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Author(s)	Matsumoto, Shoko
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# Creative Evolution Through Reproduction in *Major Barbara*:

## Self-Sacrifice for the Next Generation

Shoko Matsumoto

### 1. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw wrote *Major Barbara* in 1905, and it was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London on November 28 in the same year. One of Shaw's most popular plays, it has been frequently performed since then.

A common theme in the critiques of *Major Barbara* is salvation or how to save the poor. Critic Sonya Lorichs asserts that the theme of the play is 'the Salvationist conception of sin, repentance and salvation versus ruthless egoism and crass materialism' (102).

In this paper, however, I will focus on Major Barbara's decision to marry Adolphus Cusins and inherit her father's company, primarily because that decision, when Barbara had struggled to be an independent woman, makes it difficult for us to understand her. Her status at the end of the play is contradictory to the first wave of feminism extending suffrage to all women in the late nineteenth century.

Moreover, her choice is enigmatic for Shavians because the ending does not conform to what Shaw's heroines tend to do. Take, for example, Vivie Warren in *Mrs Warren's Profession*: in leaving her brothel-keeper mother, she, like other Shavian heroines, does not choose to depend on others but instead tries to be an independent New Woman. Shaw so admired Henrik Ibsen as a teacher (Holroyd 11) and was so profoundly influenced by him that his works have a running thread of the 'woman question' in them, not unlike Ibsen. This focus in Shaw's plays and his life helped women's independence, and critic Virginia Costello goes so far as to call him a 'promoter of women's rights' (147). In this paper, then, I investigate why Barbara makes the decision she does in the end and what her resolution means.

### 2. A daughter's defiance

Barbara is not the typical Victorian upper-class woman. She is 'robuster [*sic*], jollier, much more energetic' (61), in a Salvation Army uniform living 'on a pound a week' (54) without a maid to take care of her, associating with a pseudo-Greek professor whom she 'picked up in the street' (54) and giving people nicknames like Ann in *Man and Superman*. She is a self-sufficient person

and, as her mother Lady Britomart describes her, she ‘has developed a propensity to have her own way and order people about which quite crows [her mother] sometimes. It’s not ladylike’ (61).

Barbara’s motivation for her contrariness is to oppose her mother, a typical Victorian woman who depends on a man financially in spite of her father being ‘the Earl of Stevenage’ (55) who does not have money. Lady Britomart’s primary concern is to make her only son Stephen Undershaft a successor to the Undershafts’ cannon business, hoping to manipulate the company behind her son’s back. Lady Britomart insists that her husband bequeath his company to his son because ‘it is [his] duty to make Stephen [his] successor’ (120). She is not a weak and naïve woman but a ‘peremptory’ (51) and aggressive one, although she narrow-mindedly follows Victorian duty without skepticism. Her ambition, however, cannot help her gain power in the male-dominated world, and she sees her son as her only hope to gain a foothold in a patriarchal society. Her plan is foiled, however, because the Undershafts doggedly follow the traditional family principle that ‘the cannon business [must be] left to an adopted foundling named Andrew Undershaft’ (57). On top of that, neither Undershaft nor Stephen willingly consents to her.

Barbara’s defiance is ultimately for naught: Undershaft and his associate Bodger donate ten thousand pounds to the Salvation Army, which was too poorly funded to operate. Ultimately, ‘the Army is saved, and saved through [Undershaft]’ (109). Barbara has a crisis in faith and is thereafter unable to pray because she had believed that souls cannot be bought by money. To her, Undershaft’s money brings back ‘drunkenness and derision’ (127) to the people she had once saved. Barbara’s reaction to this disappointing turn of events is to discard her uniform and wear an ‘ordinary fashionable dress’ (114) in Act III, which is effective enough on the stage to make the audience understand her change of heart. Critic Sonja Lorichs analyses Barbara as an ‘unwomanly woman’.

