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Toy Gods

A Scarce Novel Illuminates Eliza Doolittle's Plea, "I Only Want to Be Natural"

JESSE M. HELLMAN

ABSTRACT: The feminist concerns of the group of artists and socialists in which Shaw was an active voice were expressed in numerous ways. Wilhelmina Stirling in 1904 published a novel, *Toy Gods*, virtually unknown today, which has plot elements similar to those of *Pygmalion*. As she and her family, which included Pre-Raphaelite artists and writers, were themselves in society and experienced its constraints, her observations are particularly relevant. Her novel illuminates the social and feminist concerns so important to Shaw, in particular those expressed by Eliza when she told Higgins, "I only want to be natural." Written by Mary De Morgan (Stirling's sister Evelyn's sister-in-law), the fairy tale "A Toy Princess" further expresses these concerns. The romanticization of Shaw's play is discussed in the context of these issues.

KEYWORDS: *Pygmalion*, Bernard Shaw, *Toy Gods*, Wilhelmina Stirling, gender roles

Literary works frequently contain texts and subtexts that induce explanation and revision. Such is the case with Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Theater professionals made attempts to modify it from virtually its first London performances in 1914, and then two years later Shaw himself further explained one subtext in a postscript "Sequel." *Toy Gods*, a virtually unknown novel by "Percival Pickering"—the pseudonym of author Anna Maria Wilhelmina Pickering Stirling—that was published in London in 1904 by John Long, illuminates that subtext of Shaw's play.¹

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A copy of *Toy Gods* appeared on eBay in 2016. Its advertisement read, “This is one of [Stirling’s] scarce novels, the story of a young cockney girl, an orphan, and her transformation from her humble beginnings to a lady, a tale similar to the later George Bernard Shaw play *Pygmalion*, or the film *My Fair Lady*.” No further information came with the book, and the bookseller had no record of who had so described it. While certain elements of plot and character are indeed similar to Shaw’s play, the emphases of the two works differ significantly. In *Pygmalion* the primary emphasis is on language and its use in class distinctions, secondarily on Higgins’s treatment of Eliza. Shaw’s interest in social change—one aspect of which are the constraints on women in Britain, and the effect of those constraints on Eliza—though present and important, are a tertiary concern; Shaw amplified his social message in his 1916 “Sequel” to the play. In *Toy Gods*, on the other hand, while the heroine succeeds in shedding her cockney accent, her speech and accent are not central to the story. What is central and primary, rather, are the falseness and constraints affecting women in fashionable society and the accompanying hypocrisy affecting both sexes.

Stirling herself had an unusually valuable perspective on these issues. In exploring them we will examine both members of her circle and those of Shaw’s, using historical citations and relevant quotations from the De Morgans, the Spencer-Stanhopes, Thomas William Coke, William Morris, and other sources. Because Stirling’s 380-page novel remains quite scarce, a summary is included. Finally, we will briefly review efforts to romanticize *Pygmalion* and how that romanticization affected Shaw’s social message. *Toy Gods*, considered in the context of Stirling’s family and background, illuminates a critical element of *Pygmalion* that was important to Shaw.

Clara’s and Eliza’s Dissatisfaction

In *Pygmalion* Henry Higgins is a bully: he is never considerate or empathetic. He, and only he, treats Eliza callously and thoughtlessly, his treatment of her stemming from his personality, not circumstance nor class. When Higgins does recognize Eliza’s feelings, it does not appear to affect him emotionally nor alter his behavior. In Act V, Eliza gives voice to a lament that one might find somewhat puzzling today:

LIZA: . . . Freddy’s not a fool. And if he’s weak and poor and wants me, maybe he’d make me happier than my betters that bully me. . . .

HIGGINS: Can he MAKE anything of you? That’s the point.

LIZA: Perhaps I could make something of him. But I never thought of us making anything of one another; and you never think of anything else. I only want to be natural.

“My betters that bully me” clearly refers to Higgins, but less clear is what Eliza means by “I only want to be natural.” Shaw uses “natural” or “naturally” ten times in *Pygmalion* and its preface, always in a complimentary sense, never in a disparaging one. We hear “an honest and natural slum dialect”; “Eliza’s mousy hair color can hardly be natural”; “Mere alliteration natural to a poet”; “Pickering: this chap has a certain natural gift of rhetoric”; “it was natural for you to be anxious about the garden party”; and “the girl is naturally rather affectionate.”

In a reference to Colonel Pickering “natural” is connected with kindness: when Eliza confronts Higgins in Act V, she tells Pickering, “Your calling me Miss Doolittle . . . that was the beginning of self-respect for me . . . there were a hundred little things you never noticed, because they came naturally to you.” And Doolittle, in referring to class values, also uses “natural” in a positive sense. Pickering asks him if he and Eliza’s mother were married:

PICKERING: Well, nobody told me. But I concluded naturally—

DOOLITTLE: No: that ain’t the natural way, Colonel: it’s only the middle class way.

The word’s final use is in Eliza’s plaintive “I only want to be natural.”

But while social constraints in Victorian and Edwardian Britain affected both sexes, certain ones affected women in particular. They went well beyond constraints on external behavior to the actual suppression of feelings and emotions: *internal* constraints imposed by women on themselves. Fashionable women had been brought up to regard those internal constraints as admirable, and to think of them as intrinsic to femininity. As *Pygmalion* opens, for instance, Mrs. Eynsford-Hill displays the reliance on a gentleman that was expected of a lady. Caught in the rain, she asks Colonel Pickering, “Oh, sir, is there any sign of its stopping?”—as if Pickering could observe the sky better than she. She shows no sign whatsoever of being conflicted or disturbed by that question. She is behaving as a lady ought, and is comfortable doing so.

