

Article

On the Innovative Feminism in George Bernard Shaw's *The Pygmalion*

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Received: 20 February 2026 / Accepted: 18 April 2026 / Published: 20 April 2026

Abstract: George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912) is based on the fairy tale of *Pygmalion* and adds new connotations, reflected and witnessed the transformation process of the Industrial Revolution, which laid the foundation for modern feminist theory. This representative play depicts Eliza's image of women's success starting from low education and economic status, attracting attention to the situation of poor women. Bernard Shaw's female characters can not only start to choose their own careers in their career independently and bravely, but more importantly, they have their own ideas and propositions, and even the pursuit of their own values; They shows the process of women's status from oppression to liberation during the Industrial Revolution. Shaw looked on women's spiritual independence and advocated that women should have the same educational rights and career development opportunities as men. At the same time, he opposed the sanctification and idealization of women, and instead called for "perfect humanity" to replace the past concept of "perfect women". This thought was pioneering at that time and made valuable contributions to the development of feminist theory in the 20th century. This paper aims to analyze the evolution of Eliza's female image in Shaw's plays, to explain how to change its evolution from realism to romantic idealism and then to anarchist female trend, and to evaluate its important position and influence in the process of literary development. Then, by analyzing the female image in George Bernard Shaw's main plays, and discussing his innovation and influence on the development of feminism as a playwright.

Keywords: Pygmalion; George Bernard Shaw; Feminism; Eliza

1. Introduction

Born in Dublin and grew up in a poor family, George Bernard Shaw (26 July 1856 – 2 November 1950), a wit, journalist, playwright, author, and iconic Irishman, wrote more than 60 plays which recognized as the mainstream works of English drama in the 20th century, known as the most famous playwright in the history only after Shakespeare, and became the first person to have won both a Nobel Prize for Literature (Saint Joan, 1925) and an Academy Award (Oscar for Best Written Screenplay, 1939). (Carter, et al., 1997).

George Bernard Shaw lived in the late Victorian and Edwardian period in England from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. In the context of the industrial Revolution, the change of the status of women in European society triggered extensive social discussion. (Carter, et al., 2001). As a famous playwright and thinker of that time, George Bernard Shaw, with his insightful drama "*The Pygmalion*", described the survival dilemma of urban women in the late 19th century and revealed the social injustice and sexism faced by women

in the industrial era. (Ganz, 1983). At the same time, his other works, also actively advocated women's rights, and made important contributions to women's fight for equal status. Starting from the typical work of *The Pygmalion*, this article will analyze how Bernard Shaw led and promoted the feminist movement of that time through literary creation, and its unique construction of the concept of "perfect humanity". This will not only help us to deeply understand George Bernard Shaw's thoughts and creations on women's issues, but also further reveal the complexity of the changes in women's status during the Industrial Revolution Age.

2. Literature Review/Background

2.1 The mythological framework of Pygmalion

The origin of Pygmalion mythology can be traced back to ancient Greek myths and legends. There are many different versions, and the story was first seen in the ancient Roman poet Ovid's masterpiece "*The Metamorphosis*" (Arthur Golding, 1567). The main plot of *The Pygmalion* myth is as follows: The Cypriot sculptor Pygmalion abandoned his mother and was betrayed by his girlfriend, so he had a grudge against the woman and decided not to marry her for life. Pygmalion wholly devoted himself to statue-carving. Later Pygmalion had carved a beautiful girl in ivory and fell in love with a statue of himself. On the festival of sacrifice to Aphrodite, Pygmalion made a wish to the god of love to get a woman like his ivory statue. Aphrodite fulfilled his wish to let the statue get life, and the statue was named Glatea (meaning "sleeping lover"), who then married Pygmalion and gave birth to their daughter and son.

2.2 George Bernard Shaw's parody of Pygmalion

The myth gives life to the statue through artistic creation, just like George Bernard Shaw's linguistics professor Higgins, who trained the Eliza. Both embody the creative power of artificially shaping the other. Secondly, leather Malion (a recurring typo for Pygmalion) eventually fell in love with his work, and this reversal of the subject and object relationship is also reflected in *the Pygmalion*. (Zhang, 2019). Higgins started out of anger and curiosity, but eventually developed some affection for Eliza, which became an important driving force for the plot. In addition, the love theme of the leather Malion myth also transforms into the complicated emotional entanglement between Eliza and Higgins and Alfred in *the Pygmalion*, and these emotional clues add to the tension and dramatic conflict of the plot. It can be said that the myth of the Pygmalion provides rich cultural heritage and artistic inspiration for Shaw's creation of "*The Pygmalion*". He borrowed from this ancient fairy tale, endowed it with a new connotation of the times and social significance, and successfully created a classic social drama. (Cody, 2002).

