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# UNVEILING THE VEILED WOMEN: SECONDARY FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *PYGMALION* BY GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw was an early and vigorous exponent of gender equality. Scholarly studies focusing on Shaw's literary characters reach contradictory results: some argue that the author created a new model of women—domineering, clever and sensible—while others claim that his progressive ideas on women are not evident in his literary works. *Pygmalion* has attracted academic attention in relation to Eliza, who has been largely examined from a feminist angle, but little or no research has been done regarding secondary characters. This article argues that Shaw's feminism should be understood through a broader gender spectrum, focusing on how secondary characters embody or challenge social expectations of femininity. Considering how Miss and Mrs Eynsford Hill, Mrs Pearce, and Mrs Higgins reproduce or subvert social norms may demonstrate that Shaw's feminism cannot be solely explained through Eliza. The role of Freddy will also be discussed as part of Shaw's critique of dominant masculinity, contributing to a redefinition of the boundaries of gender equality.

*Keywords*: Shaw, *Pygmalion*, feminism, gender roles, secondary characters.

## DESVELANDO A LAS MUJERES VELADAS: PERSONAJES FEMENINOS SECUNDARIOS EN *PYGMALION* DE GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Resumen

George Bernard Shaw destacó tempranamente por su firme defensa de la igualdad de género. Los estudios centrados en los personajes literarios de Shaw ofrecen resultados contradictorios: algunos sostienen que el autor creó un nuevo modelo de mujer (dominante, inteligente y sensata), mientras que otros afirman que sus ideas progresistas sobre el sexo femenino no se reflejan de manera evidente en su obra literaria. *Pygmalion* ha atraído la atención académica en relación con Eliza, quien ha sido ampliamente analizada desde una

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perspectiva feminista, pero se ha realizado poca o ninguna investigación sobre los personajes secundarios. Este artículo sostiene que el feminismo de Shaw debe entenderse a través de un espectro de género más amplio, centrándose en cómo sus personajes secundarios encarnan o cuestionan las expectativas sociales sobre la feminidad. Analizar la manera en que Miss y Mrs Eynsford Hill, Mrs Pearce y Mrs Higgins reproducen o subvierten las normas sociales puede demostrar que el feminismo de Shaw no puede explicarse únicamente a través de Eliza. Asimismo, se abordará el papel de Freddy como parte de la crítica de Shaw a la masculinidad dominante, lo que contribuye a redefinir los límites de la igualdad de género.

*Palabras clave*: Shaw, *Pygmalion*, feminismo, roles de género, personajes secundarios.

## 1. Introduction

Literary criticism has pointed out a polemic vision of feminism in Shaw's writings, signalling that many of his female characters reinforce traditional stereotypes related to gender. In the case of *Pygmalion*, scholars (Li & Weng, 2016; Chen, 2006; Martin, 2001; Starks, 1997) have mainly focused on the figure of Eliza, who has triggered a controversial reaction. On the one hand, some academics consider her as an exponent of the emancipated woman, who "takes her destiny into her own hands" (Kern, 2007: 4). On the other hand, other scholars claim that she is always dependent on men (namely, Mr Higgins or Freddy). Li & Weng (2016: 47), for instance, question the emancipation of Eliza, claiming that her victory is not complete, "for she could not cut off the link between her and Higgins and Pickering". This binary debate suggests that focusing exclusively on the protagonist may be insufficient to fully grasp the complexity of Shaw's gender ideology. To understand the constraints and possibilities of Eliza's independence, it is necessary to examine the social web in which she operates.

Despite this need for a broader perspective, little or no research has been done regarding the secondary characters of *Pygmalion*. The purpose of this paper is to address this research gap by focusing on the minor characters in terms of gender construction. To do so, the article begins by contextualising the intersection of age and class in the Edwardian era.

It then proceeds to analyse the Eynsford Hill family, Mrs Pearce,[1] and Mrs Higgins to clarify Shaw's contradictory ideas about women, specifically challenging standard interpretations through Higgins's contrasting treatment of younger and older female characters. Finally, special attention will be granted to Freddy to illustrate Shaw's critique of dominant masculinity, ultimately arguing that these fictional representations reflect the author's own biographical ambivalence towards female independence.

My analysis will take into consideration two key social factors besides gender, namely age and class, which play a crucial role in gender representation. Alongside race, categories such as gender, age, and class function as major organising social principles whose interaction—known as "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989)—helps explain forms of discrimination that cannot be understood in isolation.