In a similar vein, her daughter Clara speaks demeaningly to her brother Freddy without appearing troubled at having done so. He has gone, trying to hail a cab, “as far as Charing Cross Station” (almost half a mile from

Covent Garden!). Clara responds with, "It's too tiresome. Do you expect us to go and get one ourselves?" followed by telling her mother, "he hasn't tried at all," and then calling him a "selfish pig." In Act III Clara initially is all very proper: "How do you do?" After Higgins asks, "What the devil are we going to talk about until Eliza comes?" Clara expresses her dissatisfaction with the behavior expected of her: "I haven't any small talk. If people would only be frank and say what they really think!" Eliza has been given "strict orders as to her behavior," but when she shocks everyone with her "not bloody likely," Clara speaks up: "It's all a matter of habit. There's no right or wrong in it . . . such nonsense, all this early Victorian prudery!" In these deft strokes Shaw shows us both what Eliza is to learn and what Clara wants to shed.

Pygmalion is Eliza's story, however, and Clara is not developed further. It is in his "Sequel" that Shaw expands on Clara's inner struggles with society's expectations and restrictions: "Eventually Clara's snobbery went bang . . . she began to make friends *and enemies* [emphasis added]." Shaw goes on: "It exasperated her to think that the dungeon in which she had languished for so many unhappy years had been unlocked all the time, and that the impulses she had so carefully struggled with and stifled for the sake of keeping well with society, were precisely those by which alone she could have come into any sort of sincere human contact." Note "impulses stifled for the sake of keeping well with society." While "wanting to be natural" can be understood in regard to attributes that are innate, Shaw is differentiating the type of impulses a child learns to suppress in order to become socialized—for example to be kind, thoughtful, attentive, and aware of social customs—and on the other hand to suppress in order to "keep well with society," which in Clara's world included maintaining one's social standing in regard to others. As her training progresses, Eliza comes to understand what Clara had experienced and the dissatisfaction she felt. This stifling of natural feelings "for the sake of keeping well with society" is precisely Wilhelmina Stirling's focus in *Toy Gods*. As it was written in 1903 by a woman who was herself from a family in British society, one that had experienced its constraints, the novel offers particularly valuable insight into the social subtext of Shaw's play.

Shaw and the De Morgans

Born in 1865, Stirling's maiden name was Pickering. Pre-Raphaelite painter Evelyn Pickering, Wilhelmina's older sister by ten years, in 1887 had married William Frend De Morgan,² perhaps the most famous ceramicist of

the Arts and Crafts movement. Fairy-tale writer Mary De Morgan, William De Morgan's younger sister, was thus Evelyn's sister-in-law. Mary was considered outspoken and direct. Shaw mentions her in "William Morris as I Knew Him," which he wrote for May Morris's 1936 biography of her father, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*. Later in life, Shaw notes, Mary was in "pecuniary straits. A purse was forthcoming instantly from everyone who had ever spoken ill of her: that is from everyone who had known her. She flung it back in our faces with an independence that recalled Queen Elizabeth telling her council that if they turned her out in her petticoat she could earn her living with the best of them."³ Mary De Morgan's fairy tale "The Toy Princess," first published in 1877 in *On a Pincushion*, is a scathing indictment of what society expected from "ladies" and how they had to constrain themselves. Its restrictions "for keeping well with society," not simply to women's actions but more importantly to their emotions, foreshadows Clara's and Eliza's experiences.

It begins, "More than a thousand years ago, in a country quite on the other side of the world, it fell out that the people all grew so very polite that they hardly ever spoke to each other. And they never said more than was quite necessary, as 'Just so,' 'Yes indeed,' 'Thank you,' and 'If you please.' And it was thought to be the rudest thing in the world for any one to say they liked or disliked, or loved or hated, or were happy or miserable. No one ever laughed aloud, and if any one had been seen to cry they would at once have been avoided by their friends." De Morgan then tells us that a young princess, Ursula, became so unhappy with these constraints that her fairy godmother Taboret carried her away to where she could become more of her natural self. She becomes a servant to a poor fisherman and is replaced at Court with a toy princess who acts only in the expected way. The courtiers are completely satisfied with their perfect-mannered doll. When later Taboret returns Ursula to the Court, the courtiers are distraught to see before them a real young woman, with feelings and ideas of her own. Taboret asks them whether they prefer Ursula or the toy, knocking its head on the floor so they can see that it is completely empty. The courtiers choose the toy. Taboret reattaches the doll's head and the courtiers are completely satisfied. Ursula returns to the fishing village, where she marries the fisherman's son and lives happily ever after.

In "The Toy Princess" De Morgan had taken classic fairy-tale elements and created a world removed from external reality but psychologically quite real. The empty-headed but pleasing doll is precisely what society had long been expecting from women, and what women had learned to expect of themselves.

The Pre-Raphaelites and Societal Restrictions on Women

In 1871, following the death of his father, the esteemed mathematician Augustus De Morgan, William De Morgan brought his sister Mary and their widowed mother to Cheyne Row in Chelsea, just a few doors from Thomas Carlyle, Alexander and Anne Gilchrist, Cecil Lawson, and the founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.⁴ The societal expectations for young women, and the effects of those expectations and constraints, were a concern expressed by these artists in a variety of ways. The feminist message of Evelyn De Morgan's art, however, can be unwittingly minimized. Pre-Raphaelite scholar Lucy Ella Rose stresses that "female captivity is a strikingly explicit, persistent and pervasive theme in Evelyn's literary and visual work. . . . Her plethora of paintings depicting the confinement of women—most notably *Hope in the Prison of Despair* (c.1887), *The Captives* (c.1888), *The Prisoner* (1907–08), and *The Gilded Cage* (c.1919)—have been perceived as a series of spiritualist allegories of the 'soul's imprisonment' or as the 'bondage of the spirit,' yet Evelyn consistently represents prisoners . . . [in] a feminist statement about the bondage of specifically female rather than 'non-gendered' [beings]."⁵ De Morgan depicted on her canvases the emotional imprisonment of *women*, as did her sister in *Toy Gods* and sister-in-law in "The Toy Princess." All three understood the implications of learning to "behave like a duchess." Eliza in her moment of triumph is disregarded not only by Higgins but by Pickering—"Eliza flinches violently; but they take no notice of her" is the stage direction—which she was not when she was a flower girl.

