

The Dynamics of Change in George Bernard Shaw's Drama: A Study of Saint Joan, Pygmalion, and Arms and the Man

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine how George Bernard Shaw dramatizes the idea of change as both a moral and intellectual necessity for human and social progress. It seeks to analyze how Shaw's conception of transformation functions as an ethical, social, and artistic principle across three of his major plays: (*Saint Joan*, 1923), (*Pygmalion*, 1913), and (*Arms and the Man*, 1894). This study explores George Bernard Shaw's dramatic representation of change as a dynamic social, moral, and intellectual process across these influential plays. Shaw's theatre functions as a critique of stagnation, whether political, religious, or personal and as a call for continuous re-evaluation of inherited ideas. By dramatizing moments of transition within individuals and societies, Shaw transforms the stage into a forum for intellectual evolution. This paper argues that Shaw conceives of change not as an abstract ideal but as a moral imperative, one that disrupts complacency, exposes hypocrisy, and fosters authentic progress. Using a combination of textual analysis, New Historicist and socio-critical frameworks, the research demonstrates that Shaw's characters Joan of Arc, Eliza Doolittle, and Captain Bluntschli embody catalysts of transformation who question dogma and reveal the tension between reality and illusion. Through their struggles, Shaw redefines heroism as intellectual courage and moral adaptability rather than mere physical valour or social conformity. The study concludes that Shaw's theatre remains profoundly relevant to modern audiences for its vision of change as both a disruptive and regenerative force, essential for the renewal of human consciousness and social order.

Keywords: Arms and the Man; Change; George Bernard Shaw; Heroism; Intellectual Evolution.

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw occupies a unique position in modern drama, both as a moralist and a reformer. His works combine a fierce critique of social convention with a deeply rational vision of human progress. Shaw's belief in change, both as an individual awakening and a collective reformation, forms the philosophical backbone of his entire dramatic career. Writing in an era of political upheaval, industrial expansion, and the decline of Victorian certainties, Shaw used the theatre not as escapist entertainment but as a forum for public reasoning. His plays challenge the audience to think rather than sympathise, to question rather than accept, and to act rather than remain passive. For Shaw, theatre was "a factory of

thought” (Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant 21), and his characters often embody the dialectic between resistance and transformation that drives both personal growth and social evolution.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the period of Shaw’s greatest productivity, witnessed the rise of socialism, feminism, and the questioning of imperialist ideologies. As a Fabian socialist, Shaw regarded social reform as a gradual but necessary process. He viewed art as a means of moral instruction and civic improvement. In contemporary scholarship, Shaw remains viewed as a “moral reformer” who believed that individual transformation, particularly in the realm of thought and ideals, is a prerequisite for social change. For example, (Fattah, 2025) analysis suggests that the theme of change in *Major Barbara* and Shaw’s other works can be continually reinterpreted as social and moral frameworks shift across generations.

Despite extensive scholarship on Shaw’s drama, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis connecting his three major works *Saint Joan*, *Pygmalion*, and *Arms and the Man*, through a unified framework of moral and intellectual change. Most studies examine these plays in isolation, focusing on religious, linguistic, or political transformation separately. This fragmentation obscures Shaw’s broader philosophy of progress as a holistic ethical system. Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the absence of an integrated understanding of how Shaw dramatizes change as a continuous moral, social, and intellectual process shaping both character and society.

Against this historical background, the present study aims to explore how Shaw constructs change as both a thematic and structural principle across these plays. It investigates how his characters evolve, how his dialogue enacts debate, and how his narratives conclude not with closure but with intellectual provocation. The study also seeks to demonstrate that Shaw’s notion of progress lies not in conformity but in the courage to dissent. By doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions of the ethical function of modern drama and situates Shaw’s theatre as a vital model of moral regeneration in an age of ideological uncertainty.

Literature Review

1. Critical Approaches to Shaw’s Philosophy of Change

Scholars have long emphasized George Bernard Shaw’s belief in moral and intellectual evolution as central to his dramatic purpose. Stanley Weintraub observes that “Shaw’s theatre is founded on the conviction that man is educable, that through rational inquiry and self-awareness, society can be improved” (79). This conviction aligns with the Fabian socialist view that reform occurs through gradual moral enlightenment rather than violent upheaval. A. C. Ward similarly describes Shaw as “a prophet of evolutionary morality” (112), while Harold Bloom reads *Saint Joan* as dramatizing “the conscience of history its refusal to remain fixed in superstition or fear” (67).