Within the play, class emerges as a particularly decisive component of gender construction. As Mugglestone (1993: 374) notes, "class consciousness, first recorded in 1887, is, in effect, the issue which was to dominate *Pygmalion*, mirrored most obviously in the linguistic signals of social identity which provide the key to Eliza's transformation". Thus, each social stratum was governed by distinct expectations. The ideology of separate spheres was strictly a middle- and upper-class phenomenon: while wealthy women were expected to embody the domestic ideal of "the Angel in the House",[2] working-class women could not afford the luxury of such confinement. Driven by economic necessity, they were forced into the public sphere to earn a living. *Pygmalion* portrays this spectrum: Mrs Higgins represents the leisurely autonomy of the upper class, Mrs Pearce illustrates the working woman within the domestic sphere, and Eliza initially embodies the exposed struggle of the street worker.

To fully appreciate Shaw's unconventional portrayal of older characters in *Pygmalion*, it is necessary first to contextualise the prevailing attitudes towards ageing in his time. A telling example of the

[1] Following the conventions of Shavian scholarship and Shaw's own spelling reform, abbreviations such as "Mrs" appear without periods throughout this article.

[2] The phrase "The Angel in the House" comes from the title of a poem written by Coventry Patmore to memorialise his deceased wife, Emily, in which he exalts the virtues of an ideal wife.

tension between Shaw's views and societal norms was the casting of the original production in 1914: the choice of Mrs Patrick Campbell to play the teenage Eliza was met with concern because she was forty-nine years old. Yet, Shaw's insistence on casting her signals his disregard for biological age as a defining limitation.

This controversy was symptomatic of a broader historical shift in attitudes towards ageing. While older people were traditionally associated with wisdom, industrial societies increasingly perceived them as a burden, particularly when health and economic productivity declined. In industrial societies, where factory work is the dominant mode of production, older people are perceived as less useful (Barker, 2009). This utilitarian view intensified during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, when old age became inextricably linked to decline. As Mangum (1999: 102) asserts, the emerging professional discourse of the period increasingly defined old age in terms of pathology and degeneration, turning the ageing population into a social problem to be managed.

Both Eliza and Miss Eynsford Hill suffer from a form of objectification in which their value is tied to their utility or function as social props. Higgins treats them with the arrogance of intellect, dismissing their dignity. For instance, he reduces Eliza to a mere experiment—calling her a "squashed cabbage leaf" (Shaw, 1975: 680). As Buckley (2015: 35) argues, Higgins perceives her essentially as an "ambulatory phonograph", a machine capable of reproducing sound but devoid of emotion. He is equally condescending to Clara in Act III when, rather than correcting her misunderstanding of the new "small talk", he mocks her ignorance by encouraging her to humiliate herself in public (Shaw, 1975: 731). In contrast, the linguistics professor shows a grudging deference towards the older women he knows well, such as his mother or his housekeeper. Although Mrs Pearce often threatens to leave due to his unbearable behaviour, Higgins acknowledges her authority in the domestic sphere in a way he denies younger women. This is evident when, after being scolded by her not to "walk over everybody", the stage directions note that Higgins "subsides", implicitly accepting her instructions (Shaw, 1975: 692).

Shaw's reproduction of this Victorian cliché—respect for the matriarch, disdain for the marriageable girl—can be accounted for by the genre of social comedy, but another plausible explanation lies in the writer's biography. Shaw's admiration for his mother clearly conditioned his love affairs. Traditionally, critics like Ward (1975: 486) have highlighted that Shaw was "resistant to emotional entanglements". However, recent biographers including Gibbs (2006: 225) challenge this view, portraying Shaw as capable of being "rapturously and dangerously in love"—for instance, with the actress Stella Campbell and with Charlotte Payne-Townshend—suggesting that his restraint often stemmed from a conscious struggle rather than indifference.

This internal conflict helps explain Shaw's ambivalent stance towards feminism. As Peters (1996, 1998) argues, his philosophy required the sublimation of biological impulses in favour of intellectual purpose, leading him to defend women's legal and social independence while simultaneously fearing their sexual power. This aligns with the Oedipal paradigm posited by Freud (2010[1899]), where the son must emancipate himself from his mother to become mature and independent—something that both Shaw and Higgins fail to achieve. Following this implication, Higgins's respect for older women and his refusal to fall in love suggest that the character is, at least partially, a self-portrayal of the author. In addition, Higgins's emotional detachment and his authoritarian yet absent parenting style towards Eliza may also reflect Shaw's relationship with his own father, George Carr Shaw, creating a double Oedipal bind.