Wilhelmina Stirling writes that when still quite young she was once with Evelyn, who was asked, "What is your sister going to be?" Evelyn replied 'Nothing!' with sisterly contempt, 'unless it's a noodle!' Yet I smiled a smug, superior smile, for I had been well grounded in the Victorian creed that you could not be a Professional and 'a lady' at the same time." She adds that society had stipulations for men as well as for women: Her older brother Rowland had been "determined to enter the medical profession, in spite of strong opposition, for those were days when to be a professional slayer of a visible enemy was an honorable calling, but to be a professional combatant . . . of germs and microbes . . . was not the occupation of a gentleman. . . . To a certain section in society, to be an amateur in all things was admissible, but to be professional . . . was anathema."⁶ Stirling's observations are relevant to *Pygmalion*. While Higgins is "Professor" and Pickering "Colonel," there is no mention of any professional duties, but only of what they choose to do. Colonel Pickering came to London from India to meet Higgins and

stays with him for months, and while Higgins has several servants, neither he nor Pickering express any interest or need of an income.

In 1885 William Morris and others, including Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx, left Henry Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation to form the Socialist League. Bernard Shaw attended league meetings with Morris and his daughter May, dining with them,⁷ while Morris attended meetings of Shaw's Fabian Society. The Fabians worked toward gradual social change through education rather than through revolution. Honest craft and quality, with rejection of the hypocritical abandonment of traditional values to the God of industry, were important to Morris and reflected Fabian socialist ideas, the craft and art of Shaw's and Morris's movements, and their growing unhappiness with aspects of the industrial revolution.

These movements favored simple values and kindness over superficial correctness masking thoughtlessness and hypocrisy. Although Higgins had taught Eliza just as he said he would, she was left constrained and unhappy. Becoming able to pass herself off as a duchess required her to suppress herself. "What have you left me fit for? I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else." But in spite of the restrictions needed for "keeping well with society," Shaw's "Sequel" tells us that after she "stormed out" on Higgins, she and Freddy learn how to operate a business, take appropriate risks, and hire people to work for them. They learn, in short, to solve problems and stand on their own feet. Clara, in effect, did the same. She goes to work in a furniture shop. The solutions arrived at were not the ones envisaged by society for a lady, but rather ones that a modern woman would devise. The door to the dungeon, as Clara later realizes, had never been locked.

Wilhelmina Stirling and Bernard Shaw

The author Percival Pickering's identity as Wilhelmina Stirling was known immediately upon the publication of *Toy Gods*, as a number of her works are listed on the title page.⁸ As noted, the De Morgans' circle included eminent Pre-Raphaelite artists and craftsmen. Shaw's description of Mrs. Higgins's home includes several references to it: "Mrs. Higgins was brought up on Morris and Burne-Jones. . . . Her room . . . with the Morris wall-papers, and the Morris chintz window curtains and brocade covers of the ottoman and its cushions . . . a portrait of Mrs. Higgins . . . in one of [her] beautiful Rossettian costumes." Shaw's stage directions describe Mrs. Higgins's drawing room as including a landscape by Cecil Lawson "on the scale of a Rubens." While their social worlds overlapped, it is not known whether

Shaw ever met or even communicated with Stirling.⁹ In her 1922 biography *William De Morgan and His Wife* there is a single allusion to Shaw: After seeing *You Never Can Tell*, De Morgan quipped, “really—You Never Can Tell—perhaps someday *I* shall blossom into a fully-fledged author.”¹⁰ The similarities between certain aspects of *Pygmalion* and *Toy Gods* invite the question of whether Shaw had in fact at least heard of the novel. A. M. Gibbs points out that he knows of no other source for the name “Pickering.”¹¹

Over time Stirling, who died in 1965 only two weeks short of her one hundredth birthday, amassed an important collection of artworks by her sister Evelyn and her husband. Today the De Morgan Foundation continues its preservation and display.¹²

From Sir Edward Coke to Wilhelmina Stirling

Mrs. Stirling’s family, particularly her mother’s family, the Spencer-Stanhopes, was particularly relevant to her appreciation of the tensions between the expectations of society and “being natural.” Her family’s established place in British society made her familiar with social constraints and influenced her reaction to them. Parts of *Toy Gods* are biographical, referencing medical events experienced by members of her family. Stirling’s descriptions convey her compassionate understanding of suffering and demonstrate her empathy with those lower on the social scale. In *Life’s Little Day* (1924), a book of reminiscences, Stirling writes, “My father came of an ancient family, which I gathered among my first impressions was contemporary with the Dodo and cleverly survived the Flood.”¹³ The daughter of Anna Maria Wilhelmina Spencer-Stanhope and her husband, Percival Andree Pickering, Queen’s Counsel and Recorder of Pontefract, through her mother Stirling was descended from Walter Spencer-Stanhope, born in 1749 in Yorkshire, who had amassed wealth through cotton and iron.¹⁴

