The Fairer Sex:
The Portrayal of Marginalized Women in Film and Literature

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Far too often in films and literature, women are subjugated and marginalized. This can be traced to Biblical times. Throughout history, women have been persecuted for their sexuality, the very sexuality that men display more openly, and more promiscuously. Women, who dared challenge this ideology, were often put to death or ostracized completely from society, while the men involved in the scandal were not even implicated at times. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The Scarlet Letter is a prime example of this double standard. Hester Prynne is branded an adulteress, while Reverend Dimmesdale is left alone. Granted, she willingly chose to hide his identity; it was she who was viewed as the instrument instigating the affair. She wasn’t allowed to give her side of the story, and chances are even if she had it would not have held as much weight as a man’s word. Women have had to work very hard to overcome the Puritan stereotype of witches, and the devil’s mistresses.

Film and literature have helped this process along slowly. However, there are many authors and filmmakers out there that still portray a very negative view of the feminine. Even the most seemingly innocent attacks on women add to the negative and overly sexual label women are assigned. Two examples of this can be found in the My Fair Lady (the play and film) and The Woman in Black (the play). The underlying theme in both of these stories stresses the silenced female voice and the Patriarchal ideology that strives to keep women under its tyrannical control and deny their desires and autonomy. The women who try and challenge
this ideology have historically and fictionally been either punished by death or vilified.

**My Fair Lady**

At first viewing *My Fair Lady*, the charming love story about a young woman who is able to penetrate the heart of a cynical man, seemingly empowers women. Henry Higgins, an opinionated linguistics professor and confirmed bachelor, makes a wager with a colleague that within six months he can transform a cockney flower seller, Eliza Doolittle, into a lady who can take her place in high society. He wins the bet, but doesn’t bargain for the profound effect she has on his life, uprooting his comfort zone, and the status quo predictability of his life. Transformed into a musical by Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner (1956), and films by Gabriel Pascal (1938) and George Cukor (1964), from George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*, this is a tale about much deeper issues than romance. George Bernard Shaw, the author of *Pygmalion* uses witty satire to get his point across. Some targets of his satire include misogyny, mockery of the upper class sensibilities, and of a patriarchal society. The following passage from Lynda Mugglestone’s essay entitled *Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in ‘Pygmalion*, captures a large component of this mockery:

“In a typically Shavian paradox, the manners on which *Pygmalion’s* comedy has primarily been based are themselves used to convey Shaw’s socialist convictions about the insubstantiality of class and its distinctions: Higgins, intolerant and ultimately oblivious of social conventions, treats all duchesses as flower-girls; Pickering, with the politeness which makes him address Eliza as ‘Miss Doolittle’ even in the beginning, treats all flower-girls as duchesses...the ‘real human needs’ and ‘worthy social structure’
which as Shaw has always been aware, continue to lie behind the superficialities of social disguise” (384).

Shaw’s inspiration for the play came from The Pygmalion Myth. This is an ancient Greek Myth about Pygmalion, King of Cyprus, who sculpts a female statue of extraordinary beauty with which he falls in love. Desperate and obsessed with the statue, he prays to the gods for intervention on his behalf. The goddess Aphrodite, answering his prayers, transforms the ivory into the flesh and blood Galatea and he marries his own creation. Higgins wants Eliza not because he loves her but rather because, he created her!!!!!! She is his work of art, his greatest accomplishment, his Galatea. She validates his status as a renowned and infamous Professor, unparalleled by any other. He is attracted to her not by her own attributes, but by those he has instilled in her. He has created the object of his own desire essentially. Narcissus fell in love with his own image reflected in a body of water, Pygmalion with his ivory statue, and Professor Henry Higgins with his human robot Eliza Doolittle. Thus, the underlying theme of both My Fair Lady the play and film, and Pygmalion the play (I would argue) is that social pressures force one to adopt a false facade and to become the ideal Other, while denying one’s true self and losing all sense of valid identity.