Shaw refused to follow the "art for art's sake" philosophy and insisted that "the theater had a sacred trust to engage, convert, and empower thoughtful people to correct the social, economic, and political injustices they should see around them" (Hadfield & Reynolds, 2013: 12). Considering that—according to Shaw (1960)—drama's main function was to address moral issues, Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins serve as examples of how women could wield significant influence in the oppressive context of their society by questioning the attitudes of men in the house. Despite her lower social position, Mrs Pearce reprimands her master because she is aware of the deep respect he holds for her. Class does not seem to be a decisive factor when determining Higgins's admiration for women. While he is deeply concerned with his professional reputation, he cares little for empty social prestige. In fact,

Higgins uses Eliza to reinforce his status as a scientist, not as a socialite. The professor wishes her to convey a favourable impression to validate his skills, yet he paradoxically despises the very society he tries to impress. As pointed out in Act IV, Higgins does not seek social approval from his peers; on the contrary, he complains to Pickering that "the silly people dont know their own silly business" (Shaw, 1975: 782), revealing his impatience with what he considers an incompetent elite. Therefore, Higgins is willing to mingle with the lower classes in Covent Garden (Act I) for research purposes, but demands perfection from Eliza in public solely to secure his triumph as a phonetician.

## 2. SHAW'S VISION OF WOMEN

Before analysing *Pygmalion*'s secondary characters from a gender perspective, it is necessary to consider the writer's views on women. Bernard Shaw was an early and vigorous exponent of gender equality (Weintraub, 1977: 156), and his ideas were strongly influenced by John Stuart Mill. As Greiner (1975: 10) notes, Shaw engaged with *The Subjection of Women* (Mill, 1869) early in his career while attending meetings of the Zetetical Society, where he encountered the thesis that "woman's nature" was a social construction rather than a biological given. Mill (1869: 38-39) argued that women's inferior position was not natural but was the result of political oppression by men: "What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others".

Following this line, Shaw saw women as individuals who should be granted rights and power equal to men. He thought that women both desired and required the freedom to pursue their ambitions and passions, a conviction articulated in "The Womanly Woman"[3]: "Now of all the idealist abominations that make society pestiferous I doubt if there be any so mean as that of forcing self-sacrifice on a woman under the pretense that she likes it; and, if she ventures to contradict the pretense,

[3] "The Womanly Woman" was published in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, in which Shaw defended the right of women to be egocentric and declared that the Womanly Woman must repudiate "her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself" (Shaw, 1891: 44).

declaring her no true woman" (Shaw, 1891: 55). In *Pygmalion*, this call to fight for autonomy is not only embodied by Eliza but also echoed by Mrs Pearce, Mrs Higgins and Clara. Mrs Pearce's insistence on moral integrity and independence within the household, Mrs Higgins's intellectual guidance, and Clara's frustrated attempts at rebellion illustrate, from distinct social positions, the complex ways in which women negotiate power.

Shaw located the roots of women's inequality in the institutions and prejudices of early twentieth-century society. His feminist ideas flourished within the Fabian Society, which he joined in 1884, a gradualist socialist organisation committed to political equality (Peters, 1998: 8). Fabians are mostly known for their theories of social democracy and democratic socialism, but they also contributed to feminist theory. In fact, The Fabian Society comprised a high proportion of women members, who promoted political alliances across socialism and feminism and brought questions of women's emancipation. In 1908, Fabian feminists created a Women's Group to address issues such as civic equality, welfare for mothers, work opportunities for women and women's suffrage (Beals, 1989: iii).

Shaw has generally been considered a progressive thinker who supported equality between men and women, but literary criticism has pointed out his contradictory attitudes towards feminism (Hadfield & Reynolds, 2013: 8). In this respect, Powell (1998: 77) suggests that he was ambiguous towards the "New Woman", that is, the woman who was free-spirited, independent, educated, and uninterested in marriage and children. The New Woman is a concept with a complex history and was partially influenced by Shaw's ideas about "The Womanly Woman" and his feminist views gathered in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891).