Recent scholarship expands this discussion by framing Shaw not merely as a moral didactician but as an intellectual activist. (Tagayeva and Amanova, 2024) reinterpret Shaw’s critical and dramatic work as an attempt to cultivate “a modern moral consciousness rooted in rational freedom” (53). Their study highlights Shaw’s sustained relevance as a thinker who unites aesthetics and ethics through social criticism. (Manoj, 2022) also argues that Shaw’s later plays “embody the transition from moral realism to spiritual idealism,” evidencing ongoing evolution in his dramatic method (67). Taken together, these critics reaffirm that Shaw understood drama as a vehicle for both intellectual provocation and ethical transformation.

2. Social and Linguistic Transformation in *Pygmalion*

Critics have examined *Pygmalion* through sociolinguistic, feminist, and Marxist perspectives. Raymond Williams describes it as “a social parable of transformation within constraint” (141), while Sally Peters and Ellen Gainor emphasize Shaw’s proto-feminist revision of the myth: Eliza Doolittle emerges not as a passive creation but as a self-determining moral agent. Christopher Innes likewise argues that *Pygmalion* “dramatizes the human capacity for reinvention and the limits imposed upon it by class and gender” (118).

More recent studies focus on the play’s adaptability to contemporary contexts. (Aisling Máire Smith’s doctoral dissertation, 2019) explores how modern staging practices reinterpret *Pygmalion* to confront current issues of gender and class hierarchy. Smith concludes that the play “retains its transformative power precisely because its linguistic conflicts remain socially urgent” (85). Similarly, (Fattah, 2025) argues that *Pygmalion* continues to resonate as a critique of performative identity, where speech remains a marker of opportunity and exclusion.

3. Political and Moral Realism in *Arms and the Man*

Although often labelled one of Shaw’s “plays pleasant,” *Arms and the Man* contain substantial moral and political critique. Margery Morgan observes that the play “demolishes the romantic myth of war as the foundation of moral order” (96), while John Atkins interprets Captain Bluntschli’s realism as “the measure of new moral sanity” (102). Northrop Frye identifies the play’s conclusion as “a comic rebirth of perception” (311), underscoring its function as a catalyst for intellectual awakening.

Recent assessments broaden these views. Ellen E. Dolgin’s chapter “History Plays” (2015) in *George Bernard Shaw in Context* situates *Arms and the Man* within a lineage of history-conscious drama that interrogates rather than commemorates the past. Dolgin argues that the play converts traditional heroism into ethical inquiry (98). (Manoj, 2022) also links the play to Shaw’s developing “ethic of rational compassion,” suggesting that its comedic tone masks a profound humanistic critique (71).

4. Recent Reassessments and Scholarly Gaps

Recent criticism recontextualizes Shaw’s drama in global, postcolonial, and generational terms. . (Catherine Morris, 2018) argues that *Pygmalion* and *Arms and the Man* anticipate decolonial discourses of identity and self-determination, while. (Gareth Griffith, 2015) highlights Shaw’s “dialogic politics,” which intellectually engages the audience in processes of change (53). (Fattah, 2025) extends these arguments by asserting that Shaw’s works remain influential because of their “capacity to evolve with changing moral consciousness” (117).

However, despite these advancements, scholarship remains fragmented. Studies tend to treat *Saint Joan*, *Pygmalion*, and *Arms and the Man* separately, rarely considering how the plays collectively articulate Shaw’s overarching philosophy of change—from spiritual transformation (*Saint Joan*), to social-linguistic reinvention (*Pygmalion*), to political-moral re-education (*Arms and the Man*).

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative analytical method grounded in textual and contextual interpretation. The research follows a comparative model, examining (*Saint Joan*, 1923), (*Pygmalion*, 1913), and (*Arms and the Man*, 1894) as representative explorations of the theme of change across different social and historical settings. The analysis draws primarily on New Historicism, Marxist social theory, and feminist literary criticism to illuminate Shaw’s dramatic engagement with evolving structures of power, gender, and belief.

The selection of *Saint Joan*, *Pygmalion*, and *Arms and the Man* was based on three interrelated criteria: chronological scope, thematic diversity, and philosophical continuity.

Chronological Scope: These plays span three crucial decades of Shaw's career from the 1890s to the 1920s marking his development from early social satire to mature philosophical drama. This temporal range allows the study to trace the evolution of Shaw's moral and intellectual thought on change.

