

Teacher-Student Relationship in William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

Falak Ibrahim Abbas

English Language Department, College of Languages and Translation
University of Jeddah,
Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract:

The relationship between the teacher and the student is one of the most important pillars of education. It contributes to the success of the educational process and affects its outcomes. Following a feminist analysis of gender roles represented by the British writer and feminist Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), this study explores the teacher-student relationship in William Gibson's *The Miracle worker* (1959) and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913). It investigates the role of the female teacher in comparison to the male teacher and the effect on each one's learner. However, to prove their ability to transform their students, each one has motivational techniques and styles of teaching. Henry Higgins, the male teacher in *Pygmalion*, uses his skill and knowledge as a phonetician while Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker* uses her earlier experience as a blind child together with the information she acquired from Doctor Alexander Bell. This study concludes that females can provide first-class education even if they face unique challenges. Moreover, it becomes clear that the relationship between the teacher and the student in each work affects the student profoundly in every sense.

Keywords: female teacher, George Bernard Shaw, Helen Keller teacher/student relationship, a male teacher

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Education is one of the most effective processes in people's lives. It is the core of many experiences and transformations that add essential value to their cultural and social development. Moreover, it is a combination of science and art that provides remarkable changes in individuals as well as societies. Investigating the relationship between the teacher and the student is very significant to the results of education. This is because, as Varga (2017) states, "the most powerful weapon teachers have when trying to achieve a favorable learning climate is positive relationships with their students" (p.1), which can be noticed in the outcomes of the educational process. In literature, education and its ensuing transformation have been presented in many works and different concepts. William Gibson, an American novelist, and a playwright tackled the theme of education in his play *The Miracle Worker* (1959). The Irish playwright and activist George Bernard Shaw treated the same issue in his play *Pygmalion* (1913). The two plays present the teacher/student relationship and the transformation through education with different accounts of creation. In Gibson's play, Annie Sullivan, a blind tutor, tries to teach the blind, deaf and mute Helen Keller how to communicate with others through a specific language, while in Shaw's play, Higgins, a professor of phonetics, believes that he can change Eliza from a flower, cockney girl to a lady by changing her accent and language. Thus, this paper examines the relationship between the teacher and the student in each play. It investigates the role of the female figure in comparison to that of the male in education and the effect on each one's learning. I depend on a feminist analysis of gender role which is explained by the British writer and feminist Virginia Wolf (1929) as follows;

I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young—alas, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up dishes and putting children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. (p. 94)

According to Wolf, a woman can be more than a housekeeper and a mother. She can be a successful writer if she only gets the chance to express herself. Generally speaking, a woman can be successful as well as a man if she only has the right circumstances. Sometimes, she has to create her own space where she can prove her ability to succeed. Annie Sullivan and Eliza Doolittle are two examples of those women who show their capability to emancipate themselves from patriarchal society and be productive .

Education in Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* and Shaw's *Pygmalion* is used to showcase how it can be a crucial tool to improve one's life. According to Javed et al., (2016), "education enriches people's understanding of themselves and the world [...] which transforms a person to live a better life and leads to broad social benefits to individuals and society" (p.1). As both plays explore the education of language, it becomes clear how one's language is essential to define one's identity and

to communicate with others. This study will also explore the effect of education through teacher and student personalities and relationships .

Both *The Miracle Worker* and *Pygmalion* present the character of the teacher who provides his/her learner with a new language to communicate with. *The Miracle Worker* is based on Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, an autobiography of Keller's life. Gibson presents the story of Helen Keller, who was educated and transformed at the hands of Annie Sullivan, the twenty-year female teacher. Annie Sullivan was blind in her childhood until "she's had nine operations on her eyes" (Gibson, 2008, p.28) before she went to Captain Arthur Keller's house to teach his blind and deaf daughter. Annie Sullivan arrives at Keller's home to provide help and solutions so that Helen can communicate with the outside world. Sullivan's first step with Helen revolves around teaching her "first, last, and – in between, language" (Gibson, 2008, p. 266). This teacher has a strong belief that Helen can learn and improve her communication with others through language. She believes that "language is to the mind more than light is to the eye" (Gibson, 2008, p. 25). Although Annie has the intention to teach and develop Helen, she has to exert colossal effort. Helen is a seven-year-old child. She is unable to interact with people around her, her blindness confines and separates her from communicating with anything. As Blaha and Moss (2002) state, "Some children with deaf-blindness have difficulty feeling safe in a world that alternately "comes at you" or "disappears in thin air. Their communication skills may also make it difficult for them to express their feelings and desires readily to all the individuals they encounter" (p. 5). As a child with this disability, Helen becomes hard to control. She resists anyone who tries to teach or help her. "She [is] willful and quick-tempered by nature and tyrannized the household. She smashed dishes and lamps, plunged her hands into people's plates" (Herrmann, 1999, pp. 11-12). From the beginning, she has refused any involvement from anyone, which has resulted in a total lack of improvement. This was until Annie appeared in her life. Helen needed someone who truly understands her and, most importantly, feels her suffering. Gibson suggests that Annie is an excellent teacher who is not elderly and long experienced but is youthful, understanding, and passionate .