Shaw’s play Pygmalion, in its simplest form, is a Cinderella comedy with a socialist heart. As a young man in London in the late 1870s, Shaw’s passion for reforming language grew with his passion for reforming society. He was quoted in the preface to Pygmalion remarking that; “It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him”. In the early 1880s Shaw met Henry Sweet, a phonetician and grammarian, who wrote
the first scientific description of educated London speech or Received Pronunciation. Sweet became the basis for the character of Henry Higgins. Both Shaw and Sweet were aware, as Lynda Mugglestone points out, that phonetics, though still a 'new science,' was in fact potentially far more than the mere study of articulation and voice production, but rather had the potential for playing a larger social role” (377). Mugglestone goes onto to eloquently sum up Shavian ideology in the following passage from her brilliant essay:

“The *Pygmalion* myth is Shaw’s hands, predictably endowed with social meaning becomes therefore not only a paradigm of social mobility, but also a paean to inherent equality, with its thesis that ‘a lady is only a flower-girl plus six months phonetic training, a gentleman only a dustman with money.’ Eliza’s education in the behavioral norms of the English upper classes, and in the markers, and particularly the linguistic markers, of superior social status, is as a result used as a means of exploring not only the potential for individual advancement in an ‘age of upstarts,’ but also, and more importantly, the very foundations of social equality and inequality, and the values and value judgments, the perceptions of worth and status, which come in turn to surround them” (374).

This is a blatant criticism on society. Shaw is satirizing society’s acceptance of class and status by mere appearances. The fact that the upper classes cannot distinguish a common flower girl from a duchess because of her clothes and accent implies that they really know nothing about blue blood and lineage. Class distinction becomes metaphorically obsolete as the viewer is left to wonder how many imposters really exist. Shaw points out very shrewdly how easy it is to infiltrate the class divide with only practice and costume. By turning his *Pygmalion* into a professor of phonetics, he transformed the existing plot into a fable through which he could focus on some of his favorite targets (as mentioned earlier) such as English class, the inequality of English society, and
English snobbery. In addition to all of this Shaw is able to address his passion for reforming language. Shaw's criticism doesn't cease here however. It is not only language that is targeted, but also the accent one has in addition to language. Mugglestone addresses this phenomenon within the succeeding passage:

“The role of accent as a determiner not only of social status but also of social acceptability is thus in turn adopted as the major vehicle for Shaw's social critique in *Pygmalion*. Presented in terms of Eliza’s metamorphosis in the hands of the phonetician Henry Higgins, it reflects Shaw’s sensitivity not only to the way in which doors may be barred by details of language, but also and more fundamentally, to the way in which divisions of social inequality had come in turn to be mirrored by determinants of linguistic inequality, by systems of markers superficial in themselves but endowed with great and potentially divisive social significance” (373).

Anybody who has read the play, seen the stage performance, or watched the film can attest to the fact that Eliza and the Covent Garden set’s cockney accent is the recipient of many a hearty laugh in the plot line. The exaggerated vowels and guttural noises mark her and her class as ignorant and classless. Mugglestone bluntly explores this by stating that, "The cockney, throughout the nineteenth century is not only seen as a kind of social pariah, but also becomes a butt for all the linguistic sins of the age, a stereotype of every linguistic and particularly phonemic infelicity" (380). Just as Caliban curses his oppressor Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* when he states, “You taught me language, and my profit on’t is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language" (26), so does Eliza Doolittle curse Henry Higgins for teaching her his language, and transforming her into an image of herself she cannot recognize. She expresses all of this by angrily stating, “What’s to become
of me? What am I good for now? What have you left me with?” In psychoanalytic terminology, she has essentially become the “Other.” She cannot return to her life as a flower girl because she has transcended the class divide, and now stands on the opposite side. All she wanted was “a room somewhere, with one enormous chair,” and she got much more than she bargained for. For Eliza her new life wasn’t “as lovely” as she had fantasized it would be. She understands that by learning the language and etiquette of the upper class, she has lost her own identity and cannot “unlearn” what she now knows. She must accept her new identity and embrace a new way of life. Conversely, Professor Higgins cannot see that in his efforts to free Eliza from her class constraints, and move her up the social ladder; he has inadvertently imprisoned her deeper and subjugated her all the more in a role she is not willing to take on.