2.3 The Feminism Creation of Eliza

From the feminist perspective to explore the female image of Eliza, it is an excellent work. Eliza is a perfect example of Cinderella, and many of her demands are reasonable. Some of her traits are what women share as a strong feminine consciousness. In women always as male "other" and exists in the state of history, has been unable to find change the opposition, and does not produce another essentially no difference between opposition and women become dominant, while men occupy the position of women once, The social differentiation of the two sexes keeps women in a subordinate position in the society, in literature is likely to squeeze the power of women and women consciousness, even subvert the original female image, as 20th century philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously proclaimed

that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” in her famous book *The Second Sex* (Simone de Beauvoir, 1953). “*The Pygmalion*” not only shows the unequal relationship between men and women in the society, but also presents the awakening and publicity of female individual consciousness.

Eliza, the heroine in the play, was initially just a humble street flower girl, subject to the social hierarchy and gender restrictions. But transformed by linguistics professor Higgins, she gradually transformed into an elegant, well-spoken lady. This transformation process not only reflects the inequality of social class and gender order at that time, but also highlights Eliza's unremitting pursuit of self-liberation. Although Eliza's transformation process was dominated by men, she was not fully passive. Instead, she has been looking for her own "female self-consciousness". She tried to get out of poverty and humble situation and pursue her desired life. In the end, she not only completed a magnificent transformation on the outside, but also established an individual sense of independence.

The awakening and publicity of this female individual consciousness is not only reflected in the change of Eliza's identity, but also presented in her insistence and pursuit of equal social relations between men and women. She refused to passively obey the male arrangement, but actively resisted and fought for her own rights and dignity. “*The Pygmalion*” not only highlights the inequality between men and women in the society at that time, but also highlights the important significance of the awakening of women's individual consciousness. Eliza's transformation process reflects the process of women's liberation cause, and injects new strength into the development of feminism in the early 20th century.

3. George Bernard Shaw's Characters Creation

In Shaw's play “*The Pygmalion*”, all the main characters are lifelike and full of deep meanings. Eliza is a representative of bottom women who bravely pursue self-liberation and value realization. Her transformation reflects the importance of language education, the “sculpture” by the linguist demonstrates the power of language and culture, on the other hand also exposes his class prejudice as an intellectual; Colonel Pickering shows the humility and generosity of the traditional upper class, forming a beneficial background with Higgins; even the supporting role, mother, through her open and rational action, reflects the change of the old ideas.

In these aspects of characterization, Higgins' “sculpture” and control of Eliza is particularly critical. On the one hand, he used the wisdom of the language master to help Eliza change; but on the other hand, he showed his arrogant and overbearing side, regarded Eliza as an "object", lacking the similarity of basic human nature, exposing the intellectual class paranoia, and thus triggered deep thinking.

3.1 The Leading Role

The image shaping of Eliza not only reflects the author George Bernard Shaw's attention and sympathy for the people at the bottom, but also has a very prescient feminist thought. She changed from a humble flower girl to a lady with education and status, which shows that everyone, male and female, rich and poor, should have the right and opportunity of self-realization. She has the courage to break through her own situation, pursue language education and social etiquette, show her persistent pursuit of self-improvement and value realization, and convey the proposition that women should acquire independent personality and equal rights.

At the end of the script to Higgins to win the bet and happy, Eliza was in extreme pain, the end of the experiment two men was indifferent to the fact that she had to wake up, once

lurking in the heart faint worries about the future, at this moment also emerged she issued a suffocating roar to Higgins asked:

“What do I do, what do I do” ? Higgins replied, “How do I know what you do? What do you do? What is the...?” This is a heavy blow to the pursuit of self-identity integrity and Lisa. In Higgins' eyes, Eliza was just what he needed, an "experiment" and He never treated Eliza equally as a human being. As the experiment went on, when Eliza realized this, her long-accumulated sense of resistance finally broke out. The end of the script describes the argument between Higgins and Eliza over slippers.”

Eliza: (breathless) What's wrong without you? Didn't I already let you bet to win? This you are satisfied, I don't care anyway.

Higgins: You let me win the bet? you! The arrogant thing! I won. Why did you throw the slippers at me?

