

The creator of a lady:
the illusion of
empowerment in the
reformation of the
fema...



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I am too intelligent, too demanding, and too resourceful for anyone to be able to take charge of me entirely. -Simone de Beauvoir *Tête-à-Tête: The Lives and Loves of Simone de Beauvoir & Jean-Paul Sartre*

This paper seeks to examine and analyze, as portrayed in G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the reformation of Eliza Doolittle's identity into being socially acceptable by Henry Higgins- a man who gives himself the status of her creator. It discusses, from a Liberal and Marxist-Socialist Feminist perspective, the outward improvement of her manners as illusory empowerment as well as her loss of control over her own source of livelihood, and her eventual consciousness of it. It also discusses the differences in societal expectations from men and women, and the hypocrisy therein, and the audience's preoccupation with a happy ending.

A play that starts out as an interesting peek into the world of linguistics is artfully transformed by George Bernard Shaw into a deeper commentary on society and its effect on gender identity. In *Pygmalion*, Shaw portrays the nuances of class and gender relations through an engaging plot centered on a flower-girl and a Professor of Linguistics playing their part in a fateful bet. Professor Henry Higgins' initial interest in Eliza is more in terms of her as an object of a casual experiment to impress his colleague, Colonel Pickering, than as a flower girl who could use some help with her speech:

THE NOTE TAKER. You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's

garden party. I could even get her a place as lady's maid or shop assistant, which requires better English. (Shaw 12)

The act of wanting to change Eliza's identity altogether shows that she was viewed as a person essentially lower than Higgins or Pickering. Her identity on account of her social standing is automatically deemed to be of no real consequence. Higgins barely seems to think of her as a living, breathing person, let alone a woman who deserves to be treated with dignity no matter what her social standing— simply on the premise that she is a fellow human being. To Higgins, her potential is not much more than to be a badge of his linguistic prowess. Eliza as a flower girl might lack genteel manners but is seen, however, to be well aware of her rights and does not like people walking over her, no matter how high they might be on the social ladder. She feels threatened by Higgins because of his mysterious note-taking, and under the seemingly pointless hue and cry that she raises are several statements showing a sense of personhood:

THE FLOWER GIRL. [Still preoccupied with her wounded feelings] He's no right to take away my character. My character is the same to me as any lady's... (Shaw 10)

THE FLOWER GIRL. [With feeble defiance] I've a right to be here if I like, same as you. (Shaw 11)

These statements, it can be argued, are a result of living a life of poverty and hardship- of being a flower-girl in a city like London. She almost has no option but to believe in herself if she has to survive on the streets. Eliza

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might lack carriages and jewels, but her source of livelihood is her own work. The productivity flows out of her directly and she does not have to depend on society's acceptance of her to live her life. She is an independent woman, against all odds.

Eliza as a flower girl is a woman belonging to the proletariat- empowered as a worker because she does not have the luxury of choice. Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, attempts to show us how affluence worked against eighteenth-century, married, bourgeois women. Wollstonecraft compared such “ privileged” women (whom she hoped to inspire to a fully human mode of existence) to members of “ the feathered race,” birds that are confined to cages and that have nothing to do but preen themselves and “ stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch”. Middle-class ladies were, in Wollstonecraft's estimation, “ kept” women who sacrificed health, liberty, and virtue for whatever prestige, pleasure, and power their husbands could provide (qtd. in Tong 13). Eliza Doolittle is pushed upwards to become one such middle-class woman with Higgins as her guardian instead of a husband.

Very often, these women were not allowed to exercise outdoors lest they tan their lily-white skin, they lacked healthy bodies and similarly, they were not permitted to make their own decisions so they lacked liberty. Since they were “ discouraged from developing their powers of reason—given that a great premium was placed on indulging self and gratifying others, especially men and children—they lacked virtue” (Tong 13). Henry Higgins, by making a lady out of Eliza, takes away her brazen source of livelihood without

presenting her with a new one. Her speech, her clothes, her manners, and even the subjects she wishes to speak of are carefully monitored and changed to suit a well-bred upper class lady. Economics, disease, and death are to be spoken of no more because she is not to think of realistic things or of earning her own money as a flower girl because she is far too sophisticated for a job like that. Her independence is deftly taken away as she becomes a plaything for the two linguists.

PICKERING. Higgins: I'm interested. What about the ambassador's garden party? I'll say you're the greatest teacher alive if you make that good. I'll bet you all the expenses of the experiment you can't do it. And I'll pay for the lessons.

LIZA. Oh, you are real good. Thank you, Captain.

