

A SHAVIAN AFFAIR IN UNDERSTANDING FEMININITY IN A MAN’S WORLD

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Abstract: Topics regarding “the war of sexes”, “gender stereotypes”, “men and women”, “patriarchal or matriarchal”, “equal rights” are generating, still, a lot of powerful feelings on both sides of men and women “parties”. Thus, this paper has as central point of analysis the concepts of “femininity” and “feminism” as they are found in literature and films, to be more specific in the play: *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw and the Hollywood productions of *My Fair Lady*, underlining the needs of the audience for a “happy - ending”. A happy – end that was not envisioned nor wanted by Bernard Shaw as he clearly explained in the sequel for *Pygmalion*, the version from 1941.

Key-words: Feminism, Femininity, Myth, *Pygmalion*, gender stereotypes, equal rights, happy – end.

General Perspective on Femininity and Feminism

MOTTO: *As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is my world.*
Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)

Looking for the definition of “femininity” in the Oxford Dictionary, the term is explained as follows:

- having qualities or an appearance traditionally associated with women,
- especially delicacy and prettiness.

Moving on to the Longman Dictionary Of Contemporary English, we discover that to the previous definition, another adjective is added to explain the term “femininity”, that is “gentle”:

- femininity [uncountable]: qualities that are considered to be typical of women,
- especially qualities that are gentle, delicate, and pretty.

The aim for the present research is to find out the features of femininity and feminism as they are presented, by a clear definition, in the dictionaries and in the history of women fighting for their equal rights in a world of men.

In the Oxford Dictionary, the term “feminism” has this definition:

- the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.
- the issue of rights for women first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th century. In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffragette movement in the late 19th century that there was significant political change.
- a ‘second wave’ of feminism arose in the 1960s, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood; seminal figures included Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer.

But, the beginnings of Feminism are rooted so deep in the pages of history. We can go as far back as the prehistoric times in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean regions and discuss goddess religions and matriarchy. We can stop in the European Middle Ages and the mystical rhetoric of Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) who was a German writer, composer, philosopher, Christian mystic and visionary. Moving on and turning the other pages of history we find the Renaissance tradition of learned women such as Leonora d’Este (1474–1539) or Enlightenment *beaux esprits* such as Madame de Rambouillet (1588–1665), society hostess and a major

figure in the literary history or Germaine de Staël (1766–1817).

A moment of importance in the culture of Feminism is the French Revolution and the struggles of the bourgeois European women for education and their civic rights. Not to mention the years of 1791 and 1789 when Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), blueprinted a *Declaration of the Rights of Women* similarly to *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*.

When we say “Feminism” we instantly think about the different periods or waves that transformed the general view regarding the position of women in society. Thus, the correct term will not be just “Feminism” but “Feminisms”. These different waves of Feminism are concerned with strong issues as: feminist communication regarding what we see as a significant interplay between theory and politics, the ways in which Feminism, as concept, evolved in time and space and what the reactions were, and the analysis of the topic in terms of power and gender.

Beginning with the 19th century and up to the 21st century there were continuities as well as disruptions regarding the progress of Feminism.

In the context of industrial society and liberal politics as well as the liberal women’s rights movement and early socialist Feminism, the First Wave of Feminism arose.

This First Wave of Feminism underlined the need for access and equal opportunities for women. Then, the Second Wave emerged in the 1960s to 1970s in postwar Western welfare societies, when the “oppressed” groups like Blacks and homosexuals and the New Left was on the rise.

During the 1980s to 1990s radical voices of women’s empowerment and differential rights were heard being initiated by women of color and third-world women.

From the mid-1990s up to the present moment, recoiling from the emergence of a new postcolonial and post socialist world order, in the context of the neoliberal, information society, and global politics a Third Wave of Feminism developed. This is the stage on which Feminism manifests itself in “grrl” rhetoric looking to overcome the theoretical question of equity or difference and the political question of evolution and/or revolution, while it challenges the notion of “universal womanhood” and grasps the notions of ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in the global theory and politics.

‘Pygmalion’ – From Myth to Play

***MOTTO:** “Unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself.”*

Bernard Shaw.

When we say Bernard Shaw we instantly think about Pygmalion, his Nobel Prize in Literature from 1925 or we imagine him as being a passionate supporter of the theatre of Ibsen (The Quintessence of Ibsenism). His passion for the theatre was the reason for which he decided to write plays in order to illustrate his criticism on the English stage. His earliest dramas were called Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant (1898).