Shortly after the publication of his book, the novelist S. Grand (1894) coined the term "New Woman" to describe women who rejected the idea that "Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere" and aimed for paid employment. The New Woman threatened Victorian ideals of femininity by "challenging the institution of marriage and blurring the borders of the sexes" (Showalter, 1992: 169). Conservative sectors of Victorian society, including religious authorities, opposed this figure, perceiving her as a threat to social order and moral values. As Cummings (2009: 6) notes, the

term was often used pejoratively to stigmatise sexual autonomy and non-normative femininity.

Shaw's relationship with the New Woman in the professional sphere was similarly complex. Powell (1998: 87) contends that Shaw felt uneasy when women started to intrude on his field, the theatre, suggesting a protective attitude over his domain. While Shaw explicitly mocked the prejudice against female playwrights in works like *Fanny's First Play* (1911), Powell contends that, on a deeper level, Shaw struggled to accept women as equal creators of drama, preferring to cast them as actresses rather than rival playwrights. This tension illustrates how even progressive thinkers could respond to the New Woman with mixed feelings.

The ambivalence of Shaw's conception of women is also present in his representations of female characters. It is generally agreed that the writer introduced a new model of women in literature; Bellow Watson (1972[1964]: 17) considers that he moved away from the conventional prototype of "The Angel in the House" by creating female characters who were domineering, clever, sensible, good-humoured, sexually aggressive and, in short, "unladylike". Other scholars, as Adams (1974: 17), contend that Shaw's drama remains rooted in traditional archetypes—temptress, goddess or mother—and that even "when he creates a woman who has broken out of a traditional 'female' role, he tends to draw on another literary type—the 'emancipated' woman". Adams suggests that Shaw deals with clichés and stereotypes about women, albeit updated ones. However, Morgan (1972: 340) nuances this, arguing that Shaw manages his "unease with women" by objectifying them into "mythic creations". Rather than mere stereotypes, his characters operate within a "tragi-comic" framework that exposes gender tensions as structural rather than individual problems.

More recent criticism supports this reassessment. McNamara (2023: 131) argues that Shaw deliberately employs gender constructs in order to expose and dismantle them, revealing how femininity is shaped by patriarchal discourse. Moreover, for Shaw, feminism was never an isolated struggle: "it is not only a gender issue but a class issue within gender" (McNamara, 2023: 132). This perspective broadens the concept of the New Woman beyond the middle-class intellectual to include

working-class forms of resistance. Consequently, there is a need to re-examine Shaw's female characters, as they might not merely reflect traditional roles, but rather expose the mechanisms of their construction.

## 3. The Eynsford Hill Family

Mrs Eynsford Hill and her daughter Clara are relatively flat characters who embody conventions of femininity associated with their social position, that of "genteel poverty". They function as a counterpoint to more complex female figures in the play. In contrast to Eliza, they are clean, well dressed and socially respectable, despite the family's financial decline revealed in Act III. Their downward social trajectory contrasts sharply with Eliza's upward mobility, which, although initially superficial, is driven by agency and ambition.

Higgins's dismissive attitude towards the Eynsford Hills is not rooted in their economic status but in his disdain for polite society. As he repeatedly mocks fashionable conversation—referring to "a damned fool of a fashionable woman" (Shaw, 1975: 746)—his behaviour aligns with Mugglestone's (1993: 384) observation that Higgins, "intolerant and ultimately oblivious of social conventions, treats all duchesses as flower-girls". His detachment from Eliza and Clara thus stems less from social anxiety than from a profound rejection of intimacy.

Miss and Mrs Eynsford Hill are the first characters to appear on stage, immediately conveying ineptitude through their complaints about the weather and their reliance on Freddy to secure a cab. In contrast, Eliza manages to find a car on her own and, furthermore, she is economically independent, intending to pay for her classes with Higgins. While Eliza is a self-sufficient woman, the Eynsford Hill women delegate practical matters to male authority, reinforcing their dependence.

Finally, Freddy's failure to fulfil the role of family protector further destabilises conventional gender expectations. Although he claims to have tried everything to find a taxi, when he finally succeeds in obtaining one, it is too late. Clara's public insult—calling him a "selfish pig" (Shaw, 1975: 670)—goes uncontested, highlighting his insecurity and passivity.

In a society where masculinity was associated with authority and decisiveness, Freddy's submission is striking.

Victorian and Edwardian culture promoted a dominant ideal of masculinity that, as Connell (1995: 45) observes, continues to circulate in modern culture through notions such as the "real man", "natural man", or "the deep masculine". A decade later, Connell & Messerschmidt (2005: 846) reformulated the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" emphasising its historical variability, which "call[s] forth new strategies in gender relations". In order to gain insight into this widespread image of masculinity, Gilmore (1990) conducted a cross-cultural study in which he analysed this concept all over the world and identified three recurring imperatives of manhood: to protect, to procreate and to provide. Freddy fails these expectations: he cannot protect his family, lacks economic prospects, and shows no initiative to form a household.