HIGGINS. [Tempted, looking at her] It's almost irresistible. She's so deliciously low—so horribly dirty— (Shaw 20)

It is important to note here that Eliza is still under the impression that she is to profit greatly in economic terms from this experiment- florists would hire her once they saw that she could speak well. She doesn't seem to foresee the social baggage that comes along with being a proper lady. Her initial idea of simple speech lessons snowballs into passing her off as a duchess at an upscale function, and one may say that her control over her life slips through her fingers at this point. In becoming ladylike, she automatically becomes a part of the bourgeoisie that has no dearth of wealth and can thereby afford to force women to stay at home; except she doesn't have any

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of the wealth— only the superficial appearances of it. Upper class ladies are often a lot more oppressed than the working class women because they are never viewed as people who have the potential to be productive. They are seen almost as objects to be decorated and in turn used to decorate the house, to entertain the man's guests with their perfect manners, and to produce heirs:

LIZA. Oh! if I only could go back to my flower basket! I should be independent of both you and father and all the world! Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up? I'm a slave now, for all my fine clothes. (Shaw 79)

Eliza, by taking on the role of such a lady, is cut off from her decision making powers and is at the mercy of what Higgins, Pickering, or her father Alfred Doolittle choose to do with her. Since Alfred Doolittle comes into an unexpected fortune, he too is expected to take up the responsibilities of an upper class man- some of which involve looking after his daughter till she is married. Understandably, Doolittle seems to like the proletarian, free-of-norms life better than the bourgeois one with all its formalities. According to Rosemarie Tong, in Heidi Hartmann's socialist-feminist interactive system of understanding class and gender, she talks about a sort of bargain that the bourgeois and proletarian men strike to keep proletarian women in check. Tong reiterates Hartmann's observations saying: Only if all men—be they proletarian or bourgeoisie—could find some mutually agreeable way to handle this particular “ woman question” could the interests of patriarchy and capitalism be harmonized. To some degree, this harmony was achieved

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when bourgeoisie men agreed to pay proletarian men a family wage large enough to permit them to keep their wives and children at home. (117)

The exchanges between Alfred Doolittle and Higgins regarding Eliza can be considered an example of this sort of understanding to keep Eliza where she is without giving her a choice in the matter. The transformation that occurs thereafter costs Eliza her freedom from the norms of upper class society. The question of Eliza is settled with the exchange of a few pounds between the two men. When the two linguists are cautioned about the territory they are treading on, they don't seem to see any problem with taking charge of the identity of another human being:

MRS. HIGGINS. No, you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards.

HIGGINS. I don't see anything in that. She can go her own way, with all the advantages I have given her.

MRS. HIGGINS. The advantages of that poor woman who was here just now! The manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living without giving her a fine lady's income! Is that what you mean? (Shaw 54)

They dismiss any attempt at a solid plan for Eliza's future by saying they will find her some "light employment" or get her married to someone who can provide for her. These statements are often made without any consultation with her, showing that the two men might really think they own her and can

figure out what to do with her on their passing whims. She then is clay in the hands of Higgins, like Galatea in Pygmalion's.

Higgins and Pickering become the "creators" of her identity here and then strip her of her old way of life along with her old clothing. Higgins sees her as his very own creation, as if he invented her, and his attachment towards her seems to consist mainly of familiarity and the liking one has for a pretty object one owns. Higgins moves from the position of her tutor to the position of her custodian.

MRS. HIGGINS. You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll.

HIGGINS. Playing! The hardest job I ever tackled: make no mistake about that, mother. But you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul. (Shaw 52)

The female identity here is being bestowed on a seemingly un-ladylike woman who does not conform to the usual normative structures of society. Eliza has grown up with no knowledge of how to conduct herself in a socially acceptable way to upper class society. Her priorities were selling her flowers and having enough to eat and she wanted to keep her dignity for that no matter what. Higgins and Pickering, who are under the impression that they are fixing Eliza, are in fact not doing much apart from sharpening Eliza's superficial conduct. Eliza is dressed in fancy clothing and taught how to

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speak ' properly'. The content of her conversations in her first social meeting after she has begun working with Higgins is to be limited to the weather and everyone's health. This shows that talking about anything heavy, serious, or simply realistic was considered to be against the norms for what good ladies chatted about. The linguists are at no point seen imparting any academic knowledge apart from phonetics to Eliza in spite of admitting a number of times that Eliza is rather quick with picking up what is taught. She is not pushed to think for herself or to analyze anything while Pickering and Higgins brainstorm all the time around her. She is told what she must do.

The two men work towards creating the perfect social doll, and do not care that in the process of creating this doll they're pasting an identity that consists of an incredibly superficial skill-set on to a full woman- a woman who had initially come to them to work on her speech and make her economic condition improve. The female identity in this setting is judged as admirable or otherwise based on mainly outward appearances. At the Ambassador's party, Eliza is well-liked because she's pleasing to the eye and says all the right things. She creates an image of wealth and good breeding. Most of the people fawning over her would never want to socialize with someone who they know is a mere flower girl. She becomes an exquisite member of the " feathered race" (qtd. in Tong 13) that Mary Wollstonecraft talks about. Eliza, according to Higgins and Pickering, has most definitely benefitted from their experiment. They view her social acceptability, no matter how hollow, as a point of empowerment for her. Her loss of livelihood is not of much consequence to the two, and it is important to note that once

their purses are taken away from her, her empowerment in terms of social hierarchy is not of much consequence in turn.