Eliza: Because I want to break your face, I'm going to kill you, you selfish beast, why don't you leave me in the old place — in the street? Thank god, it's over. Can you throw me back again? (She twisted her fingers wildly)

Higgins: (looking at her calmly and surprised) This guy was too nervous.

Eliza: (with a suffocating roar, instinctively trying to catch him in the face!!) Higgins: (hold her wrist)! Do you want to catch people? With your claws ready, you cat, how can you be angry at me? Don't sit down. (He violently pushed her into the chair.)

Eliza: (overwhelmed by his weight and strength) What should I do? What do I do with the? (Shaw, 1983)

From these lines Shaw demonstrated Eliza's "out of breath", "suffocating roar", "crazy her fingers", "what do I do"? The movements and tone showed that she could no longer stand the emotional abuse of Higgins. He longs for equality and freedom, and hopes to get respect and recognition from others, which is also the truest and the simplest embodiment of his consciousness as a woman.

The transformation process of Eliza also reflects the importance of language and cultural literacy. Through Professor Higgins' scientific speech correction, she changed her speech and life, which demonstrates the significance of education for the realization of personal self-worth. Eliza's fate of being stigmatized and discriminated against in the show, also offers a strong criticism of hierarchy and sexism. In addition, the spirit of unremitting self-improvement and brave pursuit of spiritual freedom also had a positive impact on the women's liberation movement at that time. She dared to break free from the shackles of the bottom identity, show the desire for life and the awakening of self-worth, and become a model of self-liberation and the pursuit of equality for women at the bottom.

The shaping of Eliza's image not only has important literary significance, but also has a social influence beyond The Times. It is the embodiment of George Bernard Shaw's profound concern and value of human dignity and gender equality, and also a kind of examination and criticism of traditional hierarchical concepts and gender discrimination.

In the roots, the rise of the industrial revolution period of feminist thoughts produced important leading and promoting role, Eliza from a marginalized poor flower girl, metamorphosis into an educated, independent personality “perfect woman” , she this process vividly embodies the underlying women the awakening of self-value and the desire for liberation. Eliza bravely pursued self-realization, and finally broke free of the shackles of the bond between teachers and apprentices, set up an independent personality, and became the model and representative of the women's liberation movement at that time. The play points out the oppression of women by the social hierarchy and the patriarchal system at that time.

Eliza is often regarded as an “object” rather than a “subject” in the process of transformation, reflecting the neglect of women's personal dignity in the patriarchal society. The arrogant attitude of intellectuals such as Higgins also exposed the bad habits of men and gender discrimination. Eliza from the beginning of the awakening of consciousness to the final brave choice to leave the road is hard.

Eliza is a living woman full of passion and expectation for life and she will not stay with her “creator” as a living doll image but to find her own independent life and equality based on care. Although the Pygmalion is ordinary and humble, it is her spirit of independence, resistance and pursuit of equality that gave this drama great power and made her a new woman with female consciousness in that era.

3.2 The Supporting Roles

3.2.1 Henry Higgins

Higgins is a 40 but still choose to be alone bachelor, full of inexplicable hatred of women. In the whole treatment of Eliza land, domineering, arrogant. He used the following words for his first impression of Eliza:

“A woman with such a harsh accent can't stay anywhere and should not live at all.” When Eliza's new clothes had not yet arrived but they had to be thrown away, he ordered the servant to wrap her up in cowhide and bathe her with detergent. When Eliza expressed her love for him, Higgins flatly refused, and dismissed Eliza's pure feelings as “the puppy trick” . (Shaw, 1983)

Apparently, Higgins is a typical anti-feminist under the social environment, he put his enthusiasm and energy on voice research, although he can distinguish the subtle differences of voice, but know little about women, whether for Eliza, his mother and his housekeeper, he is concerned, tough not to mention understand their inner thoughts. When Higgins's mother suggested that Eliza return to his father, Higgins speak of:

“Bullshit, he can't support her, she doesn't belong to him, I have bought her for 5 pounds, this girl doesn't belong to anyone except me.” (Shaw, 1983)

Obviously, in his eyes, the woman is a male accessory, belittle women is one of the core of the patriarchal concept, Higgins asked Eliza back to him, to his equal care conditions, like a pair of men, when he realized he is not in economic control of Eliza, he admitted to you and me and Pickering will be three single man, rather than two men and a silly girl. This line seems to admit that he is economically in their heart, but it shows that he only regards Eliza as a skilled and financially independent man, but not that he is an independent woman. He will never change his mind, but he will never be able to get together with the already awakened Eliza.