Annie Sullivan is a confident teacher who trusts her ability to change Helen Keller positively, especially as she passed through the same obstructions as Helen when she was a child. Sullivan states that "I know what I'm like. What's this childlike?" (Gibson, 2008, p.15), but at the same time, she is not an arrogant teacher. When James Keller, a half-brother of Helen, asks Sullivan if she is Helen's governess, she replies that "Well. Try" (Gibson, 2008, p. 23). Sullivan is aware that Helen is her hopeful subject, and she has a blessed future that will erase a traumatic past of suffering for both of them. Furthermore, she is aware of the difficulties of teaching Helen because "in learning vocabulary deaf-blind students need more effort than normal students to help them remember the words" (Wardani, 2017, p. 5). Sullivan shows extraordinary kindness and patience, while Helen behaves wildly and tenaciously. Helen is a spirited but silent child, and she looks smart and curious. "She [is] a sturdy, robust child who [is] bursting to know the world around her. She [can] run and play all day without getting tired and [is] interested in everything that [happens] in the household" (Berne, 2009, p. 6,8). She is eager to discover the world around her, and she keeps moving around the room, trying to learn new things. With these facts being considered about Helen and Annie's personalities, the teacher-student relationship goes through promising results.

Gibson portrays the difficulties that might face an educator with a learner, and how patience and persistence can result in success.

Annie Sullivan needs only a place in Keller's house to prove that she is a woman who can make progress and provoke a successful transition in Helen's life. She can achieve her goal and success if she only gets the trust and the chance in Keller's patriarchal house. It is essential to realize that Gibson wrote this play in 1953, and it took place in the State of Alabama. In fact, "women in the 1950s suffered from gender discrimination from both the government and society" (Fox, 2013, p. 33); their role was mainly to function as mothers and housewives. Accordingly, Annie Sullivan's work at Keller's house is not welcomed. For Captain Arthur Keller, Annie Sullivan is a female who is not capable of teaching Helen. He does not accept the idea that a woman, especially one with a visual impairment, can provide his daughter with a better education than the male doctors before her. Firstly, when Captain Keller meets Sullivan for the first time, he keeps complaining and questioning, "She's very rough [...] She's only a child [...] Why does she wear those glasses? [...] how can an inexperienced half-blind Yankee schoolgirl manage her?" (Gibson, 2008, p. 28). His masculinity brings to his mind all questions about Sullivan's inability to deal with Helen. He ignores the similarity between her and Helen, which can be an essential element in his daughter's improvement. Mr. Keller's masculinity affects his thoughts towards his daughter too. He does not expect any positive results from Helen. When Kate, his wife, and Helen's mother, suggests writing to a famous oculist who might help in curing Helen's blindness, he responds "no, he can't" (Gibson, 2008, p.11). Helen, and her mother, who try to find a solution to her daughter's suffering, become a source of disturbance for Captain Keller, who seeks "some peace in [his] house" (Gibson, 2008, p. 12). Furthermore, James, Helen's brother, keeps criticizing his sister's behavior. He has difficulty in realizing her individual needs. He considers Helen as "a monkey" (Gibson, 2008, p. 30) because she tries to imitate everything around her, and she cannot keep herself clean when she eats. Through the behavior and attitude of Captain Keller and his son towards Helen and Annie as well, Gibson shows how patriarchy prevents female development.