Major Barbara (1905), Shaw’s next play about a rebellious young woman who has enough courage and self-assurance to break away from conventional life, was also exceptional in presenting a drama seen before a heroine who rejected the conventional life of the daughter of an upper-class family and worked in the slums as a Salvationist. (102)

Yet no matter how rebellious Barbara apparently seems, in fact, she has never been independent from her parents. On the contrary, she has depended on her father’s money and been protected by her grandfather’s social position. Undershaft has not lived with his family for a long time but has supported them financially, and he points out to Barbara that her situation has depended on his money:

UNDERSHAFT. I fed you and clothed you and housed  
you. I took care that you should have money  
enough to live handsomely — more than enough;  
so that you could be wasteful, careless, generous.  
That saved your soul from the seven deadly sins. (141)

He goes on to suggest, 'I enabled Barbara to become Major Barbara, and I saved her from the crime of poverty' (141).

Barbara's defiance would not be possible without her father's money and her grandfather's social position. Otherwise, she would be like Jenny Hills, another female Salvation worker who is described as 'pale, overwrought' (78) because she works long hours and, without any support from her family, lives on no more than one pound a week, which is not enough for adequate nutrition.

Jenny, who has no money and power to protect her, is unfortunately attacked by a man named Bill Walker who comes to the West Ham Salvation Army shelter to search for his former girlfriend and take her home. He first threatens Jenny, then he seizes her hair, punches her face and orders her to produce his former girlfriend, who has converted since leaving him. Bill leaves Barbara alone, promising, 'Well, Aw aint dan nathin to er [*sic*]' (83), because he is told that she is the granddaughter of the Earl of Stevenage.

The difference between Barbara and Jenny is Barbara's possession of money and power. This highlights the inequality between classes. In this society, without both, women have no value and no power. Even though Barbara and Jenny occupy different stations in society, the power structure of this male-dominated society prevents Barbara from becoming emancipated.

### 3. Male-dominated sphere

Adolphus Cusins embodies the sexuality force to control Barbara. The stage directions describe him as a complex and ambivalent character (62). He appears to be a grave and earnest man who has been studying Greek when truly he is sly, tricky and calculating. Hence, he always tells a lie about his religion, birth and education. He joins the Salvation Army not because he believes in it but because he is infatuated with Barbara and hopes to capture her heart. He admits to 'joining the Army to worship Barbara' (134).

As for Cusins' background, Lady Britomart believes that his parents 'are most respectable married people' (135). But in a sense he is a foundling in England because his mother is his father's deceased wife's sister, which is illegal in England. He covers up his parentage to preserve the illusion that he is a qualified partner for Barbara since he thinks that 'she [Barbara] was a woman of the people, and that a marriage with a professor of Greek would be far beyond the wildest social ambitions of her rank' (134-35).

His deception also fools Lady Britomart, who believes that he ‘will make a very good husband. After all, nobody can say a word against Greek: it stamps a man at once as an educated gentleman’ (54). He is not only not a Greek scholar, but he did not even learn Greek in school.

But fortunately for him, Cusins is qualified to inherit Undershaft’s foundry because he neither has legal parents nor high education, which Undershaft requires his successor not to have. Cusins is determined to inherit Undershaft’s business saying ‘What I am now selling it [his soul] for is neither money nor position nor comfort, but for reality and for power’ (149). Moreover he promises to ‘give the common man weapons against the intellectual man’ (150) and stop wars, declaring ‘Dare I make war on war?’ (151). But he cannot save the poor common men if he does not earn profits from producing armaments by preventing wars.

Cusins’ deceit is ultimately uncovered by his own greed. When he negotiates his salary with Undershaft, he persists until he is promised three-fifths of the total profits. As her husband, Cusins controls Barbara through sexuality. He habitually appeases Barbara by kissing her, which we know from the stage directions causes her to continually hold her tongue. ‘He [Cusins] is suddenly softened, and kisses her over the drum, evidently not for the first time, as people cannot kiss over a big drum without practice. Undershaft coughs’ (92). Cusins is reckless enough to kiss Barbara in the public, even in front of her father, who is uncomfortable even to look at them.

The marriage of Barbara and Cusins is implied at the end of the play, which also suggests the sexual activities that usually accompany married life. Bernard F. Dukore also acknowledges that ‘[a]t the end of the play, she [Barbara] reaffirms her forthcoming marriage, of which sex is a vital part, as well as her commitment to salvation.... She will be a working woman and she will also be a wife. Salvationism is in her future, and so is sex’ (118). It can therefore be predicted that Cusins will dominate Barbara through sexuality, whether by means of fear or pleasure.