Going further back, her mother was also a descendant of Sir Edward Coke, born in 1558. The first to hold the title of Lord Chief Justice of England, Coke is considered the greatest jurist of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras.¹⁵ As the Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas, he was involved in numerous cases establishing rights of the people. In Sir Nicholas Fuller’s case, which became known as the Case of Prohibitions (1607–8), King James I had acted as judge in a dispute over land. The king had stated that the law was founded upon reason, and as he had reason he could decide the case. Coke overturned the king’s decision, noting, “True it was, that God had endowed His Majesty with excellent science, and great endowments of nature; but His Majesty was not learned in the laws . . . of England. . . . Causes which concern the life, or inheritance, or goods, or fortunes of his

subjects, are not to be decided by natural reason but by the artificial reason and judgment of law, which . . . requires long study and experience.” The king was outraged by Coke’s action, stating that then the king himself “should be under the law, which was treason to affirm.”¹⁶ *The king himself should be under the law*: Sir Edward Coke played an important role in the evolution in Britain of human rights that had begun with the Magna Carta and continues to this day.

Wilhelmina’s great-grandfather was Thomas William Coke, known as “Coke of Norfolk.” To improve harvest yields he introduced crop rotation and is generally considered the father of British agricultural reform. Her appreciation of the constraints of society, and of taking action against them, can be seen in her two-volume biography, *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends* (1908), with its sympathetic and admiring descriptions of him. In 1782 he had brought in Parliament the successful motion for King George to acknowledge American independence. When Coke went before the king, Stirling quotes Lord Colchester writing, “As Knight of the Shire he had not only the right to wear his spurs in the House, but a further right to attend Court ‘in his boots,’ i.e. in his country clothes; which latter privilege, however, was seldom, if ever, exercised. But on this occasion Coke availed himself of it, and appeared unceremoniously before the King wearing his ordinary country garb.” Stirling notes that his appearance “caused the greatest horror at Court.” She writes that Coke, “that youth of twenty-eight, who alone in that great body of men . . . showed himself oblivious to the petty details of Court etiquette . . . save the one thing which he felt that he had come in triumph to claim, a belated act of justice to a long-injured people.”¹⁷ In 1830 William, Duke of Clarence, the third son of George III and a friend of Coke, became king. “One of the first acts of the new king was to express a wish to see the man whom,” Stirling wrote, “he was proud to call ‘the first Commoner in his kingdom.’”¹⁸ There is an echo of Coke in *Toy Gods*: At the outset we learn that “the test of social superiority centers in a man’s boots.” Coke once remarked at a Holkham sheep shearing that “every night during the American War did I drink the health of General Washington as the greatest man on earth.”¹⁹ To Stirling, Coke represented honesty and directness, the honesty of the country contrasted with the pretense and hypocrisy of the Court. In 1837 he was created Earl of Leicester of Holkham.

Stirling was a prolific author, writing biographies including *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends*, *The Letter-bag of Lady Elizabeth Spencer-Stanhope* (1908), and *William De Morgan and His Wife* (1922); a semibiographical novel, *A Life Awry* (1893), turned into the play *Judy* by Roy Horniman in 1899 starring Nina Boucicault;²⁰ journal articles such as “A Transatlantic Invasion of 1816,”²¹ and more. She also wrote several books about ghosts and spirits.

Stirling and her three older siblings were all born in London at No. 6 Upper Grosvenor Street in Mayfair, the family later moving to No. 48 Bryanston Square in Marylebone. Her sister Evelyn, the artist, born in 1855, was the eldest child. Evelyn's favorite model was Mary Jane Hales, who worked for the family from the age of fifteen, having also been Wilhelmina's nanny. She was crucial to Evelyn's progress: "Having access to a life model was an essential part of a professional artist's training, but was denied to most women artists."²² Stirling wrote, "What is Evelyn like, a small girl once asked me. . . . 'Like a thunderstorm,' I replied with precise truthfulness. . . . I felt dimly that at times she disturbed the Victorian placidity of our home like a flash from an alien world."²³

After Wilhelmina's marriage to Charles Stirling in 1901, Jane worked for them and became a "treasured companion" to her. Wilhelmina dedicated a book of reminiscences, *Life's Little Day* (1924), to "Pretty Jane." Jane Hales died in 1926. Her grave lies between Evelyn De Morgan's and Charles Stirling's in the Brookwood Cemetery, Woking, one plot away from Wilhelmina's brother Rowland Pickering. This gives some indication of the social attitudes of Wilhelmina and her family.

Wilhelmina's brother Percival Spencer Umfreville Pickering, F.R.S., born in 1858, was the biologist for whom Pickering emulsions (those that are stabilized by solid particles) are named. Stirling's maternal uncle Roddam Spencer-Stanhope was a Pre-Raphaelite artist. He studied and worked with painter George Frederic Watts. Another maternal uncle was Sir Walter Spencer-Stanhope, a politician, whose daughter Gertrude Spencer-Stanhope was also a Pre-Raphaelite painter and sculptor.