The issue of misogyny is also addressed in both the film and the play. The best example of this appears in the musical adaptation in which Henry Higgins sings one of the most famous songs of the film and musical ‘Why can't a woman be more like a man,’ which is essentially a charming depiction of misogyny. The lyrics insult women throughout by portraying them as overly jealous, illogical, and over-bearing, wanting only to trap men into marriage by dominating the relationship. Higgins makes repeated derogatory remarks to Eliza, calling her a ‘squashed cabbage leaf,’ and a ‘heartless gutter snipe.’ Additionally, women’s only admirable attributes are portrayed as identifiable only by their outward appearances. Towards the end of the film Higgins sings about Eliza with regards to her attractive appearance: “I’ve grown accustomed to her
face.” This seemingly innocent song has deeper implications that cannot be ignored. The title of the play and film gets at the heart of this issue; “My Fair Lady” implies that in order to be a lady, a woman must be fair or attractive. This is further evident with Henry Higgins’ epiphany of Eliza’s true beauty only after he has adorned her in beautiful clothes and jewelry. She is essentially his Barbie doll. When she is “dressed to the nines,” and speaks eloquently then he looks twice in her direction. Otherwise, she merely keeps the order in his house; she knows where his slippers are. The slippers become a powerful motif for an underlying, deeper societal implication. The slippers are a metaphor for the sensibilities of the “old guard” set. These were people believed in the angel of the house ideology which essentially holds women capable of little else besides taking care of the home, and keeping up their outward appearances. The women are to remain in the private sphere; they have no place invading the public sphere where men dominate. She regains some power by throwing the slippers back at him. She throws his patriarchal ideologies back in his face. In order to get Higgins’ attention, Eliza must conform to his standards, and society’s standards on the larger scale. This is most evident as she seeks the Professor’s linguistic council in order to get a better job. She states that she wants a job as a lady in a flower shop but that, “They won’t take me unless I can speak more genteel like.” Eliza Doolittle’s qualifications don’t matter here. All that matters is whether or not she fits the mold of what society deems as qualifications to be a lady, and thus deserving of particular career advancements: “Equality and inequality in social terms are thereby proven to be both extrinsic and subjective;
this is clearly Shaw’s thesis from a socialist point of view” (379). Those that don’t measure up to these standards are left to work the cold streets of Covent Garden on the corner of Tottenham Court Road. Essentially, one has to disown their roots in order to advance in society. Just as certain plain flowers without much color are looked over to brighter ones, so are certain plain flower girls looked over for more beautiful and refined women.

The adaptation of this play with deep issues regarding the human condition, into a film directed by George Cukor starring Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn; enhanced the fame of this timeless tale all the more. The acting skills of Hepburn and Harrison (who already had played the part of Higgins on stage in 1956) brought the characters to life for the film-viewing audiences who were unable to go to Drury Lane Theatre in London. The musical numbers brought to life the issues discussed earlier magnificently. The costumes created for Hepburn did wonders for Shaw’s original criticism of high society’s snobbery. Eliza was transformed from a flower girl into a princess with the change of wardrobe and an impeccable posh accent. The 2001 play casting Martine McCutcheon as Eliza Doolittle and Jonathan Pryce as Higgins re-introduced Loewe and Lerner’s (1956) to theatregoers. With superb acting and fantastic costumes, the characters were once again brought to life and Shaw’s vision did not wane. One important change in the 2001 play that I found to be particularly significant in enhancing the feminine voice and fighting patriarchy took place during the musical number ‘Show Me,’ in which Eliza is exasperated with words, is responding to Freddie’s confession of love with poetry by demanding he take
action instead of spouting pretty words to her. This serves to give the female
desire voice, by showing a woman who wants a tangible expression of love
rather than words or language. Later in this scene in the play, Eliza is shown
passing through a parade of women marching for women’s suffrage. She grabs
one of their signs and throws it to Freddie who is following her like a lovesick
puppy. This is the finale of this song. The implications are fairly obvious! Eliza
is the voice of women’s suffrage. She is an independent woman who doesn’t
have to settle for a relationship in which all of her needs are not being met. She
is expressing to Freddie her needs rather than trying to meet his. This is
phenomenal for a woman given the historical context of the play. As stated
earlier, a woman in Edwardian times was seen as the angel of the house, whose
responsibilities didn’t leave the four walls of her home. In no shape or form, was
she attributed autonomy and desires, sexual and passionate desires at that! In
this situation Eliza holds the gaze, she is not the subject of sexual desire but
rather its pursuer.

