The Problem With "Afterwards" Transformation and the Female Pupil in *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*

Melita Quinonez, Black Hills State University, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

George Bernard Shaw found the topic of transformation a pertinent theme in *Pygmalion*, especially the message of a female's transformation at the hands of a superior male figure. The play raises numerous questions from an Intersectional Feminism and Identity Politics lens regarding the treatment of value in relation to humans across different social standings and male-female relationships. As well as the confusion such transformations cause, leading to the bewildering thought of, "What's to become of me?" The issues of identity crisis and the intrinsic value of a person are explored as we look closer at Shaw's characters struggling with the problem of "afterwards."

Keywords: *Pygmalion*, afterwards, identity

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The International Academic Forum
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Introduction

George Bernard Shaw most certainly found the theme of transformation worthy of ink when he wrote his 1912 play *Pygmalion*. The musical adaptation, *My Fair Lady,* draws its viewers into the most beautiful world of imagination, where the ideas of identity and transformation are not yet fixed or decided outcomes.

Few comparisons existed between classes and genders to form bonds, except for one very real and very true human experience: struggle and the search for identity.

Some people spend their whole lives trying to gain entry into doors locked to them, demanding answers to all the closed doors with labels above them that announce they are not allowed to enter. In the story of *Pygmalion,* we see Professor Higgins dangling a key in front of Eliza to a world she never imagined was accessible.

There is a moment toward the beginning of Act three, where Shaw cannot leave that suspense alone any longer, and through the voice of Professor Higgins' mother, she eloquently chides her arrogant son and his companion with,

"No, you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards" (Shaw, 1912/2010).

Pygmalion is the familiar trope of a female's much-needed transformation at the hands of a superior male figure. Professor of linguistics, Henry Higgins, makes a boastful claim to his colleague Colonel Pickering that he could pass off a common flower girl from the lower class as a Dutchess at the Embassy Ball by giving her elocution lessons. Eliza Doolittle, the common flower girl he was using as an example, then shows up at the Higgins residence the next day and asks the professor for lessons in exchange for her small but hard-earned wages so she can get a job selling flowers in a shop rather than on the corner. Instead of accepting her money, he takes on the challenge that the lower-class identifier, her cockney dialect, presents, and reestablishes the claim he previously made to Colonel Pickering by betting that with his training, he could pass her off as a Lady at the Ball.

Looking at this play through a socio-political and feminist perspective, one of the more pressing questions of the story becomes, if the transformation succeeds, to whom should the praise be attributed? As well as the often-overlooked problem of creating a new identity and the fallout and confusion that leads the transformed to wonder, "What's to become of me?" (Shaw, 1912/2010).

These themes of identity, transformation, and class barriers are crucial conversations of Intersectional Feminism and Identity Politics that argue the problem with "afterwards."

Narratives about transformation exist in every story in some form or another; in fact, most critics find the compelling themes of change, identity, and meaning a primary focus of literary criticism. Viktor E. Frankl said in his book "Man's Search for Meaning" that "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl, 1946).

In *My Fair Lady*, the very first song that Liza sings is a dream-like imagining of what it would be like to extend her class barriers. The song, "Wouldn't it be Loverly," is simple in its requests, naming what most people consider essentials, not pleasures.

All I want is a room somewhere,
Far away from the cold night air.
With one enormous chair,
Aow, wouldn't it be loverly?
Lots of choc'lates for me to eat,
Lots of coal makin' lots of 'eat.
Warm face, warm 'ands, warm feet,
Aow, wouldn't it be loverly? (Lerner et al., 1971)

The industrial revolution devoured the lower class; food, water, and a warm place to rest were luxuries for those who kept the upper class in comfort. Frederick Engels, in his work, "The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844," wrote controversially of the hardships of the Industrial Revolution in what today would seem like reasonable demands.

"The simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc." (Engels, 2017).

One unfair bias that was lingering in European society was that hard work was often seen as a punishment for crimes, or an admission of lower-class citizens, rather than seeing it as an instrument for class elevation or transformation.

During the Industrial Revolution, society was exploitative and did not acknowledge hard work as transformative, but as a means to an end. In a society like that, people were not only discouraged from becoming more, but they were treated as criminals should they try to challenge the assigned status of their unfortunate birthright. This highlights the massive risk Liza would face if she were discovered to be a fake at the Embassy Ball. The risk for Higgins, if he didn't win the bet, would be a slap on the wrist, perhaps a blow to his pride, but for Liza, it could mean prison or even death. Not only was the lower class undervalued, but the judgment of punishment was entirely biased to presume guilt based upon birth. Where failure in this venture would be a severe way in which to see the imbalance of fairness, we also see imbalances if this experiment were to succeed. For Liza, success would be to elevate herself enough to sell flowers and work in an indoor shop rather than in "the cold night air"; success for Higgins was based not in the selflessness of educating someone in need but rather in accomplishing deception. This leads to the question of what success is defined by. Perhaps Shaw looked toward a future where people could trust in the words of Orison Swett Marden, who said in *An Iron Will*, "Success is not measured by what you accomplish, but by the opposition you have encountered, and the courage with which you have maintained the struggle against overwhelming odds" (Marden, 2025).