Among these, *Widower's Houses* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* focused on the attack on social hypocrisy, while in plays such as *Arms and the Man* and *The Man of Destiny* the power of the criticism was less intense. Shaw's radical rationalism, his disregard for conventions, his keen dialectic interest and verbal wit transformed the stage of the theaters into real fora of ideas. In *Saint Joan* (1923) he rewrites the well-known story of the French maiden.

1928 was the year for the publication of *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*. With this book, Shaw presents the conditions under which he thought the world could look forward to the future with hope. The book underlines his indictment of capitalism as the source of both domestic injustice and international enmity and his arguments for a socialist egalitarian society as the only organization able to assure a healthy future. He believed in the woman's freedom to be herself and to be able to liberate herself from the stereotypical role of a woman. Throughout the book he highlights the idea that the only way to live is in a society where everyone earns and owns exactly the same, regardless of skill, effort, age, gender, character, intelligence, inheritance, merit or power. Women would be free, at last, of dependence on men.

This set of ideas seems so new, updated and fresh for our present economic, politic and social situation. In a European Commission Press Release on European Equal Pay Day, from March 2012, is highlighted the fact that “Women in Europe still earn 16.4% less on average than men”. Thus the European Commission wants to raise awareness about this gender pay gap across the EU.

EU Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding, the Commission's Vice-President commented upon this issue: “European Equal Pay Day reminds us of the days and hours that women have been working 'for free' since 1 January. The principle of equal pay for equal work is written in the EU Treaties since 1957. It is high time that it is put in practice everywhere⁵ⁿ”.

Starting with the 2008 economic crash, people, regardless of gender, have had the same concerns regarding their jobs, economic status and earnings.

Shaw outlined the fact that capitalism degrades the character and all human relationships, reducing everything and everybody to monetary value while misunderstanding the extent to which humans are not motivated purely by greed or acquisitiveness. Yet, as our reality demonstrates so vividly, people are not machines or experts of the stock exchange and they are not entirely driven by money alone. Shaw displays the thought that the reality was that ill-used people were worse than well-used people and that he hated the poor and looked forward “eagerly” to their extermination. Even though this image is quite strong, he maintains the equilibrium by adding that he also hates the rich a little and he is equally bent on their extermination. He believed in “equal opportunity to secure employment, equal pay for equal work, contracts for

marriage, marriage free from degrading economic and possessive-sexual factors, dignified divorce, financial independence within or without marriage, ownership of property exclusive of one's husband, bearing of children outside of marriage and refusal to bear children, equal opportunity to participate in athletics, and legal equality of every variety”.

Moving on to a more artistic area, we can observe that Bernard Shaw's talents were not only related to strong political and social views. He was awarded with Oscar for the best screenplay for Gabriel Pascal's film of *Pygmalion* in 1938 and in 1955, Alan J. Lerner based the book and lyrics of the musical *My Fair Lady* closely to *Pygmalion*.

Hollywood's 'Fair' Adaptation of Pygmalion

Entering in the world of film productions, we discover a specific term that is “backstage musical” referring to films that contain a plot centred on the making of a show, concluding with a lengthy production number that involves either singing or dancing, or a combination of both. Some good examples sustaining this definition are the films that featured Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, who appeared together in nine musicals such as: *Flying Down to Rio*, *Top Hat*, *Roberta* or *The Gay Divorcee*. But, in contrast with these films and, in general, with all the other Hollywood musicals, *My Fair Lady* contains only a couple of dancing scenes.

As Altman observes “hardly a musical exists that does not at some point literally cover the screen with dancing couples. The American film musical seems to suggest that the natural state of the adult human being is in the arms of an adult human being of an opposite sex. Pairing – off is the natural impulse of the musical.⁶ⁿ”

Watching carefully the film *My Fair Lady* one can observe the fact that the character who dances in most of the scenes is Doolittle and has no partner. The only moments when Eliza dances with Higgins are in “The Rain in Spain” scene and at the Embassy Ball. There are also some romantic implications that are subverted with the inclusion of a third party when Pickering dances with both Eliza and Higgins, and with Karpathy to whom Higgins relinquishes his waltz with Eliza. With the absence of all characters being engaged in singing and dancing scenes, we may conclude that *My Fair Lady* is highly unusual among Hollywood musicals. Altman continued the observations stating that “the duet is the musical's centre of gravity, its method of summarizing in a single scene the film's entire structure” and that “it is usually reserved for moments of maximum tension or exultation”.

Moreover, he explained that duets play “the important function of crystallizing the couple's attitudes and emotions” and that are mostly “delivered in echo fashion: one line from him, one line from her, and so on, alternating until the voices merge in a final embrace.”