Toy Gods is a forceful portrayal of the falseness and hypocrisy of the social constraints and limitations of the time that a lady such as Clara Eynsford-Hill would have experienced. It is a story of disillusionment and false idols, not only for women, but for all British society. The title of chapter 1, "The House of Rimmon," refers to a Babylonian god who also is called Baal.²⁴ In 1903 Rudyard Kipling had written his poem "Rimmon," and one newspaper review of *Toy Gods* was titled "The House of Rimmon." Born in 1865 (as was Stirling) and a nephew of Edward Burne-Jones's wife Georgiana, Kipling as a child was a visitor to Cheyne Row and may well have heard Mary De Morgan tell her fairy tales to children there. While the plot line of *Toy Gods* is complex and the writing at times opaque (with lengthy philosophical dialogues in the second half), Stirling expresses clearly some of the emotional consequences resulting from the social and psychological straightjacket demanded of a lady described in "The Toy Princess" and that affected Eliza. As noted, the novel is exceedingly scarce.²⁵

Toy Gods: A Synopsis

Going to place flowers on his wife's grave, an older man, John Lawson, meets by chance seventeen-year-old Amelia Bradshaw, who sells artificial flowers and cloth at Osgood's, a shop in the Edgware Road. Her mother's grave is nearby. Amelia has a thick cockney accent, which Lawson corrects at once. Lawson had previously met working-class Jane Burgess, Amelia's aunt, who had begun to do housework and cooking for him. After a time "John Lawson had grown to appreciate the society of Mrs Burgess." But it is Amelia he invites to the theater, realizing that, due to her father, socially "she had claim to a station superior to his own . . . but in spite of that she was common, untutored, and condemned."

After the death of his wife the wealthy Admiral Bradshaw had in his old age married his cook, but as he had neglected to amend his will she and their daughter Amelia were left with no means of support. Muriel Coleford, the daughter of the Admiral's first wife and eighteen years older than Amelia, lives in luxury on Park Lane. Amelia, beautiful, courageous, and kind, is struck by the unfair difference in their fortunes. Rushing to a party in hopes of meeting Muriel, she is almost knocked over when she collides with a policeman. She inventively defends herself: "I'm orf to a party where my presence is particularly requested." Stirling tells us that indeed she does need to defend herself, as being alone on the street at night an unmarried woman might well be suspected of being a prostitute. It is a very cold night. On the way home Amelia takes off a piece of the clothing she is wearing and gives it to a poor woman sitting on the sidewalk.

Two weeks later Amelia makes another attempt to meet Muriel by going, again uninvited, to a costume party she is giving. She goes dressed as a moth in a ballet, with wings and silk tights. Amelia shows sparkle, confidence—and her legs. All eyes are upon her. Muriel asks the girl to leave. But in the brief time she is there she speaks up, telling Muriel that they are sisters. She is also noticed by Sir Geoffrey Hope, a close friend of Muriel's. He wants to know who Amelia really is, and how he might find her. "I must see you again!" he tells her. An exhausted Amelia arrives home, where Lawson surprises her by proposing marriage. Although she does not answer, the young woman thinks she is engaged. Quite unhappy about it, Amelia tells Mrs. Burgess, who advises her only to "always have his slippers to the fire at six-thirty."

Days later Muriel, now understanding that she and Amelia are half sisters, invites her to her home. Sir Geoffrey is also there. Muriel lives with a bedridden husband, now close to death, who has a progressive neurological

illness that has left him unable to move or speak. Childless, kind, and compassionate, she spends hours each day reading to him. Muriel offers to send Amelia to school to be educated so that she might improve her lot in life, but will do so only if she agrees to strict conditions: She must end her “engagement” to Lawson and “be educated where and how I choose . . . at a first rate school in Brighton and in Brussels, with the finest private masters.” Amelia is stunned, grateful but also offended, telling Muriel she is as good as she. Rejecting Sir Geoffrey’s offer to take her home, she does accept her sister’s proposal. She speaks to Lawson, who, very hurt, says to her: “We’ve had no quarrel. . . . Have I offended you in any way?” Speaking of Amelia, Muriel tells Geoffrey, “She is only vulgar when she is fancying herself ladylike.”

When Amelia returns from Brighton and Brussels, her cockney accent is gone. “Tell me about your experiences abroad,” Muriel asks her. “It was all *very nice*,” replies Amelia politely, simply, consistently. When finally asked how she liked Brighton, Amelia “cast a comprehensive glance around her in which enthusiasm leapt through her careful indifference.” Later, fashionably dressed, Amelia goes with Muriel to buy violets. She sat “more stiffly upright and her little affectations of attitude and glance grew.” Muriel notices “the exaggerated condescension of her manner, her disparaging inspection of the flowers submitted for her approval, her complacency of smile and movement.” She observes to Sir Geoffrey that Amelia’s “speech is too considered . . . education has effaced her identity . . . my experiment has done this . . . poor old world. Appearances are all it goes by. It likes to keep an ideal even if that must be a god with feet of clay.”

Among the well-dressed people swirling around Muriel is the scheming and very rich Mrs. Breton. Another is friendly and elderly Colonel Banks, who laments that today, unfortunately, meeting “a woman who fulfills woman’s first duty of looking charming is an uncommon pleasure. The days are past when woman was content to accept beauty as her profession.” Muriel demurs, “Poor woman! . . . when I hear eternally that her first duty is to be charming, I find myself calculating the amount of brains, education, time, worry, and real hard work which are involved in the effort,” adding that men are even “shocked to see a woman bicycling.” The colonel insists, however, that she *must* agree that “a woman does not look her best upon a bicycle.” Muriel counters, “Would a man keep from an enjoyable activity because a woman thought he did not look his best engaging in it?” Muriel considers her experiment: “What is all learning other than knowing how to pretend the right thing at the right moment?”

Muriel plans to present Amelia to society at a ball, but a romantic triangle is developing between Geoffrey and the two sisters. Which sister will he choose?