As a response to the patriarchy interference, along with Kate's overanxiety about her daughter, Annie feels the need to take Helen away to the garden house. She believes that separating Helen from her parents will provide some control over her. In this way, Annie can have her power on Helen and teaches her effectively. Moreover, the shared similarities between Helen and her teacher provide a better understanding of Helen's needs. Knoell from the University of Nebraska (2012) confirms this idea when he states that "one of the attributes that will undoubtedly make most lists is a teacher's ability to connect with students. It may be referred to as an ability to cultivate relationships or be more formally labeled as "nurturing pedagogy" "(p. 9). Through this conception, Annie and Helen's relationship suggests a high expectation of success, especially with Annie's own experience with visual disability and learning language. Equally important in this relationship is the way that Annie treats Helen. Annie is patient towards the stubborn and wild child. She keeps trying to pass on her belief that a change can be visible to Helen and that she must address the difficulties she faces. Moreover, Annie's loss of her brother, Jimmie, in her early life, makes her more aware and empathetic of Helen's situation. The death of Jimmie, when they were sent to live in a house for the poor, makes her feel guilty as his elder sister who should take enough

care of her younger brother. Also, when Jimmie died, Annie was left alone. Accordingly, she understands what it is like to be alone. Helen's inability to communicate with her family makes her feel lonely and alienated. As a result, Annie connects and succeeded in changing Helen positively. Keller (2002) admits

It was my teacher's genius, her quick sympathy, her loving tact which made the first years of my education so beautiful. It was because she seized the right moment to impart knowledge that made it so pleasant and acceptable to me (p.17).

In fact, "Sullivan opened up for Helen a whole new world, bursting with words, ideas, and emotions." (Koestler-Grack, 2009, p. 8). Annie Sullivan succeeds in passing her confident femininity past the patriarchal dominance of Keller's house and proved that she is a sister of William Shakespeare, but with one difference; she wrote a word, and everyone read it. Gibson suggests the image of the female that, with her disability, can success and make changes. Annie Sullivan, with her semi-blindness and maturity, made an essential change to Helen's life .

Shaw's presentation of the teacher/student relationship is different from Gibson's. This relationship has a mythical background, with some differences. In the myth, according to Simion (2014):

A sculpture named Pygmalion, disgusted by the behavior of the local prostitutes creates a sculpture of the ideal woman with whom he falls in love. Because of his love for her he prays to Aphrodite (Venus) to give her life and his wish comes true. Pygmalion marries the woman and they have a daughter, Paphos. (p. 86)

In Shaw's *Pygmalion*, we are introduced to Professor Henry Higgins (Pygmalion), a phonetician and an expert in determining one's origin from the language. He "can place any man within six miles. [He] can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets" (Shaw, 2004, p. 15). Therefore, Higgin's primary role in *Pygmalion* revolves around language and its effect. With this distinguished knowledge of the language, Higgins has a strict approach in dealing with people. He considers people as subjects to be studied. Moreover, "he is of the energetic, scientific type, heartily, even violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject, and careless about himself and other people, including their feelings" (Shaw, 2004, p. 19). When Higgins hears the language of the poor, "illiterate ignorant" (Prasad, 2013, p. 1), a flower girl in Covent Garden, Eliza Doolittle, who speaks cockney, a dialect that only East Londoners can understand, he becomes intimately interested in her language. Eliza is, "the illegitimate child of a broken family, thrown out to earn her own living by selling flowers" (Pirnajmuddin & Arani, 2011, p. 147). Despite Eliza's social class and dysfunctional childhood, the capability of education to transform people's identities is crystal clear in her case. Eliza Doolittle becomes Higgin's object, an opportunity to showcase his male influence and authority through education. Shaw highlights the power inherent in language and how it is an indicator of class and social standing. Higgins appears to be rich, confident, and intelligent due to his language abilities .

Shaw (2008) states that "The reformer England needs today is an energetic phonetic enthusiast: that is why I have made such a one the hero of a popular play" (p. 179). Higgins is the man with the energy to understand as well as to teach language. Higgins is proud of his knowledge; when the gentleman asks him how he could know where the flower girl comes from, he responds dependably with, "Simply phonetics. The science of speech. That's my profession; also my hobby!" (Shaw, 2004, p. 15). He is obsessed with noticing people's language and continuously takes notes. He is the one "who seems wholly preoccupied with a notebook in which he is writing busily" (Shaw, 2004, p. 7). Higgins keeps observing Eliza's language and studiously keeps records. For him, she is an excellent subject to showcase his ability to change one's identity through a change in language. He believes that if he first teaches her grammar, the rest will be easy. He wants "to get her to talk grammar. The mere pronunciation is easy enough" (Shaw, 2004, p. 27). He tells her when she is at his home that "you are to live here for the next six months, learning how to speak beautifully, like a lady in a florist's shop" (Shaw, 2004, p. 28). As for Eliza, she only desires to "talk like a lady" (Shaw, 2004, p. 27), and she tells Higgins, "I want to be a lady in a flower shop instead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road" (Shaw, 2004, p. 21). She understands that language is the key to improving her life and that Higgins is her guide. In fact, both have their own aims, as a teacher and as a student, and Shaw sheds light on the dynamic relationship between the teacher and the student as each one benefits from the other, consciously and unconsciously.