In the Introduction of *Pygmalion*, Nicholas Grene draws attention to the fact that the central point of the play, as Shaw envisioned, was the independence that Eliza achieved, denying her status as Higgins' male artefact. Grene explains that this is exactly what makes the ending of *My Fair Lady* “for all its marvellously witty songs”, a vulgar travesty of the play's design. The last lines in *My Fair Lady* give hope for a possible romantic relationship between Higgins and Eliza:

HIGGINS:[softly] Eliza? Where the devil are my slippers?

[There are tears in ELIZA's eyes. She understands]

The curtain falls slowly.

The romantic atmosphere is prepared for the final lines as Eliza is there made to come back noiselessly and Higgins, missing her presence, is listening to her voice on his records.

Greene asks rhetorically in the end of his

Introduction:

Would Shaw have approved? Not bloody likely⁷.

The same observations are put forward by Gibbs as he describes in his book *Bernard Shaw: A Life*:

Shaw had written a play he thought was about, among other things, a young woman finally emancipating herself from the domination of her male mentor. In his view it was a play not about the growth of love between master and pupil, but about the pupil's regaining, through struggle, her independent identity⁸.

Observing the audiences' reactions towards a romantic ending for the play and the helplessly need of different directors to change and romanticize the closing stages, Shaw wrote a prose sequel to the play for the first authorized English – language edition of *Pygmalion* in book format. With this sequel he insisted that Eliza should marry Freddy Eynfort Hill, not Higgins.

In the preface for *Pygmalion*, Shaw explains that “as will be seen later on, *Pygmalion* needs, not a preface, but a sequel, which I have supplied in its due place⁹”.

The sequel stand as both an essay on human behaviour and nature and a narrative of the future lives of the characters present in the play. From the very beginning Shaw laments of the excess of “imagination enfeebled by their lazy dependence on the ready – made and reach – me – downs of the ragshop in which Romance keeps its stock of “happy - endings” to misfit all stories”. For him the thought that Eliza should marry the hero only because she became the heroine of a romance, is “unbearable”. He also gives strong arguments for which Eliza could not have married Higgins arguing that the latter was “a predestined old bachelor” with a mother – fixation and a passion only for phonetics.

Thus, as a woman, Eliza was “instinctively aware that she could never obtain a complete grip of him or come between him and his mother (the first necessity of a married woman)”. It was ludicrous to believe that a person as strong – willed as Eliza would have kneeled to the equally strong – willed Higgins. Human nature shows us a totally different reaction: strong people desire weaker the partners and that would be the main reason for which Eliza was always destined to marry Freddy. On the opposite side there is Higgins embracing the life of an old bachelor and unlike him, Eliza was destined to be married. So to be clear for the audience, Shaw clarifies that “Freddy is young, practically twenty years younger than Higgins, he is a gentleman (or, as Eliza would qualify him, a toff) and speaks like one; he loves Eliza unaffectedly and is not her master, nor ever likely to dominate her in spite of his advantage of social standing”. In this case, Eliza is put in front of a clear situation: should she choose a lifetime of fetching Higgins' slippers or a lifetime of Freddy's fetching hers? It is unquestionably that Eliza should choose the latter choice.

Even though the sequel was so skilfully argued, one could observe that since only the readers of *Pygmalion* would have encountered the sequel, the large audience was presumably unaware of its existence. Still, we may raise some questions regarding the arguments presented in the sequel. It may be true that Eliza should not become Higgins' male artefact and should marry Freddy, for the reasons that were clearly presented.

However, with the presence of this sequel, the central theme regarding Eliza's independence is undermined. Thus, Eliza abandons the idea of becoming a

phonetics teacher and even though she is not dependent, anymore, on Higgins, is dependent on Pickering who offers her financial support when she and Freddy open a florist/greengrocer's shop together. Another contradiction would be that although she said that she didn't want to see Higgins again, she remains in regular contact with him. Higgins continues his educative role as her teacher when she decides to improve her writing skills.

As readers we can understand Shaw's imperative need to clarify every detail regarding the ending of his play. If we analyze carefully certain scenes and moments in the play we may predict that the end will not contain a romantic union of the heroes. Thus, the Ambassador's Reception may well have similarities with the Cinderella story, yet Shaw forestalls any potential inference of romance by separating the two characters during most of the sequence.

At the end of her success, Eliza received no compliments on her performance from her mentor, thus preparing the scene in which she will burst with negative feelings towards Higgins.

Moreover, in order to encourage Eliza with her pronunciation, Higgins suggests to her that she will obtain a better husband if she succeeds. Also, at the end of Act IV, in the 1941's version of the play, Eliza “goes down on her knees on the hearthrug to look for the ring. When she finds it she considers for a moment what to do with it. Finally she flings it down on the dessert stand and goes upstairs in a tearing rage.”(page 81)

The fact that she “considers what to do with it” can suggest that she could take into consideration the possibility of a romantic relationship with Higgins. But, this uncertainty lasts only for a brief moment, as she puts it on the dessert stand, leaving it behind and with it all the hope that she could change her mind.