In patriarchal logic, men are expected to make decisions in order to enhance the security of their dependents, namely women and children, who occupy a position of subordination and obedience. However, Freddy is the one who receives orders from women and, furthermore, he is incapable of following them. By portraying Freddy as an emasculated figure, Shaw challenges hegemonic masculinity and proposes a more plural understanding of gender identity. His drama suggests that just as femininity exceeds the boundaries of the "womanly woman", masculinity cannot be reduced to the "manly man". Similar challenges to gender norms appear elsewhere in Shaw's work, including Vivie Warren in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, who is a paradigmatic example of the New Woman, and male figures such as Bentley Summerhayes (*Misalliance*, 1910) and Charteris (*The Philanderer*, 1893), who subvert Victorian ideals through independence, unemployment or emotional sensitivity.

When Freddy exits the stage in the first scene, he collides with the flower girl in Covent Garden and ruins some of her flowers, which makes Eliza lose her temper: "Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah" (Shaw, 1975: 670). Eliza uses a popular mode of expression among lower classes that consists in randomly using a proper name to refer to a stranger. Nevertheless, Mrs Eynsford Hill, who does not share her linguistic code, interprets her words literally and believes she knows her son. At this point, Freddy's mother gives Eliza some coins to learn how she met her

son, since she suspects that Eliza might be a prostitute. Apart from being mistrustful, Mrs Eynsford Hill is depicted as self-interested and opportunist: she simulates wanting to help others when, indeed, she only cares for herself. Clara's portrayal is also not very positive, as she looks selfish and greedy because she tries to stop her mother from giving money to the flower girl. What is more, Clara dares to oppose Mrs Eynsford Hill's decision and talks back to her—"Do nothing of the sort, mother. The idea!" (Shaw, 1975: 671)—, which shows no respect towards older people.

Up to this point, it might seem that Clara is a transgressor with a strong character, unwilling to submit to the socially perceived superiority of her brother (for being a man) or her mother (for being older). Clara is not as confident as one might first think; she suffers from a considerable lack of personality, which leads her to imitate the peculiar way Eliza speaks (mixing vulgar phrases with refined expressions). Clara is not aware of the low origins of the young woman she admires, and assumes Eliza is rich and well-known:

> CLARA [all smiles] I will. Good-bye. Such nonsense, all this early Victorian prudery!
>
> HIGGINS [tempting her] Such damned nonsense!
>
> CLARA Such bloody nonsense! (Shaw, 1975: 731).

Through this scene, Shaw exposes the artificiality of social distinctions. As Mugglestone (1993: 379) observes, Higgins has succeeded in creating a new social identity for Eliza, "bridging the 'gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul' by an exercise in phonetics". However, the scene also highlights a comic paradox: Clara is so captivated by the surface markers of prestige that she mistakes Eliza's linguistic errors for the height of fashion, proving that social acceptability often relies more on perception than on substance. In this sense, the mother is shown from a slightly better angle, since she seems to have solid principles, and she is not willing to imitate a trend that contradicts her beliefs: "I daresay I am very old-fashioned; but I do hope you won't begin using that expression, Clara" (Shaw, 1975: 731).

Finally, Clara is presented as the antithesis of Eliza in terms of matrimonial matters. Clara might accept a marriage of convenience (a popular trend during the Victorian period), whereas Eliza would never consent to it. Clara barely knows the professor and, yet, as the following stage direction shows, she considers Higgins a suitable husband: "Miss Eynsford Hill [who considers Higgins quite eligible matrimonially]" (Shaw, 1975: 726). Clara is motivated by greed and, although she may not love the professor, she certainly loves all she could do with his capital. Conversely, adhering to Shaw's intent, Eliza never considers marrying a man old enough to be her father. Instead, she declares she would marry Freddy "as soon as I'm able to support him" (Shaw, 1975: 780). However, this choice must be understood within the context of the era's limitations. As Dolgin (2017: 127, 132) notes, Shaw engages with the discourse of Cicely Hamilton's *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), exposing the contradiction of marriage as a woman's only allowed "career". Dolgin argues that women like Clara were trained from girlhood merely to be "pleasers" rather than to develop their own abilities. Consequently, Clara embodies Hamilton's (1909: 8) observation that a woman "frequently obtains a husband only in order to support life". Unlike Eliza, who seeks independence to define herself, Clara is trapped in this "trade", having been socially conditioned to suppress her individuality in exchange for economic survival.