Finally, Undershaft epitomizes the money force to dominate Barbara. Having suffered from poverty in his childhood, he hates destitution and slavery and thinks they are ‘worse than any other crimes whatsoever’ (143). Hence, his religion is ‘money and gunpowder’ because he believes ‘without enough of both [he] cannot afford the others’ (93). Keeping his words, he gives his employees ‘thirty shillings a week to twelve thousand a year’ (141). He admits his business gains more profits as its armaments become more damaging, confessing, ‘[t]he more destructive war becomes the more fascination we find it’ (70). With his money, he saves even the Salvation Army. He cannot find anything he cannot control with his vast means. Even though Undershaft lived separately from his family for a long time without seeing his children since their babyhood, the rest of family depends on his money. He thus powerfully influences his family even in his absence. It is he who decides every important matter including who will be the successor of his foundry.

Barbara laments that she cannot escape from capitalists like her father and the distiller and recognises that society is operated by capital and that people cannot live without it.

CUSINS. And leave me.

BABARA. Yes, you, and all the other naughty mischievous children of men. But I can't. I was happy in the Salvation Army for a moment. I escaped from the world into a paradise of enthusiasm and prayer and soul saving; but the moment our money ran short, it all came back to Bodger: it was he who saved our people: he, and the Prince of Darkness, my papa. Undershaft and Bodger: their hands stretch everywhere: when we feed a starving fellow creature, it is with their bread, because there is no other bread; when we tend the sick, it is in the hospitals they endow; if we turn from the churches they build, we must kneel on the stones of the streets they pave. As long as that lasts, there is no getting away from them. Turning our backs on Bodger and Undershaft is turning backs on life. (151)

In this way Barbara acknowledges the grip that the powerful men in her life have not only on her but on society at large; she then resigns from the Salvation Army and decides to help his father with his employees.

Believing '*I am the government of your country [England]*' (124), Undershaft governs not only the domestic but also the international, because his company sells armaments all over the world with the policy '[t]o give arms to all men' (138) and produces profits and armaments for the country. In essence, he has money and power to control the world.

#### **4. Life Force**

Women in this male-dominated society are valued largely for their ability to produce heirs. It is only Barbara for whom Undershaft cares in his family, and not for her reproductive ability. When he meets his family after a long time, there is no child of his whose identity he can guess except Barbara. Although Stephen is the first-born son, Undershaft does not care about him because his son does not take after him at all, leading Undershaft to say, '*I think, I see nothing of myself in him, and less of you [Lady Britomart]*' (118). Undershaft is interested in Barbara so much that he desires to win her. When Cusins asks him, '*Have you, too, fallen in love with Barbara?*', he also confesses his love for her, saying '*Yes, with a father's love*' (96). Although Undershaft has not seen her since her childhood, he strangely loves his daughter so much that Cusins finds this paternal love dangerous.

But what charm of hers attracts him so much? It is her will. Undershaft is interested in Barbara because he presumes that she is his comrade, understanding that '[h]er inspiration comes

from within herself” and that “[i]t is the Undershaft inheritance (96). He hopes, ‘I shall hand on my torch to my daughter. She shall make my converts and preach my gospel’ (96). He selfishly assumes that her ilk is the same as his. Cusins also sees a driving force inside Barbara, noting ‘Dionysos and all the others are in herself. I adored what was divine in her, and was therefore a true worshipper’ (134-35). Undershaft expects Barbara, who possesses inner will, to worship and advocate his chosen religion. As a secularist, his religion is firstly ‘money and power’, boasting, ‘My religion? Well, my dear, I am a Millionaire. That is my religion’ (88), believing ‘you must first acquire money enough for a decent life, and power enough to by your own master’ (94).

To upraise the next generation’s standard of living, Undershaft makes Barbara join the triangular alliance of a millionaire, a poet and a savior of souls: Undershaft, Cusins and Barbara (97). He insists that they are special: ‘We three must stand together above the common people: how else can we help their children to climb up beside us? Barbara must belong to us, not to the Salvation Army’ (98).