Compounded Problems

In reviewing the play, through an early, more traditional form of Feminism, some critics write a scathing review about the misogynistic ideas and outdated constructs of feminine roles. An interesting point that needs mentioning here is that with the passing of nearly one hundred years since the writing of this play, male-female relationships are not the only dynamic that this culture was experiencing a significant prejudice with, it is easy enough to compare the modern class struggle with our own but that would be a considerable misunderstanding of what we experience more as an irritating bias to the experiences of class that Shaw is describing with an outright unfairness that often led to a life or death situation.

Considering the struggles Liza would encounter, both in class and in gender bias, it is important to note that Shaw's leading lady represented two overlapping groups in need of activism. This overlapping form of Feminism and Political criticism that best captures Shaw's intentions is a branch called Intersectional Feminism. Kimberle Crenshaw, a leading feminist in this movement, said in an interview with Time magazine, "All inequality is not created equal; an intersectional approach shows the way that people's social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination" (Crenshaw & UN Women, 2025).

Through this collaborative form of feminism and identity politics, the ideas of discrimination and class barriers seen in *Pygmalion* are significant examples of the compounded struggle that women of the lower class represented. We see a variety of progressive ideas lurking or lacking when we delve into the characters Shaw created.

Character Perspectives

Mrs. Pierce, the housekeeper, is an example of a person who, for proprietary reasons, insists the Professor concerns himself more carefully where his association with Liza is concerned, but is also somewhat motherly to the girl as well. Her role as Housekeeper is more than a profession; she represents the role of mother that Liza never had.

In contrast, Professor Higgins consistently discriminated against Liza's birth status and sex, but also imposed judgment of a more personal nature, the kind that deprives a person of dignity and decency; the kind that assumes one's station of poverty as a predisposition to criminal behavior.

> HIGGINS: Oh, pay her whatever is necessary: put it down in the housekeeping book. What on earth will she want with money? She'll have her food and her clothes. She'll only drink if you give her money.
>
> LIZA: Oh, you are a brute. It's a lie: nobody ever saw the sign of liquor on me.
>
> PICKERING: Does it occur to you, Higgins, that the girl has some feelings?
>
> HIGGINS: Oh no, I don't think so. Not any feelings that we need bother about. Have you, Eliza?
>
> LIZA: I got my feelings same as anyone else. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

Mrs. Higgins, the Professor's mother. Is a woman who has concluded what the reality of the situation is for the girl, a reality of what the upper class would demand and expect of Liza.

> MRS. HIGGINS: You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll.
>
> HIGGINS: Playing! The hardest job I ever tackled: make no mistake about that, mother. But you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

Mrs. Higgins has sympathies, but she misses a fundamental understanding of the idea that Liza's struggle and her working-class upbringing could account for some portion of what Mrs.

Higgins attributes to the female constitution. Although she supports the truth that men of her time often underestimated women's abilities, she could not see that Liza's struggle due to her lower class was an asset in her achievement of becoming a lady.

Liza worked tirelessly to change her station through rigorous lessons from a strict teacher. In *My Fair Lady* The song showing Liza's transformation is towards the end of the story, when Liza has her moment of equality, and as an equal attempts to square off with Professor Higgins and sings "Without You," where she claims her identity apart from him. The delightful juxtaposition is that now that she is at the end of her need for his teaching, she has won his bet and can cash in her reward, her independence; there is no more need for Higgins, and this is where the role of tutor cannot fill the same dynamic of an intimate relationship. This interesting shift of identity crisis is where we see the professor finally be somewhat vulnerable in his Jekyll and Hyde song of "I've grown Accustomed to Her Face" where one minute he is cursing loudly that he does not need her and the next singing poetically of the niceties of having a woman in his life, which incidentally was in complete juxtaposition of his first song "I'm an ordinary Man" where he had proudly proclaimed "I will never let a woman in my life" (Lerner et al., 1971).

How Higgins treats Liza is a strange combination of irony, humor and prejudices that parallels what Lynda Mugglestone says, in her journal, "Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in *Pygmalion*" about how Shaw's upbringing in upper class society and his eventual turning to socialism set a tone in his work, "in the writing of *Pygmalion*, and in his treatment of social illusion and social reality Shaw produces a text which combines the seemingly divergent spheres of socialist parable and social comedy of manners" (Mugglestone, 1993).