Now well dressed, Amelia goes back to Osgood's to buy silk and is not recognized by the salesgirl there. She finds that the god she has pursued, that of society, has feet of clay. While she at first wanted only to be accepted by her sister, she learns that what is expected from a lady keeps her from being herself. She yearns to become more natural again, and asks Sir Geoffrey to help her become *really* educated, which she believes would mean to be more natural and not to simply mechanically repeat what she has been taught. But soon he needs to go to Scotland on business. "What's to become of my lessons?" Amelia asks him. "I'd be sorry you should go." "Tell me you love me," he urges, and proposes marriage to her. In answer she kisses him passionately. Once home, she tells Mabel she is engaged. The next day Geoffrey calmly asks her to release him from his promise, acting as though nothing had happened. Amelia, furious, confronts him. *She* had never disguised her feelings: "I've that much of the 'lady' in me," she tells Muriel, "I don't want him back." Muriel understands. "To a woman, her happiness is belief in the man she loves. . . . There was but one religion and one morality: Thou shalt not be found out. Bow thyself in the House of Rimmon. What you are is trivial; what you seem is vital."

"You've gorn up in the world and left us all behind," Mrs. Burgess tells Amelia, who answers: "I'll tell you what a 'lady' is: it's talking correct grammar . . . never looking as if you were enjoying yourself, walking well, talking well, fooling well." But Amelia's anger has helped her recapture her sense of being natural. She is now free. Lawson becomes engaged to Beatrice Grey, a schoolteacher his own age. "He had been consistently honest," Amelia observes of him. The sisters have come to love each other. Muriel silently shows Amelia a letter she just received. Sir Geoffrey has married rich Mrs. Breton.

Reviews of *Toy Gods*

Several London newspapers reviewed *Toy Gods*. The review in *The Outlook* (19 March 1904), thoughtful and insightful, relates particularly to both Clara and Eliza:

The development of Amelia, daughter of a baronet who in his dotage married his cook, is the theme of Mr. Percival Pickering's new book, "Toy Gods." Though her birth gives her right of entry into the world of fashion, Amelia's lot is cast by circumstances in a respectful slum. Her rich relations ignore her, and she is left in the care of her maternal aunt, a charwoman by profession. But Amelia is a person of spirit and ambition. A glimpse of the world to which she feels she has a

right by birth, spurs her to push her way into it. With daring and beauty to aid her she succeeds in being taken up by her half-sister, a rich woman of the world, with a taste for experiments in education, and after a hasty polish in foreign parts, she finds herself admitted to the world of her dreams. *But like a roadside flower in a hot-house, she is ill at ease and unhappy. A world in which one must always pretend, never be oneself for a moment, bewilders and disgusts her* [emphasis added]. With a keen appetite for the enjoyment of this world's goods she expects much and meets with the inevitable disillusionment.

The Bookseller (9 April 1904) adds that “the numerous *faux pas* which the pretty but somewhat vulgar and eminently lovable little heroine makes are related with much genuine humour.” And *Punch* (27 January 1904) notes, “The story will be found thoroughly interesting, and one that will well repay careful study. Decidedly it is not a book for the light-hearted volatile skipper. Amelia Bradshaw, who up from gutter to drawing-room is so cleverly drawn, and so true to human nature, as to win the hearts of all who have the pleasure of making her acquaintance . . . however [we] cannot accept the author’s charitable excuses for the conduct of Sir Geoffrey Hope, whose behaviour was set down by all readers . . . as that of an unutterable cad.” Not all reviewers, however, found Amelia’s forthrightness appealing. Women, and particularly ladies, were expected to behave as toy princesses. *The Tablet* (16 April 1904) noted, “But no veneer of training can eliminate the inbred coarseness of fibre which makes her common with a commonness . . . only to be looked for in the vilest slums. It is not alone in diction and utterance that she offends . . . but in her *total absence of feminine reticence or reserve* [emphasis added].” *The Tablet* reviewer also complained bitterly about Amelia’s treatment of Lawson, finding it unforgivable that she should break her odd and sudden “engagement” to a middle-aged man—that “with the cruelty of her egotistic nature, [she] throws him over the moment other prospects open to her”—rather than that Lawson had proposed to a seventeen-year-old girl whom he barely knew, passing over Mrs. Burgess, a woman close to his own age with whom he had a caring relationship.

The Devil’s Bargain in *Pygmalion*

Modern playgoers may hear Higgins’s offer to Eliza as being only positive, not realizing that while she would learn pronunciation so that she could get a job in a flower shop (“in six months—in three if she has a good ear”),

there would be unspoken consequences. “You’ve got to learn to behave as a duchess,” Higgins tells Eliza. Edwardian audiences would have been more attuned to one such dimension of Higgins’s offer—that what is expected of a lady is *only* pleasant and “proper” behavior. Ladies in society were expected to act virtually as accessories to the gentlemen around them. As the reviewer for *The Outlook* wrote, the society to which Amelia aspired is “a world in which one must always pretend, never be oneself for a moment.” Additionally, being taught the behavior of a lady would entail the loss of being “natural.” It was a devil’s bargain, as Eliza discovers in Act V of *Pygmalion*:

PICKERING TO ELIZA (SPEAKING OF HIGGINS): Why don’t you slang back at him? . . .

LIZA: I can’t. I could have done it once; but now I can’t go back to it. Last night, when I was wandering about, a girl spoke to me; and I tried to get back into the old way with her; but it was no use.

As noted above, quite different from the constraints demanded by society, Eliza had developed *internal* constraints, ones that acted to suppress her ability “to be natural” even when back in familiar surroundings. Through training and her own wish to succeed, behaving “in the old ways” was no longer something she could even consciously choose to do. Stirling expands on this unwelcome effect of training in *Toy Gods*. There is an inherent romantic core to *Pygmalion*, however, that creates a dilemma for every director: Shaw’s commitment to social change made it extremely important to him that his play not be perceived as the romance the title—referring to the Greek sculptor who falls in love with his own creation—and the subtitle, “A Romance in Five Acts”—lead one to expect.