Even though Higgins is a confident person with a distinguished, high-level knowledge of the language, his main concern is to subjugate people to his own experiments. Accordingly, he treats Eliza with little respect for her humanity. "He suggests an absence of the power of reason and a sound human soul in her. So, Higgins feels perfectly justified in mistreating her as an inferior creature" (Chen, 2011, p. 338). Furthermore, he teaches her ruthlessly and shows no kindness. He remarks to her from the beginning that "if I decide to teach you, I'll be worse than two fathers to you" (Shaw, 2004, p. 23). His masculinity and arrogance control his relationship with Eliza. He reflects the patriarchal society of the 1900s in England in which women;

tended to live longer; that they were more severely affected by marriage breakdown than men; that there were more single and widowed mothers than fathers with children to support; that they were less likely to re-marry; that their work opportunities were more limited; and that, when they could work, their wages were generally much lower than those of men, most commonly one-half or even one-third. (Goose, 2005, pp. 351-352)

Despite Eliza's skill to learn quickly, practice, and speak, Higgins disregards her talent and insists that "she's incapable of understanding anything" (Shaw, 2004, p. 38). His inner self knows that she is highly capable, but his masculinity prevents him from admitting. Moreover, "Higgins sees this work of teaching Eliza as one similar to that in the Bible, and his fascination with the prospect of teaching her lies chiefly in the great pleasure as a Maker" (Chen, 2011, p. 338). Higgins, the creator, likes his creation, Eliza, because he sees his victory and power of knowledge through the changes he created through her. "Regarding himself as a teacher and creator, Higgins naturally takes the privilege of dominance over Eliza as granted" (Chen, 2011, p. 338). On the other hand, Eliza, at the beginning is very excited to learn and change her language and become a lady. She

tolerates Higgins's chiding because she needs him to change her identity. Furthermore, "she is fiercely independent of the beginning, [...], relatively secure in her sense of self-worth" (McGovern, 2011, p. 57). Her dignity leads her to offer money for Higgins's lessons. She wants to pay Higgins for the new clothes he brings too. Eliza Doolittle tries to resist Higgins's authority from the outset, and she is "not totally submissive and asks Higgins to speak respectfully to her" (Pirnajmuddin and Arani, 2011, p. 149). Higgins keeps blocking every attempt of Eliza to talk or interact with him. Eliza does have warm feelings towards Higgins, but he does not respond in any way. She declares clearly, "I want a little kindness. [...] What I did was not for the dresses and the taxis: I did it because we were pleasant together and I come – came - to care for you" (Shaw, 2004, p. 80). As a response, Higgins answers her with a relentless feeling that he, and Mr. Pickering as well, care for her. As a student, Miss Doolittle shows remarkable improvement by the end of six months, which clearly illustrates her intelligence and her patience with Higgins. She is a gifted girl, and she inherited this from her father, but unlike him, she is ambitious and is driven to be a member of the middle-class, even a Duchess. Shaw points out that cleverness and learning are not attached only to the middle-class. Poor, low- class people like Eliza, can be smart, and can learn and be transformed through education. Eliza needs only the light of knowledge to have her flower shop where she can express herself and be seen as part of society .