Shaw's characters share similar conflicts within themselves and the world around them. This conflict is seen explicitly in Higgins and is aggressively displayed toward the end of the play. In the book "East of Eden" by John Steinbeck, some of Higgins' struggle is with coming to terms with his approach to relationships, "When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved, his life must be a failure to him and his dying a cold horror." (Steinbeck, 1952, 1952). This conflict creates the question of whether Liza's finding identity outside of Higgins and her leaving was a sort of death for Higgins? Or one could ask if her independence was progress, and if so, doesn't progress suggest that learning is still in session? When Liza proclaims her independence at the end of *Pygmalion*, Higgins is still fighting to keep his role alive.

Value vs. Identity

Likely, the reason Shaw's characters didn't factor in the momentum that transformation creates is that identity isn't a fixed outcome. Bettering oneself isn't a goal achieved and then cast off. Realistically, and as many teachers know from experience, dependence on one another shifts, and roles can develop into other unique manifestations. For a teacher, the student learning all that can be taught signals the end of one journey. What Higgins was unaware of was that Liza's independence signaled the end of their time, due not to the ending of his instruction, but instead due to his treating that relationship with contempt; he was, from the beginning, trying to solve her identity problem by assigning value to her through elocution. But her value was never a problem to be fixed.

Due to their conditioning, Shaw's characters could not have known anything other than a value system based on birthright, manners, and other such conditional attributes. What the upper class unwittingly gets right out of their arrogance over the war over birthright is that people should not have to prove worth or value; what they get wrong is that this applies to all people. The misconception of our judging human value ultimately ties into our identity. In Liza's case, when she started to see herself as a valuable person, worthy of being treated with respect, it was because Colonel Pickering didn't disqualify or devalue her identity as a lady, despite her lower-class background. Liza experienced a revelation of value, and as a result, her confidence in a ladylike identity blossomed.

Liza was hurt by the assumption that her becoming "a lady" was credited to a man teaching her, because a lady is not a doll or a toy, but a feeling person. For Liza, it was easy to give back what had been mirrored to her, and each gentleman, the respect they had given her. She acknowledged Higgins teaching her a practical skill. Yet, she praises Pickering for his kindness and attributes that kindness to what motivated her to see herself as the woman she always was and also was becoming.

> LIZA: [continuing] It was just like learning to dance in the fashionable way: there was nothing more than that in it. But do you know what began my real education?
>
> PICKERING: What?
>
> LIZA: [stopping her work for a moment] Your calling me Miss Doolittle that day when I first came to Wimpole Street. That was the beginning of self-respect for me. [She resumes her stitching]. And there were a hundred little things you never noticed, because they came naturally to you. Things about standing up and taking off your hat and opening doors—
>
> PICKERING: Oh, that was nothing.
>
> LIZA: Yes, things that showed you thought and felt about me as if I were something better than a scullery-maid; though of course I know you would have been just the same to a scullery-maid if she had been let in the drawing-room. You never took off your boots in the dining room when I was there.
>
> PICKERING: You mustn't mind that. Higgins takes off his boots all over the place.
>
> LIZA: I know. I am not blaming him. It is his way, isn't it? But it made such a difference to me that you didn't do it. You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

Conclusion

Higgins struggled to cope with her identity as an independent lady due to his devaluation of her and his false belief that identity, rather than value, is the foundational element. Value is fixed, where identity is something we already are and are also becoming. Identity is not fixed

because it is in unity with the idea of transformation. As Liza was already in the habit of becoming, of progressing and transforming, it was a deflating and frustrating experience at the end when everyone else thought it was all over. For her, it was difficult to imagine the goal accomplished because the goal had also transformed from survival and the small dreams of meeting her basic needs to the wide and lonely world of possibilities. She was angry that now she was on a progressive train that by worldly standards only went one direction, but had stopped in a station she was unaccustomed to, and now, the question she would struggle most sincerely with would be "what's to become of her."

Perhaps Mrs. Higgins was the one who had the right question all along.

> MRS. HIGGINS: Be quiet, Henry. Colonel Pickering: don't you realize that when Eliza walked into Wimpole Street, something walked in with her?
>
> PICKERING: Her father did. But Henry soon got rid of him.
>
> MRS. HIGGINS: It would have been more to the point if her mother had. But as her mother didn't, something else did.
>
> PICKERING: But what?
>
> MRS. HIGGINS: [unconsciously dating herself by the word] A problem.
>
> PICKERING: Oh, I see. The problem of how to pass her off as a lady.
>
> HIGGINS: I'll solve that problem. I've half solved it already.
>
> MRS. HIGGINS: No, you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

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