Romanticizing *Pygmalion*

From the first performances there were efforts to romanticize *Pygmalion*—and Shaw objected strongly. When Shaw learned that Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the first Higgins, had thrown a bouquet of flowers to Eliza after she had swept out in Act V, he was furious. “My ending makes money, you ought to be grateful,” Tree remonstrated, to which Shaw famously replied, “Your ending is damnable, you ought to be shot.” Shaw had given Higgins qualities that he might well have thought inoculated his play from becoming a romance, despite the promise of its title: Higgins shows virtually no interest, other than a professional one, in Eliza. In answer to Pickering’s

concerns that no advantage would be taken of her, Higgins adds, “So here I am, a confirmed old bachelor, and likely to remain so.”

In his preface to *Pygmalion* Shaw notes that Higgins was partially based on philologist Henry Sweet: “His great ability as a phonetician . . . would have entitled him to high official recognition . . . but for his Satanic contempt for all academic dignitaries and persons in general who thought more of Greek than of phonetics.” Bertrand Wainger writes that Sweet “would often turn his back on a group of speakers and jot down a phonetic record of their conversation . . . engrossed in his studies—as is Professor Higgins—to the exclusion of the social amenities.”²⁶ The personality characteristics that Shaw gave to Higgins—gross callousness and insensitivity—go well beyond being deeply absorbed in and committed to research. In his preface Shaw noted “*Pygmalion* Higgins is not a portrait of Sweet, to whom the adventure of Eliza Doolittle would have been impossible.” Rodelle Weintraub showed that Shaw accurately portrays in Higgins aspects of the syndrome Hans Asperger described in 1944.²⁷ Despite Shaw’s efforts, however, romanticization continued to occur. A. M. Gibbs noted “the various endings of *Pygmalion* and Shaw’s attempts to preserve the essentially feminist thrust of the play.”²⁸

One reason Shaw was adamantly against romanticization was that it diminished his social message. Romanticization is explored by Derek McGovern in “Eliza Undermined: The Romanticisation of Shaw’s *Pygmalion*,” an analysis of how *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* incorporated romantic themes and by so doing shifted Shaw’s original intent.²⁹ In the 1939 Anthony Asquith film with Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller, this was accomplished in numerous ways: casting a particularly handsome Higgins, his gentle tone of voice, having him speak to Eliza softly rather than roughly, having Higgins and Eliza physically closer to each other, their expressions, her beautiful clothes, careful lighting, and more intimate acting. In addition the age difference between Higgins and Eliza was reduced; she was no longer less than half his age, and he no longer an “old bachelor.” The shift occurred to such an extent that in the 1964 film *My Fair Lady*, when Audrey Hepburn is at the embassy ball, she is beautiful, elegant, and completely constrained. Although she shows no more of her “natural self” than would a model in a fashion show, that does not appear to have particularly distressed audiences or critics.

Although the romantic yearnings stimulated by Shaw’s play are considerable, they in themselves did not cause the eclipse of his social intent: The women’s movement’s continuous advances played a part in allowing that shift to occur successfully. In Britain, Parliament began granting women the

right to vote in 1918, and in the United States the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote was ratified in 1920. Wilhelmina Stirling was herself active in efforts for women's suffrage. The Archives of the De Morgan Foundation contain a letter (11 May 1911) from British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst to Stirling, thanking her "for having unearthed and published such a valuable piece of evidence that women voted prior to the Reform Bill of 1832."

Sweeping Out in Anger

Shaw likely thought it essential for Eliza to "sweep out" at the end of *Pygmalion*—and that it not end in romance—for several reasons. The personality characteristics he gave Higgins are one: Eliza's personal growth ensures she no longer will tolerate such abusive treatment. Two further reasons relate to Shaw's original social intent. In regard to external constraints, her return could imply acquiescence to the constraints of society—to society's expectations that a lady be no more than a toy princess. Eliza sweeping out on Higgins is an expression of Shaw's social values. In regard to the development of internal constraints, it could imply Eliza's own suppression of natural feelings, her permanent suppression of her own wishes and the ability to be natural. For at least these reasons Eliza must sweep out on Higgins. This may help us understand Shaw's reaction to Tree throwing the flowers.

The complex intertwining of *Pygmalion*'s inherent romantic theme with Eliza's pushing back against Higgins's treatment of her, against the constraints of society, and against her own suppression of natural feelings "for the sake of keeping well with society" exist together in her retort, "I only want to be natural." Freddy's own naturalness is the antithesis of the artifice of society, his honesty and sincerity seen in his love-struck behavior. His treatment of Eliza is quite opposite to Higgins's. *Toy Gods* also makes use of this concept. Amelia says to her sister, "Men can't act being struck silly, unless the silliness is there, it isn't love."³⁰

Critiques of the social strictures of Victorian and Edwardian society such as seen in *Toy Gods* and *Pygmalion* were a frequent theme both in print and on stage. Wilhelmina Stirling's novel adds valuable affirmation to what is already known. These two stories—similar in theme and written in the same decade, describing the development of internal constraints that prevent women from "being natural"—may help us to further understand not only the constraints women experienced, but the significant emotional toll they exacted.



Fig. 1 | Wilhelmina Stirling. frontispiece to her book of reminiscences, *Life's Little Day*.