One could consider that Freddy and Higgins are characters positioned at the extremes. Thus, in order to make Freddy more edible to the audience as Eliza's love interest, Shaw introduces him before Higgins is seen or his character is revealed. At first Higgins is named only as “the Note Taker”. Freddy is presented as “a young man of twenty, in evening dress” and he is linked, in a delicate manner with Eliza when, caught in a heavy shower, he “rushes off”, followed by Eliza, with whom “comes into collision”. On the other hand, Higgins is presented in Act Two as:

A robust, vital, appetizing sort of man of forty or thereabouts, dressed in a professional – looking black frock – coat with a white linen collar and black silk tie. 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. (page 24).

After the description of Higgins one can ask: can be Eliza considered a “scientific subject”? Could she admit the fact that she could never be more than something interesting to be studied or transformed without a care for her feelings? As the play will unfold, the only possible answers for these questions will be simply: No. The emphasis on Higgins's age and interest for science is clearly intended to establish visually his unsuitability as a romantic partner for Eliza, while in contrast Freddy would be a much more proper choice. When Eliza relieves him of his taxi, he “dazedly raises his hat” saying “Goodbye.” Then Eliza has several exchanges with the taxi driver that reveal her possible interest in Freddy:

TAXIMAN. Where to?

LIZA. Bucknam Pellis. [Buckingham Palace]

TAXIMAN. What d'ye mean - Bucknam Pellis?

LIZA. Dont you know where it is? In the Green Park, where the King lives. Goodbye, Freddy. Dont let me keep you standing there. Goodbye.

FREDDY. Goodbye [He goes]. (Act One, page 20)

In Act IV, Freddy is presented as he is standing in the street, lovelorn and gazing up at the second floor hoping to see Eliza. When asked by Eliza what was he doing there, he replies that he spent most of the nights there as that was the only place where he was happy. He calls her “Miss Doolittle” thus showing her his respect. Her reaction is to grab him by the shoulders and reacting emotionally to his presence will ask him “Freddy: You don’t think I’m a heartless guttersnipe, do you?” He will respond first with declarations of love and then “losing all self - control [smothering] her with kisses.” They will stay in one another’s arms until “a scandalized” elderly police officer will interrupt them. Freddy tells him, “Sorry, constable. We’ve only just become engaged” and the pair then “run away”.

In order to strengthen the sense of a fast – developing romantic relationship between Freddy and Eliza, Shaw has her imply that her new found love will also save her from ending her life:

FREDDY. Where were you going?

ELIZA. To the river.

FREDDY. What for?

ELIZA. To make a hole in it.

FREDDY.[horrorified] Eliza, darling! What do you mean? What’s the matter?

ELIZA. Never mind. It doesn’t matter now. There’s nobody in the world now but you and me, is there?

FREDDY. Not a soul. (page 82)

Shaw also highlights some other features that Freddy has: he is earnest and quite likeable, being willing to defer to Eliza’s greater life experience.

Thus, he tells her after a second constable orders them to release themselves from each other’s embrace, “I had no idea the police were so devilishly prudish” while Eliza replies “It’s their business to hunt girls off the streets”. Her self – esteem improves and we find a more confident Eliza. She will declare to Higgins her intention to marry Freddy very clearly as he loves her, thus, making him king enough for her.

The presence of the taxi may seem as a linking element in the creation of their relationship. As in the First Act, in Act Four the taxi driver appears asking Freddy if he can drive him and the lady anywhere. The impoverished Freddy reveals that he has no money for a taxi, so, Eliza takes again the position of the teacher replying to him that she has plenty as the Colonel thinks “you should never go out without ten pounds in your pocket”.

All these arguments being underlined, we can only conclude that Nicholas Grene was right when he stated that the only possible and truthful ending for Pygmalion could be as Shaw envisioned. Still, it is quite interesting to observe that even though the human nature would drive Eliza to marry Freddy for all the right reasons, the audience and Hollywood expected only a happy – end in which Eliza would throw herself in the arms of Higgins, leaving behind all her independence and dreams in her life. The proof for the need of a so called “happy – ending” stands in the Oscar that Shaw received for the best screenplay for Gabriel Pascal’s film of Pygmalion in 1938. Moreover, in 1964 the Academy Film awarded another 8 Oscars and 3 Golden Globes for My Fair Lady, with Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn as main characters, closing the final scene with a “happy – ending”.

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