**The Woman in Black**

Another incredible example of the marginalized female appears in the
chilling play *The Woman In Black*. Adapted by Stephen Mallatrat from the heart-
stopping 1983 novel by Susan Hill, of the same title, this story leaves its
audience looking under beds and into their closets before bed after having seen
it. This is the story of a man haunted by his past encounter with a mysterious
woman, in black, who is thought to be a ghost or apparition of some form. This
horrifying woman when seen by anybody with children will cause the children to
The legend of the woman in black states that in her youth she had a child out of wedlock and in an effort to cover it up, left the child with her sister and denied her maternity. As time passed, she began to visit the child and grew increasingly attached to it. Also as time passed, the child began to resemble the woman more and more each day. Realizing she could no longer bear to be apart from her offspring, the woman demanded her maternal rights be reinstated. Her sister refused, and a plan to escape with the child resulted in its death as the woman witnessed it all! She died shortly after and began to haunt the small town and Eel Marsh House, the site of the accident. Where Eliza Doolittle represents the empowering of the feminine via a refusal to abide by societal standards, the Woman in Black, is the living incarnate of the *revenge of the feminine* against a Patriarchal society that took her child away. This is a classic example of a women being vilified for having an extramarital affair. Not only is her child killed with her witnessing it, but she is immortalized as a murdering ghost!

The silencing of the feminine voice is exaggerated in this play as the only actors, seemingly, are two men. The title of the play is the *Woman* in black, and yet no woman is listed in the program. This is not only done for suspense purposes, there is a deeper societal implication once again. Here the woman is Other due to sexual discrimination. Her intellect and civil rights are thought to fall second to man’s. Nina Rosenstand, the author of an introductory ethics book, addresses the issue of sexual discrimination and feminism. The following passage very accurately summarizes the preceding argument:

“For those taking the view that men and women should be considered persons first, the gender differences are primarily cultural. Biological
differences are significant only in terms of procreation; apart from birthing
and breastfeeding infants, which can be done only by women, the sexual
differences are irrelevant. Culture has shaped men and women, and a
cultural change could therefore allow for another type of gender: the
androgynous type “ (437).

This essentially asserts that women are capable of governing themselves.
Outside physiological differences, there are no differences between men and
women.

The play *Woman in Black*, attempts to portray the negative view of woman
at a particular point in time and the negative effects that had. Despite the
tries to silence the female voice, it became an absent presence. It haunted
and drove certain people insane. The overall theme of the play would appear to
be that by denying female autonomy and silencing the female desires, there will
be resultant disasters beyond the imagination’s grasp. Mallatratt is ingenious
with his technique of leaving the audience, along with the main character Aurthur
Kipps, with the knowledge that they have seen the woman in black, and that their
children could be in danger. The audience is left thinking, “Did I really see a
woman in black?” It would appear that the feminine truly has her revenge as she
continues to haunt the mind of every viewer and reader of her tale.
Works Cited