As a phonetician, he is good at language correction, which reflects the importance of language education and cultural literacy. By "sculpting" the vulgar flower girl Eliza into decent and polite ladies, it reflects the great power of language and culture in changing personal destiny. But at the same time, Higgins' contempt and arrogance towards Eliza and other people at the bottom have exposed his class prejudice as an intellectual and discrimination against the poor. He lacked basic empathy and sees Eliza as an arbitrarily “carved” , “object” rather than an equal “subject” . This concept reflects the prejudice and discrimination of many intellectual elites at that time against the public at the bottom, revealing that although they have knowledge, they may not have foresight and kindness. Higgins' image has two meanings: he showed the importance of language education and literacy, and his arrogance and prejudice exposed the lack of empathy and tolerance among the intellectual community. Through this role, the author George Bernard Shaw criticized the discrim-

ination of aristocratic intellectuals against the people at the bottom, and called on the society to treat every individual with an equal and humane perspective, and give everyone the opportunity to actively change their destiny.

The role of Higgins not only conveys the power of language education, but also attacks the class prejudice of intellectuals, which reflects the author's value of human nature equality and the criticism of social hierarchy discrimination. This image enriches the theme connotation of the play, and triggers the deep thinking on the purpose of education and social level.

3.2.2 Colonel Pickering

As a traditional upper gentleman, Colonel Pickering does embody some unique meaning: the elegant and courteous side of the traditional upper class. In sharp contrast to Higgins's arrogance, Colonel Pickering was polite and generous, showing the benevolent demeanor of the traditional British upper gentleman class. He is gentle and has basic empathy and respect for people at the bottom, such as Eliza. In the play, Higgins and Eliza are often at odds because of the differences in status. The considerate Colonel Pickering often communicated between the two people, showing his character characteristics of tolerance and breadth and trying to resolve conflicts.

Although Colonel Pickering and Higgins are good friends, there are some differences in their life and consciousness. The former inherits the humble demeanor of the traditional aristocracy, while the latter represents some arrogance and paranoia of the new intellectual class. The personality contrast of the two confirms the rift between the old aristocracy and the new intellectuals. It can be seen from Colonel Pickering's courteous and wise image that the author Bernard Shaw does not completely deny the traditional aristocracy, but shows some valuable qualities and noble demeanor, thus reflecting the author's certain recognition of the aristocratic culture of the old era.

The character of Colonel Pickering is vivid. His character of resolving contradictions reflects Shaw's admiration for reconciliation and reason, while his traditional style reflects the affirmation of "gentleman's character". Through his contrast with Higgins, he also deeply reflects the author's examination of some of the differences between the old aristocracy and the new intellectual class.

3.2.3 Higgins's Mother

The portrayal of Higgins's mother, though rare, is profound, as an upper lady, Higgins mother shows the typical image of a traditional mother, performing housework, skilled social etiquette, and paying attention to her children's upbringing. She was the epitome of the upper-class women of the time, reflecting the traditional gender division and the positioning of the mother role. Unlike the average stubborn image of a conservative mother, Higgins's mother showed considerable rational wisdom. Although she did not agree with her son's behavior, she finally chose to understand and accept, to avoid violent family conflicts. This wise attitude towards life, shows her advanced thinking beyond The Times. Most notably, Higgins's mother raised strong questions about hierarchy and traditional ideas. She publicly expressed her willingness to accept the humble Eliza to join the family, breaking the hierarchical barriers and reflecting an open mind to eliminate the rules. This view was undoubtedly progressive and open at the time. Although the play does not play too much on its maternal love, but Higgins mother's tolerance and tolerance for her son, reflects a kind of maternal love. Even though her son did some "eccentric" behavior, she did not severely criticize, but tried to communicate and understand each other, to convey the mother's love for her children. Higgins's mother enriches the play, reflecting her rationality and wisdom,

questioning the hierarchy and embracing Eliza, and showing the love of a mother for her children. This image provides a vivid reference for the change of social hierarchy and gender concept at that time, and is the challenge and transcendence of the values of the old era.