Considering Clara's interventions, she is portrayed as a shallow person of feeble morality: she does not show any respect for the members of her family, she does not have a defined personality, and she always tries to take advantage of the wealthy while refusing to help those in need. Mrs Eynsford Hill is also greedy and egocentric, but she holds to her principles and is respectful. Shaw contrasts these upper-class women with others in the play: Clara parallels Eliza, while Mrs Eynsford Hill is closer in age to Mrs Pearce. Eliza and Mrs Pearce come from a lower class, though they are depicted in a more positive light than Clara and Mrs Eynsford Hill because of their autonomy, sincerity and kindness. The playwright may exaggerate the negative traits of Clara and her mother as a strategy to reinforce the positive qualities of their female companions in the play. By including the negative characterisation of these women, Shaw escapes from a simplistic and Manichean representation of gender, as he depicts all sorts of women.

## 4. Mrs Pearce

Mrs Pearce is Henry Higgins's housekeeper and, like Pickering and Mrs Higgins, she incarnates the voice of reason. She also acts as a surrogate mother not only to Eliza but to the professor himself, constantly correcting his childish impulses and bad manners. The figure of the housekeeper is particularly complex because she acts as an angel in a house, but is paid to work in a space which is not hers. She represents the stock character of "the irreverent servant" wiser than the master, a character archetype that goes back to Greek plays. The housekeeper shares Eliza's humble origins and perspective, which drives her to defend the young woman. Recognizing that the professor often loses his mind when immersed in his projects, Mr Pearce and Mrs Higgins strive to keep him grounded, sharing a vital concern for protecting Eliza from his outlandish ideas.

Victorian society considered that women's appropriate place was the domestic space. The home established a relationship of subordination in connection to the public space: "the home was 'other', a narrow and colonised female space that existed in opposition to and in support of the master space, that place outside the home where the business of making a living took place" (Dickerson, 1995: xiv). The home embodied a dichotomy: men owned the domestic space, while women were responsible for maintaining it. Being a housekeeper, it is natural that Mrs Pearce might feel empowered in the domestic environment, and she even dares to criticise her master's questionable manners: "I ask you not to come down to breakfast in your dressing-gown, or at any rate not to use it as a napkin to the extent you do, sir […],it would be a better example to the girl" (Shaw, 1975: 704).

At first, Mrs Pearce is rude to Eliza and seems to disapprove of her entrance into the house. She talks to the newcomer disdainfully and abuses her privileged situation in the context, given that she knows the professor better: "Nonsense, girl! what do you think a gentleman like Mr Higgins cares what you came in?". Mrs Pearce's attitude towards Eliza quickly shifts from detached observation to explicit protection. She openly challenges Higgins's authority and criticises his abusive behaviour, reminding him that he "cant walk over everybody like this".

Her intervention culminates in a direct moral reversal, when she stops him and declares: "It's you that are wicked" (Shaw, 1975: 687, 692, 694).

Similarly, Mrs Pearce does not allow Eliza to talk rudely to the professor and tries to educate her. When Liza talks back to the professor (Shaw, 1975: 731)—"Oh, dont be silly"—, Mrs Pearce replies: "You mustn't speak to the gentleman like that". Later, the housekeeper insists on the appropriate mannerism of Eliza: "Dont answer back, girl". The same applies to the professor, as Mrs Pearce scolds him for swearing in the house: "you really must not swear before the girl" (Shaw, 1975: 689, 698, 703). The housekeeper insists on good manners from everybody and she does not show any favouritism for any of the protagonists.

In short, Mrs Pearce is a principled woman who, through her organization and impartiality, acts as a voice of reason that maintains domestic peace and ensures everyone is treated with respect. Mrs Pearce has even gained the professor's respect; Higgins is not really offended by her reprimands, even when she criticises him in front of professor Pickering. Mrs Pearce's attitude parallels Clara's in their shared defiance of social superiors: while Clara challenges her mother and brother, Mrs Pearce confronts her master. However, whereas Clara's defiance is rude and self-interested, Mrs Pearce's interventions are guided by concern for the common good and expressed with respect. This might signal Shaw's belief that women's positive traits cannot be linked to class: Mrs Pearce is a powerful woman in spite of her origins because she contributes to the improvement of her microsociety, even if that means confronting others.