While Henry Higgins, the teacher, and Eliza Doolittle, the student, have different characteristics and social status, each one succeeds in reaching his/her goal. On the one hand, Higgins succeeds in transforming Eliza into a lady. On the other hand, Eliza succeeds in learning a new language, new behaviors and becomes a lady. Reaching this result is not easy for either of them. Eliza's primary concern is the transformation of becoming a lady, while for Higgins, it is a matter of a case study. Eliza needs Higgins to change her identity, while Higgins needs Eliza to identify himself. After proving his success, he does not care about Eliza anymore. He tells Mr. Pickering that, "when I've done with her, we can throw her back into the gutter; and then it will be her own business again; so that's all right" (Shaw, 2004, p. 27). These words reflect Higgins' selfishness. He does not think about his student's future, especially given that she is now a lady who does not fit with her past as a flower girl. He does not realize the destructive results of kicking Eliza out of his house. Eliza's language has been improving throughout Higgins' lessons, but his indifference and bad treatment have oppressed her soul. To Eliza, this experiment of Higgin has made her stronger and more stubborn. "Eliza gains an education, a new speech, new manners, eloquence and, finally, after much inner turmoil and verbal clashing, independence from her mentor" (McGovern, 2011, p. 74). She challenges Higgins, "I'll let you see whether I'm dependent on you. If you can preach, I can teach. I'll go and be a teacher" (Shaw, 2004, p. 82). Actually, "she is no longer afraid of Higgins's big talk and bullying manner and that he cannot take away Eliza's knowledge and power. She decides to regain her independence by leaving Higgins" (Pirnajmuddin and Arani, 2011, p. 151). Shaw highlights the subjugation of women, even when it comes to education. He presents the male figure who improves a female to prove his excellent gender ability to affect the opposite sex and infer that the reverse is not possible .

In conclusion, even though Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* and Shaw's *Pygmalion* represent the teacher/student relationship, each representation showcases different images. While Annie

Sullivan is kind-hearted and uses her experience of blindness to help the deaf child Helen Keller to communicate with people, Henry Higgins', a tough man, uses his expertise in language and phonetics to teach the poor, low-class Eliza Doolittle how to speak like a lady. Moreover, Miss Sullivan provides help through a sense of humanity; she treats Helen as a human being who has the right to learn and lead a better life, while Higgins' treatment of Eliza is based on the gender differences between them. For Higgins, Eliza is an object, a tool in his experiment. He believes that one's class can be changed by changing his/ her use of language .

Although Helen has a complicated health situation as she is blind, deaf, and mute, Miss Sullivan treats her with kindness, empathy, and patience. She understands that " good teaching includes the ability to cultivate relationships; it is caring for and supporting our students, not just transferring knowledge to them" (Luz, 2015, p. 6). She has a strong belief that Helen can develop. She does not care about herself and the effort she provides as much as she cares about Helen improving. Annie teaches Helen manners, while Eliza can never learn manners from Higgins since he lacks them. She learns manners from Pickering. Higgins' treatment is marked by his misogyny and egoism, and all the effort he exerts is stimulated by his wish to prove to Mr. Pickering and himself that he can, in a short time, change Eliza's language and social status. Achieving these results, each teacher creates his/her environment of teaching. Annie teaches Helen separately in the Garden House because she wants her student to obey her totally through being utterly dependent on her. By this moving, Helen's parents cannot interfere in Annie's education system. A similar situation occurs in Shaw's play where Eliza, the student, moves to live at her teacher's house, to have a concentrated process of education. In her case, parental interference is not a problem, only at the time when Eliza's father shows up to ask for money for the use of his daughter. During the teaching process, each teacher uses his/her equipment. Higgins uses his skill and knowledge as a phonetician. Annie uses her previous experience as a blind child, together with the information she acquired from Doctor Alexander Bell. Generally speaking, each student is affected practically and morally by his/her teacher. While Helen improves in both aspects, Eliza improves only in a linguistic sense. She shows a significant improvement in her language, but her soul ached due to Higgins' mistreatment. In the end, both students gain a new language to communicate with and changed attitudes, both with striving and perseverance .

In *The Miracle Worker* and *Pygmalion*, the presentation of the teacher-student relationship portrays different meanings and lessons regarding education and its results. In fact, both William Gibson's and George Bernard Shaw's presentation of the teacher-student relationship has significance to literature as well as to life itself. As literature has been used to reflect on pivotal issues of our lives, it becomes a valuable tool to convey serious issues of society. While Gibson's presentation of the teacher-student relationship highlights how education can illuminate the heart and the brain, Shaw's primary concern is to shed light on the issue of language and how far it affects an individual's social class. All in all, the two plays showcase the transformation in one's life through education, and how women can be educated and independent. It proves that they can be succeeded in different roles and positions. Moreover, education is an essential key to improves women's lives and their personalities.

About the Author :

Falak Abbas is a researcher in literary studies. She acquired a master's degree in English literature from the University of Jeddah in 2019. Her research interests are in cultural, Palestinian American, feminist, and postcolonial studies .

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