4. Discussion

Eliza transforms from a humble flower girl and from Professor Higgins to a decent, polite “perfect woman”. This process reflects the power of language education and culture to reshape individuals, but it also gives us to deep reflection on the concept of “perfect woman” as follows:

Firstly, with the acquisition of language cultivation, through the speech correction training of Higgins system, Elissa changed her vulgar accent and learned the accurate and elegant English pronunciation. Her beautiful language not only helped her to integrate into the upper class, but more importantly, she built up her confidence and opened the door for her to pursue a new life. Language cultivation has become an important part of her obtaining the external image of “perfect woman”.

Secondly, in the formation of etiquette cultivation, in addition to language, Eliza also accepted the influence of social etiquette and behavior. She learned how to walk, eat, talk and a series of polite rules. This kind of etiquette from the inside out, so that she finally gained the “lady” appearance.

Thirdly, the awakening of personality independence, the real “perfect woman” should not stop at the appearance of decent behavior, but also should have an independent personality and subject consciousness. In the play, Eliza experienced the awakening process from relying on Higgins to self-independence. She bravely refused the mercy of each other and chose her own life path. This kind of personality independence is the inner quality that “perfection” should have.

Fourthly, the reflection of traditional ideas, through this transformation of Eliza, we can't help but reflect: whether the standard of the so-called “perfect woman” is limited to some inherent ideas? Is it too much emphasis on external words and deeds, while ignoring the cultivation of independent personality? Are there still some stereotypes about society's expectations for female roles? The artist George Bernard Shaw has inspired us to think about these questions with vivid images.

Fifthly, reflection on the purpose of education, the purpose of education, is it simply “sculpture” some external image, or to promote the all-round development of students and have independent personality? Is the traditional education mode too “controlled” and “suppressed” and ignoring the play of students' subjectivity? The transformation from a flower girl to a “perfect woman” not only reflects the power of language and cultural education, but also triggers our deeper reflection on the concept of “perfect” and related social values. The real “perfection” should be the perfect unity of external cultivation and internal personality, and should not stop at some stereotypes or paranoid ideas. This transformation process vividly interprets George Bernard Shaw's examination and criticism of the inherent thinking of the old era, and urges us to re-examine the concept of education and social development. (Yong Tan et al., 2026).

5. Conclusions

George Bernard Shaw's “*The Pygmalion*” is ultimately intended to declare that women, whether rich or poor, should have the rights and opportunities for independent personality and equal development. Eliza's transformation conveys the progressive proposition that women should have the courage to pursue self-realization and seek independence, and

issues a call for women to awaken together and get rid of the shackles of old ideas. This is the pioneer feminist character creation in Industry Age which leads the feminism trend in literacy world in 19th century. Eliza's transition from flower girl to upper class is itself a microcosm of the breaking of the traditional hierarchy. Even traditional people such as Higgins's mother eventually accepted Eliza's new status, indicating that old thinking is changing. The non-romantic ending unlike the usual endings of the prominent plays had various interpretations and numerous messages to be conveyed and that what made the play one of the most successful plays in the world. George Bernard Shaw is shown to be critical of society and its conforming classes, both lower and upper statuses. The play artistically reproduces the transformation of feminism values during the Industrial Revolution.

In “*The Pygmalion*”, the class contradiction and the gap between the rich and the poor, gender stereotypes and educational opportunities, the awakening of women's independent consciousness and other problems reflect the serious class differentiation in the British society at that time. Eliza, as a bottom flower selling girl, lived in extremely poor conditions. Later, in many different ways Eliza has changed which include her new identity that has accompanied her improved hygiene, self-esteem, confidence, views and her relationships such as the one that was formed with Freddy. Eliza has found her self-importance and independence and she can now leave Higgins, without his need all the time, as she left with Freddy. Eliza will continue to work hard and fight for the identity she thought she deserved. Eliza's identity significantly changes over the course of the story, but her essence remains true to the hopeful Cockney speaking girl we met at the beginning of the play. This highlights the social problem of poverty and inequality of opportunity. At first, it was considered low and vulgar, and it was discriminated against. However, through the cultivation of linguistics, her behavior and speech have changed greatly, which shows the important role of education in breaking through the concept of gender rigidity.

It is indicated that George Bernard Shaw showcased the feminist appeal through the vivid characters and plot conflict for the rising female liberation movement injected ideological motivation, issued a call for gender equality and female independent personality and expectations, embodies the author actively lead the progressive trend of pioneer consciousness and humanistic care.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T and Z; methodology, T; formal analysis, A; investigation, T; resources, T and Z; data curation, T; writing—original draft preparation, T and Z; writing—review and editing, T; visualization, T; supervision, Z; project administration, A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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