This character suggests that a woman will not become stronger or better by fighting and rebelling continuously, but by interceding when there is a worthy cause in need. Mrs Pearce functions as a domestic embodiment of Fabianism: mirroring the strategy of "gradualism" —achieving reform through steady pressure rather than revolution—she manages Higgins via persistent correction (Levenson, Lodge & Rosen, 2004). Furthermore, her defence of Eliza reflects the Fabian commitment to "greater equality of power, wealth and opportunity", elevating her role from mere housekeeper to an agent of social equity.

## 5. MRS HIGGINS

Mrs Higgins, Henry's mother, is an intelligent and independent woman who, despite her advanced age, articulates progressive ideas that resonate with the feminist thought of her time. While her initial remarks about marriage (Shaw, 1975: 722) might suggest a conservative stance, her critique of Eliza's training aligns with the legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft (1792) argued that women's education should cultivate reason and independence rather than merely teaching them to be pleasing to men. Mrs Higgins voices this concern when she scolds the men for their superficial experiment, accusing them of playing with a "live doll" (Shaw, 1975: 734) and, hence, exposing the danger of an education focused on performance rather than autonomy. Moreover, Mrs Higgins embodies the liberal feminism of J. S. Mill (1869), recognising that female subordination is social rather than natural. She fiercely defends women as autonomous agents, not male property, a stance evidenced in Act V when she rebukes Henry for treating Eliza like "a lost umbrella" (Shaw, 1975: 758). Through this metaphor, she rejects objectification and asserts Eliza's status as an independent citizen, bridging Enlightenment rationalism with the political consciousness of the suffragette era.

Like Mrs Pearce, Mrs Higgins sympathises with Eliza and worries for her destiny. After meeting Eliza at the party in her house, Mrs Higgins realises that she will not be able to find an adequate position within the society of her time. Although she appreciates the value of her son's linguistic experiment, she is certain that Eliza's transformation will be of little help to the girl when trying to find a better future: "the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards" (Shaw, 1975: 737).

Mrs Higgins knows that learning the mannerisms and etiquette of middle class will not enable Eliza to find a suitable job. She compares Eliza with Clara who, in spite of belonging to the upper class, suffers from economic difficulties and does not have any income. Consequently, what the professor considers an "advantage" (that is, being able to speak as a polite lady) is not as useful as he might believe: "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!" (Shaw, 1975: 737). In this way, Mrs Higgins becomes

a voice of realism within the play—one that critiques the illusion that class performance can replace structural change. Her perspective underlines the performative limits of gender and class roles, which is precisely what makes her so vital to a feminist reading of *Pygmalion*.

In the epilogue, Shaw characterises Mrs Higgins as an "ideal mother", noting that "remarkable mothers are uncommon" (Shaw, 1975: 784). This insurmountable standard leads Higgins to channel his passion into intellectual pursuits rather than younger women who cannot compete with her. Consequently, Mrs Higgins is widely viewed as an idealised portrait of Shaw's mother, Lucinda Elizabeth (Bessie). May (1985: 185) argues that the author's high maternal regard rendered "romantic entanglements [...] impossible", explaining Shaw's preference for older women and avoidance of traditional courtship. This biographical fixation is mirrored in Shaw's 1911 confession of dreaming of his mother as a "wife" (Shaw, 1985: 17)—a link reinforced by his affair with Bessie's close friend, Mrs Patterson. This preference is reflected in Higgins's declaration: "Oh, I can't be bothered with young women. My idea of a loveable woman is something as like you as possible" (Shaw, 1975: 722).

By positioning Mrs Higgins as an emotional anchor, Shaw inscribes a personal narrative about gender, intellect, and idealised femininity that blends biography with fiction. Nevertheless, reducing Shaw's relationships to a purely maternal fixation risks oversimplification, and the assumption that he was only drawn to older women overlooks biographical evidence to the contrary—most notably, the fact that his wife, Charlotte Payne-Townshend, was one year his junior. Married at the age of forty-two, Shaw maintained with Charlotte a respectful and companionate union, based on intellectual affinity and shared ideals.