Thematic Diversity: Each play dramatizes transformation within a distinct human domain: *Arms and the Man* explore political and ethical disillusionment, *Pygmalion* focuses on social and linguistic self-reinvention, and *Saint Joan* examines spiritual and moral awakening. Together, they provide a comprehensive view of Shaw's multidimensional treatment of change political, social, and spiritual.

Philosophical Continuity: Despite their differences in subject and tone, the three plays collectively express a unified Shavian philosophy of progress grounded in rational moral inquiry. Each work represents a different stage in Shaw's exploration of how individuals challenge inherited systems of belief to achieve authentic freedom. Thus, these plays were chosen not merely for their popularity but for their thematic coherence and cumulative contribution to Shaw's vision of transformation.

Analytical Framework

The New Historicist approach situates each play within its sociopolitical context *Saint Joan* within post-World War I disillusionment, *Pygmalion* within Edwardian class consciousness, and *Arms and the Man* within the waning romanticism of nineteenth-century imperial ideology. This framework helps uncover how Shaw translates historical upheavals into dramatic metaphors for intellectual and moral change.

The Marxist dimension investigates Shaw's critique of class hierarchy and capitalist morality, particularly through characters like Eliza Doolittle and Alfred Doolittle in *Pygmalion*, and through the exposure of aristocratic hypocrisy in *Arms and the Man*. The feminist perspective illuminates Shaw's portrayal of women Joan of Arc, Eliza Doolittle, and Louka as agents of transformation rather than passive recipients of fate.

Methodologically, the study integrates close textual analysis with intertextual comparison, emphasizing how Shaw's dialectical dialogue, paradox, and subversion of genre serve the representation of change. Critical insights from scholars such as Stanley Weintraub, L. W. Conolly, Ellen E. Dolgin, and Manal I. Fattah inform the interpretive framework, while recent perspectives are used to situate Shaw's vision within contemporary debates on ethics, identity, and progress.

By combining thematic selection, theoretical diversity, and historical sensitivity, this methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of how Shaw constructs change as both a dramatic structure and a moral principle a vision that continues to challenge modern audiences to think critically about transformation in their own societies.

Results

The analysis of George Bernard Shaw's (*Saint Joan*, 1923), (*Pygmalion*, 1913), and (*Arms and the Man*, 1894) reveals a coherent moral and intellectual vision of change that unfolds through three interconnected dimensions: spiritual defiance, social transformation, and ethical realism.

1. Spiritual and Moral Awakening in *Saint Joan*

The findings show that Shaw presents Joan of Arc as a figure of rational faith and moral courage. Her defiance of ecclesiastical and political authority dramatizes the emergence of individual conscience in the face of institutional power. Joan's declaration, **"I shall mind God alone"** (Shaw 6. 78), illustrates Shaw's framing of spiritual transformation as an act of intellectual independence. The analysis confirms that Joan's tragedy represents society's inability to adapt to visionary reformers, highlighting the tension between historical inertia and moral progress.

2. Social and Linguistic Transformation in *Pygmalion*

The findings indicate that *Pygmalion* translates the theme of change from spiritual reform to social and linguistic reconstruction. Eliza Doolittle's metamorphosis demonstrates the human capacity for self-creation through education, discipline, and self-awareness. Her realization that **"the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated"** (Shaw 5. 112) marks a profound moral insight rather than a superficial social ascent. The results confirm that transformation in the play carries dual consequences: empowerment alongside alienation, revealing Shaw's critique of class structures and performative respectability.

3. Moral Realism and Ethical Renewal in *Arms and the Man*

The findings affirm that *Arms and the Man* completes Shaw's arc of transformation by dismantling romantic illusions of heroism, patriotism, and love. Captain Bluntschli's pragmatic stance **"I fight when I have to, and am very glad to get out of it when I haven't to"** (Shaw 3.71) embodies Shaw's rational humanism. The analysis shows that Shaw redefines heroism as intellectual honesty and adaptability rather than militaristic valor. Through satire and comedic revelation, the play presents ethical realism as the foundation for genuine social change.

Discussion

Change in *Saint Joan*

In (*Saint Joan*, 1923), Shaw offers a profound exploration of transformation spiritual, political, and personal. Joan of Arc is reimagined not as a mystical saint but as a rational idealist who challenges the entrenched worldview of medieval society. Her courage exposes the conflict between emerging modern nationalism and the rigid structures of feudal and clerical authority.

