Analysis Of Pygmalion In The Movie My Fair Lady Based On George Bernard Shaw's Stage Play

The story of Pygmalion and his ivory statue has been especially appealing to numerous writers and filmmakers for many years. Various adaptations of the story have been made using its themes and ideas with a modern twist to connect with viewers. The original myth was written by Ovid in his book Metamorphoses, and tells the story of a sculptor who creates an ivory statue that is perfect to his tastes and desires, and essentially is his ideal perfect woman. It is so beautiful and lifelike in his eyes that he ends up falling in love with it. Longing to spend the rest of his life with a woman he loves, he prays to Aphrodite to give him a wife as perfect as his statue. To his delight, he discovers later that the goddess had turned his statue into a real woman named Galatea. As expected, they eventually get married and have a daughter together. This myth may seem like a simple love story at first, but it has become so popular in the modern movie industry due to its relevant themes regarding love and human desire. A classic film that adapted this story into a musical was My Fair Lady.

My Fair Lady was first adapted into a film in 1964. The character who portrays Pygmalion is a phonetics professor named Henry Higgins, and the statue is played by a woman named Eliza Doolittle. Eliza agrees to take speech lessons from Henry to improve her chances of getting a better job, but what she doesn’t know is that Henry has other intentions behind it. Being an arrogant character, he makes a bet with a friend that he can transform Eliza, an unrefined working-class girl, into a woman who can pass for a cultured member of high society (IMDb). Throughout the movie, Eliza and Henry’s relationship develops through conflicts and an unexpected bond begins to form. In the end, Eliza becomes angry with Henry for taking all of the credit of who she has become without acknowledging any of her hard work. As a result, Eliza angrily leaves him for Freddy Eynsford-Hill, who fell madly in love with her. This movie adaptation is almost identical to the story of Pygmalion in that a man is trying to sculpt a woman into one that he desires, although there are quite a few differences that make the film unique from the original myth.

The movie adaptation stays true to the storyline and underlying themes of the myth, but there are various ways that the movie modifies or re-interprets the details of the myth into the modern film. First off, while Pygmalion is explicit about his love for his statue, the majority of My Fair Lady depicts Eliza and Henry’s relationship on solely a professional level. There is no hint of romance until the very end when the audience is left with a feeling of hope that they might end up together. This shows that Henry wasn’t fueled by his love for Eliza, but his arrogant goals to prove his friend wrong, whereas all Pygmalion desired was a beautiful wife. Another modification from the myth is the detail of how the women are transformed by their men.

Pygmalion quite literally sculpts the physical features that he sees in a perfect woman, and then brings her to life with Aphrodite’s help. On the other hand, Henry molds Eliza’s character through speech lessons. He tells her, “Eliza, you are to stay here for the next six months learning to speak beautifully….At the end of six months you will be taken to an embassy ball in a carriage, beautifully dressed….If you refuse this offer, you will be the most ungrateful, wicked girl, and the angels will weep for you” (quotes.net). When she first meets Henry, she is extremely impolite and dresses terribly as a low-class worker. Throughout her transformation, her posture

is fixed, her voice is changed, and her mannerisms are modified. She might as well be a completely different person besides her already beautiful facial features. In Henry's eyes, he may see this change as bringing her to life or the beginning of a new life she may lead. But the more she learns to act in his world, the less she has to say. That outgoing and lively woman that at one point wasn't afraid to speak her mind has now been silenced by society and males specifically. You could say that she is still the same woman on the inside, but she puts on an act on the surface to improve what people think of her. This leads to another aspect of differentiation between the film and the myth, which is the theme of social class. In Pygmalion's story, there is no discussion about the hierarchical differences between him and the statue. Although, readers would assume that a human is of higher class than a statue. In My Fair Lady, not only does Eliza have to look the part, but also she needs to act the part. To become Henry's ideal perfect woman, she has to keep herself under control in order to appear presentable and acceptable in their high-class society. Drawing from these differentiations, the relationship between the film and the movie isn't in fact the similarities between them, but it's actually quite the opposite.

In Pygmalion, his wife is turned from a statue into a real woman. In My Fair Lady, Eliza Doolittle is transformed from a lifelike and free woman into a constrained and sculpted statue. As previously mentioned, Henry instructs her to say as little as possible when they are in public in order to prevent any mistakes that she may make in breaking her character. Throughout the teaching process, he has no regard for her feelings or how she might take his criticism because all he is thinking about is the bet he wants to win. In the film, she angrily says to him, "Well, you have my voice on your gramophone. When you feel lonely without me you can turn it on. It has no feelings to hurt" (Rotten Tomatoes). Eliza is silenced by this man who only sees her as an object to be modified and she is suppressed by society in order to fit in. This theme of women being silenced and restricted by men and society are still reoccurring today.

This ancient story of Pygmalion is being re-adapted so frequently because it's concepts and ideas are still persisting in modern society. Drawing upon these ancient stories shows how little humankind has changed despite the time that has passed since they were first created. Men still have the upperhand in society today, and human desire has a strong hold on anyone who wants to fit in. My Fair Lady was successfully able to embrace Pygmalion's ideologies and the value of those themes to the ancients and to our own society.