Mrs Higgins is, arguably, the most balanced character in the play and becomes a crucial guide for Eliza, who feels supported and respected by this discerning matriarch. Consequently, when Eliza turns to Mrs Higgins for comfort after being devastated by the professor's behaviour in the fifth act, she finds an ally who explicitly defends her right to freedom, asserting: "The girl has a perfect right to leave if she chooses" (Shaw, 1975: 758). Acting as the voice of reason, Mrs Higgins advocates for Eliza's independence and agency, sharply criticising Henry and

Pickering for not treating her as an autonomous woman capable of making her own decisions.

Berst (1973: 213) describes Mrs Higgins as "the ideal of candor, good manners, sophistication, and kindliness". She is powerful, well-balanced, witty, and beloved by everyone. Indeed, she is the most requested person in case someone needs support and guidance: middle-class citizens turn to her house to make connections, Eliza resorts to her when she feels desperate and needs some advice, and her son depends upon her for his daily routine. She is the most indispensable woman of the play and gathers the best traits of each female character: she is wise and experienced as Mrs Pearce, she is autonomous and decisive as Eliza, and she is a better motherly figure than Mrs Eynsford Hill, as she knows how to put her son in his place.

## 6. Conclusions

Pygmalion presents a wide range of female characters whose diversity reveals the complexity of Shaw's vision of women. While Eliza has rightly attracted critical attention, focusing exclusively on her obscures the significance of secondary characters, who illuminate alternative forms of agency, dependence, and resistance. Clara and her mother become the counterpoint of Eliza and of the two wise, powerful, and emancipated older women (Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins). These female characters are depicted as the prototypical dependent women unable to live without a man to take care of them: firstly, because they do not have a salary and, secondly, because they fail to support themselves in basic daily needs. The husband of Mrs Eynsford Hill is never mentioned, and the erased figure of the family man is substituted by Freddy (though he appears to be as inept as his relations).

Although representing the prototype of the traditional woman, Clara is not depicted as sweet and subordinate: she verbally abuses her brother and does not perform expected feminine behaviour and speech manners. The contrary can be said of her brother: Freddy might not be the prototype of a manly man but, as his manners are polite and he is agreeable, women pay attention to him. Indeed, Eliza considers marrying him (Shaw, 1975: 780), because she finds him attractive and considerate.

Freddy is the opposite of Higgins regarding romanticism: he is a loving suitor and writes letters to Eliza almost every day.

Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins are two powerful and positive prototypes of women who emerge as role models for Eliza. The young woman changes over the course of the play, finding in these female mentors the strength to be confident and self-reliant. Mrs Pearce teaches her that everyone should and can be well-spoken, and that gentility and politeness must not be linked to gender. From Mrs Higgins, she learns that she has the right to exercise her liberty without subordinating herself to the professor. Probably because of their age (and lack of interest in competing for a husband), Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins embody sisterhood, a feminist concept understood as solidarity among women. They care for other women and try to help vulnerable female characters, such as Eliza, to feel secure. Their attitude differs strikingly from Clara's, who is unwilling to help anyone. Following Victorian conventions, Clara prioritizes finding a husband, a pursuit that leads her to regard Eliza as a competitor she is too selfish to assist.

All in all, *Pygmalion* explores the tension between traditional gender roles and their subversion. Whereas Clara's rebellion proves largely ineffective, Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins achieve authority through moral consistency and intellectual independence. Their portrayals suggest that women's influence need not rely on overt defiance, but can also emerge through sustained ethical and social engagement. Although Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins do not strictly fit the New Woman archetype, they offer an evolution from the traditional prototype of Victorian womanhood. It might seem ironic that the older rather than the younger characters seem more advanced from a feminist perspective but, taking into account Shaw's fascination with his mother, it is not surprising that he depicts the older women as better able to emancipate themselves from social constrictions. Bessie defied social norms in 1873 by leaving her husband to follow the music teacher and partner, George John Lee, to London (Holroyd, 1990: 24-25). This autobiographical influence may explain why older characters in the play prioritise personal freedom.

This autonomy highlights, by contrast, the stagnation of the Eynsford Hills, who embody the traditional subordinate woman dependent on men. Among the younger generation, Clara remains trapped by social

expectations, serving merely as a static counterpoint to Eliza's eventual self-determination and autonomy (Reynolds, 2022: 6). Ultimately, the secondary characters illustrate the shifting roles of women: from the traditional dependence of the Eynsford Hills to the autonomy of Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins. Finally, Shaw also explores alternative forms of masculinity through Freddy: although he is neither a hero nor a genius, he earns the appreciation of Eliza and Mrs Higgins.

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