The idea that Eliza is being given the power to pierce upper class society is only a superficial mask for the loss of power she experiences in the decision making of her own life. Upper class societal norms are also seen differing with gender in the play, quite hypocritically. The loud and passionate behavior that Eliza is criticized heavily for is simply dismissed as a part of his personality when Higgins shows it. He curses, throws fits, is unbelievably moody, and in Mrs. Pearce's words will often "walk over everybody" (Shaw 21) and is met with barely a stern word.

LIZA. You see it was so very difficult for me with the example of Professor Higgins always before me. I was brought up to be just like him, unable to control myself, and using bad language on the slightest provocation. And I should never have known that ladies and gentlemen didn't behave like that if you hadn't been there. (Shaw 72)

As Eliza says, any sense of respect and understanding that she may have gained from the experience was through the courtesy that Colonel Pickering shows her, and not from Higgins' nearly tyrannical behavior. Higgins' retort to this accusation is that he behaves the same with everyone, and that while Pickering treats even a flower girl like a duchess, Higgins would "treat a duchess as if she was a flower girl". This statement, aside from an odd sense of equality, shows just how unimportant being respectable is to Higgins. This quality has been touted as a part of Higgins' charm over the years by

audiences, but might not be so easily acceptable if Eliza were to pick it up.
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Eliza is often criticized for being too emotional or for overreacting. This behavior, however, may stem from how society expects women to be and from the frameworks it creates for that purpose: Although Wollstonecraft did not use terms such as “ socially constructed gender roles,” she denied that women are, by nature, more pleasure seeking and pleasure giving than men. She reasoned that if they were confined to the same cages that trap women, men would develop the same flawed characters. Denied the chance to develop their rational powers, to become moral persons with concerns, causes, and commitments beyond personal pleasure, men, like women, would become overly “ emotional,” a term Wollstonecraft tended to associate with hypersensitivity, extreme narcissism, and excessive self-indulgence (qtd. in Tong 14).

Higgins seems to fit Wollstonecraft’s description of “ emotional” rather well; he is extremely narcissistic and excessively self-indulgent. What is ironic, however, is that this term was often used to deride women. Eliza eventually manages to evade the illusory and deceptive “ empowerment” that comes along with being a lady and resists conformity after realizing that her productivity has been snatched away from her. This can be roughly compared to the class consciousness before the struggle that Marxism describes; in this case it is more of an individual consciousness of being capitalized on.

She doesn’t remain a mere puppet for very long and snatches the controls of her life back from Higgins after fully understanding that she was a mere conquest post the Ambassador’s party. Moving swiftly away from the girl

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who did menial jobs around Higgins' house such as fetching his slippers, she passionately asserts herself and flings his slippers right back at him. She uses the articulation that he has taught her to tell him that she will do as she pleases. In Shaw's ending of the play, Eliza declares she won't be seeing Higgins again, while he prattles off a list of errands for her to run. Eliza disdainfully asks him to them himself, and that is the last thing she says in the play. Her final statement shows what a long way Eliza's identity has come- from an easily flustered flower girl, to a mere doll, and then to a smart and assertive woman. Adaptations of the play have often altered the ending to make it " happy".

Arguably the most famous movie adaptation of it, *My Fair Lady*, shows Eliza returning to Higgins and speaking in her old flower girl way. These adaptations are quite the opposite of what Shaw was intending to do with the play and it prompted him to write a note on what happens after and why Eliza does not end up marrying Higgins for " Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion: his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable"(Shaw 97).

Paul Lauter while comparing two of Shaw's plays discusses the changes made to them on popular demand: The usual perversions of *Candida* and *Pygmalion* are thus understandable: to make the plays suitable for musical comedy audiences, they must be bent into normally sentimental frames and fitted with stereotypic happy endings. The producer must, above all, give his house its dreams. But Shaw was out to make his subversive points; he could not, like his *Don Juan*, be content with the " romantic vowings and pledgings

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and until-death-do-us-partings” of sentimental marriage. He recognized, and displayed in both plot and dramaturgy, the need of the artist in a world of bourgeois clichés to adopt the strategies, not of silence, but certainly of ‘exile and cunning’. (19)

The audience’s need to see Eliza end up with Higgins shows just how much one can be blinded by a conventionally attractive man who in reality borders on abusive. According to Bárbara Cristina Gallardo: [T]he unrequited love between Eliza and Higgins is turned into a romance that pleased the audience; viewers become passive because they do not have to think of the reasons why there could not exist romance between Eliza and Higgins. In spite of that, they may think that that happened because the man has status and the girl is beautiful. (2)

In Shaw’s version of what happens after, however, Eliza does get back some of her own, marries Freddy who may not be rich and influential but is respectful towards her, and runs her own shop with the regular ups and downs of life. In a society that bombards women with behavioral norms and gives their outward appearances excessive importance, Eliza Doolittle, because and in spite of this very society, remains a formidable literary model for the formation of the female identity.

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