silent" at first. The thought of getting her dream job starts to trouble her with the thought of losing her independence overcomes her. She starts missing her old station in life when she was independent of her father and Higgins. She realizes she has become a lady who is now not fit for living in squalor like her past. Higgins thanks for it to be over which infuriates Eliza to that extent that she hurls his slippers at him in anger. When asked why she did it, Eliza says,

"Why didn't you leave me where you picked me out of- in the gutter? You thank God it's all over, and that now you can throw me back again there, do you?"(Shaw, p.58)

When we look through the character's eye here, we realize that she is unhappy because of her circumstance. The consequence of a six month long teaching and companionship with her mentor has now come to a culminating end. She dreads the possibility of her future at that moment and to which Higgins hasn't been supportive emotionally to her. She is being supported materialistically by Professor Higgins but the lack of emotional support makes her feel dreaded for her future. It justifies her anger at Higgins. Shaw's authorial cue before the incident acts as a premonitory warning as he states, "Eliza's beauty becomes murderous". The anger and unhappiness of Eliza are responsible for her impolite behavior. It is the combination of stimulus as well as circumstance attribution. Her over-apologetic nature is also transformed at the end as she progresses towards the higher rung of station in her life. Material possessions were important for Eliza in the beginning but later she realized that it is respect and acknowledgement in the eyes of her mentor which is also very important to her. The realization causes her behavior to change from being an over-apologetic, impatient and obedient person to an unapologetic, demanding and a patient person.

Conclusion

As the behavior of a person changes, the disposition also changes with it, but the context plays an important role in generalizing the behavior of a person. It stands out for the fictional characters as well. Kelly's model of attribution theory asserts an importance of the context of the situation over the sudden outbursts of a person. The internal as well as the external factors are responsible for the reasonable answer to their dispositions. The personal qualities as well as the environment of the character decide the mental disposition of the character too. Eliza's nature changes as the environment around her changes. Thus, the causal loci of her disposition lie in the external factors as suggested by the reading of the play. There is a role of material structures too that instill a sense of power and confidence in her at the end. The character of Eliza goes through a series of behavioral changes that change with her association with the materialistic possessions over the entire course of the play.

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