Shaw portrays history as evolutionary rather than divinely predetermined. Joan's tragedy, as Shaw notes in the preface, lies in society's failure to adapt to her vision. She becomes what Weintraub identifies as **"the revolutionary conscience of history."** Her insistence that "France is for the French" signals a shift from local feudal loyalties to national identity.

Characters such as the Earl of Warwick articulate the anxieties of the waning aristocratic order. Warwick's fear that Joan's ideas threaten the "temporal power" illustrates how nationalism and individual conscience undermine medieval hierarchy. Shaw further parallels medieval Church authority with modern imperialism, suggesting that every age constructs its own forms of tyranny.

Joan's challenge to the Church's monopoly on divine truth marks a spiritual revolution. Her insistence on direct communion with God dismissed as "Protestantism" by Cauchon—anticipates modern religious individualism. The trial scene crystallizes the struggle between institutional control and personal conviction. In the Epilogue, Dunois's remark that it took "four centuries to find out the truth" underscores the historical delay of moral recognition.

Change in *Pygmalion*

In (*Pygmalion*, 1913), Shaw shifts from political and spiritual revolution to the subtler domain of linguistic and social mobility. The play critiques how class identity is defined and restricted by language. Higgins's claim that Eliza's "kerbstone English" will keep her "in the gutter" reveals the arbitrary power of accent-based discrimination.

Eliza's transformation symbolizes the constructed nature of class: through disciplined effort, she transcends linguistic boundaries, exposing class as performative rather than innate. Yet her triumph at the ambassador's party also highlights the absurdity of linking moral worth to speech.

Her realization that dignity depends on treatment, not behavior, marks the play's central moral awakening. The tension between independence and belonging reveals the cost of transformation. Meanwhile, Alfred Doolittle's involuntary rise to middle-class respectability provides a satiric commentary on the burdens of imposed social advancement.

The ambiguous ending Eliza's refusal to return to Higgins emphasizes Shaw's belief that true transformation results in autonomy, not assimilation.

Change in *Arms and the Man*

(*Arms and the Man*, 1894) represent Shaw's early critique of romantic idealism and military heroism. Through comedic inversion, Shaw dismantles the conventional narratives of war, love, and social hierarchy. Raina and Sergius embody sentimental illusions shaped by romantic literature and nationalist rhetoric. Bluntschli's realism disrupts these fantasies, presenting war as survival rather than spectacle. His preference for chocolate over bullets becomes an emblem of practical humanism over heroic bravado.

The play further critiques class pretensions through the Petkoffs' shallow desire for bourgeois refinement. Bluntschli's assertion that he is a "free citizen" of Switzerland reflects Shaw's democratic ideal. Louka's defiance and Sergius's eventual self-recognition ultimately dissolve social boundaries and affirm individual moral agency.

Through humor, Shaw reveals that enlightenment begins with the collapse of illusion. In exposing the emptiness of romantic and militaristic ideologies, the play advocates for rational progress as the true form of heroism.

Conclusion

Across *Saint Joan*, *Pygmalion*, and *Arms and the Man*, Shaw presents human advancement as a continual reorientation of thought and character. Each play highlights a different arena of intellectual awakening: Joan's principled defiance of authority, Eliza's assertion of selfhood through linguistic competence, and Bluntschli's pragmatic dismantling of heroic pretensions. Together, they reflect a consistent Shavian vision rooted in clarity of mind, integrity, and the courage to question inherited assumptions. Rather than discarding tradition outright, Shaw's figures reveal how renewal emerges through critical engagement with social, cultural, and ideological norms, allowing his theatre to remain a resonant critique of the enduring conflict between personal conscience and collective convention.

The implications of these readings extend to literary scholarship, theatre ethics, and contemporary social discourse. Shaw's dramaturgy demonstrates how drama can interrogate ideological structures, challenge complacency, and promote independent judgment in the face of institutional and societal pressures. For future research, scholars may examine Shaw's other major works—such as *Major Barbara*, *Man and Superman*, or *Heartbreak House* or pursue comparative studies with modern dramatists like Ibsen, Brecht,

or Churchill who similarly employ the stage as a forum for ethical and political reflection. Investigating staging practices, reception history, and modern adaptations would further illuminate the ongoing relevance of Shaw's dramatic vision in evolving cultural contexts.

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