Stirling describes in *Toy Gods* the anguish Amelia felt as she bent herself to the artifice demanded by society, losing her ability to be her natural self. Both authors differentiate this actual loss of ability from self-imposed constraints, bullying, and other forms of mistreatment. Both Eliza and Amelia were taught to suppress feelings and emotions, to act mechanically, like toy princesses. At the end of *Toy Gods* Amelia becomes furious with Sir Geoffrey when, the day after they passionately kissed and declared their love, he acts as though nothing had happened. Similarly, in response to Higgins's bullying and his lack of kindness, Shaw's stage direction is that Eliza speaks to him "disdainfully" and then "sweeps out." For each heroine, becoming angry appears to have been a necessary part of recapturing her natural self. Anger would have been one of the emotions each had been taught to suppress in learning to act like a duchess. It was not considered "ladylike." That is what makes "sweeping out" so important, whether for Amelia, Eliza, or Henrik Ibsen's Nora when—supremely unladylike—she slammed the door behind her as she walked out of her doll's house in 1879.

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NOTES

1. Stirling often published as A. M. W. Stirling. My thanks to Michel Pharand, at that time editor of *SHAW*, who called my attention to the advertisement and has been of further help in many ways, and also to A. M. Gibbs. Both offered considerable and valuable advice and encouragement. My thanks in addition to Claire Longworth of the De Morgan Foundation for her help.

2. Augustus De Morgan used a capital "D" in spelling his name as do his descendants. Shaw spells it with a lowercase "d."

3. Bernard Shaw, *William Morris as I Knew Him* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936), 28–30.

4. Julia Cartwright, "William DeMorgan: A Reminiscence," *Littell's Living Age* 293 (April–June 1917): 346. For Shaw attending at-homes at the Lawsons, see A. M. Gibbs, *A Bernard Shaw Chronology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 366.

5. Lucy Ella Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership: Gender, Word, and Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 83–85. See also Elise Lawton Smith, *Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 115, and Patricia Yates, "Evelyn de Morgan's Use of Literary Sources in Her Paintings," in *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings*, ed. Catherine Gordon (London: De Morgan Foundation, 1996), 62.

6. A. M. W. Stirling, *Life's Little Day* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1924), 117, 23, 27.

7. Gibbs, *Bernard Shaw Chronology*, 62–63.

8. "Percival Pickering" was the name of Stirling's father and of one of her brothers. Her father died in 1876, and her brother Percival, who was known as Spencer, was a biologist. As Stirling had by 1903 published two novels (*The Adventures of Prince Almero* in 1890 and *The Queen of the Goblins* (A Fairy Tale) in 1892) under her own name, Claire Longworth of the De Morgan Foundation asks whether it was actually her mother who had written *Toy Gods*. Longworth, private communication, 2017.

9. Stirling is not mentioned in Shaw's published letters or other known writings.

10. A. M. W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and His Wife* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 237.

11. Gibbs writes that he has "not heard of any other source which might have prompted Shaw to use the name Pickering," and adds, "I suppose it is a coincidence, but the name Lawson in the *Toy Gods* story is also that of Cecil Lawson, a member of the artistic Lawson family with whom Shaw became acquainted in his early London days. . . . Lawson was a member of the same kind of artistic circle as that mentioned in your essay." A. M. Gibbs, private communication, 26 March 2017. In regard to similarities with *Pygmalion*, Claire Longworth of the De Morgan Foundation noted, "From what I know of Mrs Stirling, I think we'd have some outraged journal entries or letters if she believed that either she or her mother was plagiarised to such a level of success." Longworth, private communication, 2017.

12. The De Morgan Foundation, Watts Gallery Estate, Down Lane, Compton, Guildford, Surrey. Its collection is displayed at the Ashmolean, Cannon Hall, Queens House, and Wightwick Manor in addition to the Watts Gallery.

13. Stirling, *Life's Little Day*, 13.

14. Walter Spencer-Stanhope, born a Stanhope, changed his last name to Spencer-Stanhope after he married Anne Spencer, whose family held Cannon Hall.

15. John Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (Edinburgh: Butterworths, 2002), 167.

16. Owen Hood Philips, *Leading Cases in Constitutional Law* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1957), chap. 13, 46–47. See also <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/KB/1607/J23.html>.

17. A. M. W. Stirling, *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends: The Life of Thomas William Coke, First Earl of Leicester of Holkham*, 2 vols. (London: John Lane, 1908), 1:207–9. Stirling quotes *Diary and Correspondence of Lord Colchester*, 1:45.

18. Stirling, *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends*, 2:378.

19. Stirling, *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends*, 1:190.
20. *Judy* had only a very brief run at the Prince of Wales Theatre. The title character was played by Nina Boucicault (1867–1950), the first to play the title role in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* in 1904.
21. A. M. W. Stirling, "A Transatlantic Invasion of 1816," *Nineteenth Century and After* 66 (July–December 1909): 1063–64.
22. Lois Drawmer in Jill Berk Jiminez and Joanna Banham, eds., *Dictionary of Artists' Models* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 257–59.
23. Stirling, *Life's Little Day*, 26–27.
24. Note in 2 Kings 5:18, "In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself . . . the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing."
25. The WorldCat listing shows but five copies: in the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, and the libraries of the University of Cambridge, Princeton University, and the University of North Carolina. It is not found at Shaw's Corner, the British National Trust, or the collections of the De Morgan Foundation.
26. Bertrand M. Wainger, "Henry Sweet: Shaw's *Pygmalion*," *Studies in Philology* 27.4 (October 1930): 558–72.
27. Rodelle Weintraub, "Henry Higgins: A Classic Aspergen," *English Literature in Transition: 1880–1920* 49.4 (2006): 388–97.
28. A. M. Gibbs, *The Art and Mind of Shaw: Essays in Criticism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1983), 168–76, and *Bernard Shaw: A Life* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 330–34.
29. Derek McGovern, "Eliza Undermined: The Romanticisation of Shaw's *Pygmalion*" (Massey University, New Zealand, 2011), 141.
30. Percival Pickering, *Toy Gods* (London: John Lane, 1904), 362.