Moreover, the reason he does this is he believes that he follows ‘a will of which [he] is a part’ (139). He means that he follows the world’s will, or as Shaw calls it, Life Force, Michael Holroyd explains, “Shaw added a number of passages in which he makes clear that he is enshrining the individual will, not when directed to personal ends but when working in harmony with the word-will (or Life Force as it became known)’ (13). Furthermore, Christopher Innes indicates, ‘Undershaft—whose business promotes death—is “the instrument of a Will or Life Force” at the controls of the engine of social progress (whereas the Salvation Army is the tool of enslaving exploitation)’ (38).

Barbara is finally converted after seeing Undershaft’s heavenly foundry where its employees are well endowed with welfare and good facilities (130). She is made to believe ‘[t]hat is where salvation is really wanted...Let’s God’s work be done for its own sake: the work he had to create us to do because it cannot be done except by living men and women’ (152).

## 5. Self-Sacrifice

Nevertheless, despite her strong will, Barbara will ultimately sacrifice herself to the male-dominated society in two ways. Firstly she devotes herself to silencing Undershaft’s demanding employees’ complaints in the name of ‘salvation’, delightfully recognising, ‘fulfilled, quarrelsome, snobbish, uppish [*sic*] creatures, all standing on their little rights and dignities, and thinking that my father ought to be greatly obliged to them for making so much money for him’(152). If she obeys her call to preach to his employees that what they are doing is not for profits but to follow Life force to improve the world, all human being will become better; Shaw

calls this Creative Evolution<sup>1</sup>. They will probably never complain about their situation because they may think they have ‘a great and justifiable’ cause. But it is Undershaft and Cusins who gain all benefits because their employees will never grumble and are easily controlled.

Secondly, Barbara is capable of producing an heir to inherit the Undershaft fortune and perpetuate the Undershaft religion. She transforms a human into a convenient means of maintaining the male-dominated sphere. By the end of the play, Barbara regresses to an infantile state; stage directions have her ‘clutch[ing] like a baby at her mother’s skirt’ (152) and her mother moans, ‘Barbara: when will you learn to be independent and to act and think for yourself? I know as well as possible what that cry of ‘Mamma, Mamma,’ means. Always running to me’ (152).

Believing that she needs to fulfill her mission endowed by Life force, she decides to join the triangle alliance feeling that she is integral part of it. But unfortunately she is not. There are often members in a group believing that they are comrades, but they are actually exploited by the others. The triangle alliance brings a handsome profit to Undershaft and Cusins while Barbara is exploited and the men put her to use for their maximum benefit. Elsei Adams also claims, ‘As agents of the Life Force, such women as Candida, Lady Cicely, Barbara Undershaft or Saint Joan are as self-sacrificing as the most fanatic Victorian martyr-woman’ (159). No matter how hard Barbara tries to be a part of the male-dominated sphere, she cannot be because she is a woman of whom they want to take advantage and then exclude from their society. No matter how hard Barbara tries to be independent, the male-dominated society consisting of the two types of force ensnares Barbara and compels her to resign from her emancipation. Throughout this, she does not recognise the fact that she is regarded as a means for maintaining men’s superiority; she believes that she is devoting herself to Life Force, which is a core idea of Shaw’s.

## 6. Conclusion

In this early work of Bernard Shaw, Major Barbara is depicted as an agent of Life Force. But Major Barbara is not described as a noble human being for Creative Evolution but a means of reproducing a protector of the male-dominated society in the form of an heir. Shaw portrays a woman’s self-sacrifice as magnificently noble, like an angel or a saint. Adams also states ‘Major Barbara is likewise a savior of others, as is Saint Joan.... Curiously, Shaw attacked the woman-are-angels morality, but himself liked to portray women as saints’ (159). In this play, Life Force is depicted as the will of men, not of all humankind. Barbara’s inner will is subsumed by men’s desires, conveniently cloaked as Life Force. It is not understandable why Barbara

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<sup>1</sup> This is the word of Henri Bergson meaning the Life force (the inner driving force) urges people to acquire power and knowledge for something far bigger than the satisfaction of their own appetite and the ease of their own bodies, and who find such interest and pleasure in those extra pursuits that their bodies and appetites are rather a nuisance to them than otherwise, are the really religious people (Conolly 105)

one-sidedly martyrs herself for the men in the play when the men do not do the same. Barbara is depicted as an agent of self-sacrifice in order to go back to being a conventional woman, thus discarding the self-realization of being an independent woman. In this play, Shaw does not illustrate Barbara from the view point of feminism.

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