

Alfie gets a lesson from Pauline Boty in the dry-cleaners shop

The premise:

This narrative brings together two 1960s cultural figures – one real and one fictional – in a conversation about gender equality and the art world. The year is 1966.

The protagonist is Pauline Boty (1938-1966). She was a British painter and co-founder of the 1960s' British Pop Art movement of which she was acknowledged as the only female member. Her paintings and collages often demonstrate a joy in self-assured femininity and female sexuality, as well as criticism (overt and implicit) of the "man's world" in which she lived. Her rebellious art, combined with her free-spirited lifestyle, made Boty a herald of 1970s' feminism.

Alfie, on the other hand, was a highly successful film – a box office hit which premiered in March 1966 in London. The narrative follows a young womanising Cockney (Alfie, played by Michael Caine) who leads a self-centred life focused almost entirely on his own pleasure-seeking. Alfie cheats on women, treating them with disrespect and using them for casual sex and domestic affairs. The film was one of the first of its kind to use the *fourth wall* technique where Alfie speaks directly to camera, offering running commentaries to explain his actions and responses to the viewer.

The following dialogue is inspired by a real scene in the film in which Pauline Boty plays the part of a fictional dry-cleaning attendant. The piece re-imagines a conversation that might have taken place had Pauline Boty been playing herself in that scene.

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The bell above the door chimes as ALFIE enters the dry-cleaning shop. Behind the counter stands PAULINE BOTY, 28, vibrant and confident, her paint-stained fingers sorting through garments. She doesn't look up immediately.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Now here's a bird I've been meaning to get to know better. Works in this dreary little shop, but there's something about her that's different from the usual sort. *(to Pauline)* Afternoon, love. Got my suit ready?

Pauline: *(not looking up)* Depends which suit you're talking about, Alfie. The one you wear to impress women, or the one you actually brought in for cleaning?

Alfie: *(surprised, then grinning)* Sharp tongue on you, 'aven't you? I like that in a woman.

Pauline: *(finally looking up, unimpressed)* How lovely for you. Your actual suit is hanging right there. That'll be two and six pence.

Alfie: *(to camera)* See what I mean? Most birds would be melting by now. This one's wearing armour. *(to Pauline)* What's got you so wound up, love? Working here, is it? *(gestures around the shop)*...this palace of steam and starch, eh?

Pauline: This isn't my real job, if you must know. It's just part-time. Actually, I'm an artist: a painter.

Alfie: *(patronizing)* Oh yeah? Course you are, love. Nice hobby for a girl.

Pauline: *(sharply)* It's not a hobby. I'm at the Royal College of Art. Or I was till they told me my work wasn't suitable. Whatever that means.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Uh oh, touched a raw nerve there, didn't I? *(to Pauline)* What d'you mean, not suitable?

Pauline: *(leaning on the counter)* Well, Alfie, and I know this must be hard for the likes of you, but imagine a world where your charm, your confidence, your right to speak your mind is always being questioned. Every time you open your mouth, someone tells you to pipe down. Yes, that's right...pipe down and let the men talk. Yeah, that's what it's like for me!

Alfie: *(uncomfortable)* Oh come on, Pauline. Can't be that bad, can it? You're an educated bird, right? And you're...

Pauline: ...what? Pretty? Is that supposed to be my qualification? Last week my professor at the College told me my paintings were "too emotional, too feminine" for serious consideration. Meanwhile the likes of David Hockney and his gang get their work praised to the sky...their bold visions. Hah hah!

Alfie: I've heard of that Hockney geezer. He's famous...Well Pauline, maybe they think your paintings are a bit...girly?

Pauline: *(laughing bitterly)* Girly? You know nothing about my work, Alfie! If you mean 'girly', yes, they celebrate women, not treat us as decorative or sexual objects. They explore female sexuality instead of pretending we don't have any. What do men know? Bugger all, I'd say.

Alfie: *(shifting uncomfortably)* Look, love, I'm not saying women don't have appetites. I mean, I've met plenty who do...

Pauline: Who do what, Alfie? You mean women you've conquered? Seduced? Used then thrown them away?

Alfie: *(to camera)* Hmm...this is getting a bit heavy for a casual chat in a dry-cleaning shop, ain't it? Who'd 'ave thought? *(to Pauline)* Listen Pauline, I don't use women. Yeah, okay, we have a bit of fun – a laff an' that – no harm done in that is there?

Pauline: No harm to whom? Bloody 'ell, Alfie, you waltz through life assuming every woman exists simply for your pleasure. Then you wonder why someone like me doesn't swoon when you flash that smile of yours.

Alfie: *(defensive now)* Look, I treat women well. I know I do because I'm always honest about what I want.

Pauline: Are you? Or do you just tell yourself that to hide the damage you leave behind?

Alfie: Hmm... damage? Now that's a bit strong...Well, I never think about it from a woman's point of view, do I? I always assumed if they weren't complaining...*(pause)*...Alright, Pauline, maybe I'm not perfect...but what's that got to do with your painting, for Gawd's sake?

Pauline: It's got everything to do with my painting, that's what, Alfie. That same attitude that makes you think women are there for your entertainment is what makes the art world dismiss us female artists. We're not taken seriously because we're not seen as serious people. You just don't bleedin' get it do you, Alfie?

Alfie: *(becoming curious now)* Oh. Alright Pauline; you made your point, hands up. So, what kind of paintings do you do then?

Pauline: I paint women the way I see them. Through my eyes. Strong, sexual, complex. Not as brain dead muses or madonnas, but as sensual human beings with our own desires and power. The male critics in the art world hate it because it threatens their own definitions of what femininity means. That's why they try to exclude us.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Woah...she's challenging me, ain't she? Do you know, I'm thinking...what would it be like to see women the way Pauline sees them? *(to Pauline)*. I don't suppose I could see some of your pictures, could I?

Pauline: *(taken aback)* What? You, the great lover boy Alfie Elkins wants to look at ART?

Alfie: Pauline I'm not that stupid, you know. I do think about things...you know, the 'finer things' in life. Sometimes.

Pauline: The 'finer things' in life? Honestly, Alfie, what's that supposed to mean? Alright then, I'll show you some of my paintings. I'm not going to explain every detail to you. Or hold your hand. You can have a look for yourself...

Pauline fetches her portfolio from the back of the shop and sets it down on the counter. She opens it to reveal a set of vibrant, bold paintings that celebrate female form and sexuality with unashamed joy.

Alfie: *(genuinely impressed)*. Bloody hell, Pauline. These are brilliant. I've never seen anything like this before. Are these pictures yours?

Pauline: Oh, come on Alfie! Don't sound so surprised. Of course they're mine!

Alfie: *(to camera)* But I am surprised. Not what I expected at all. These pictures are strong and confident...like her *(to Pauline)* Why aren't these in galleries, then?

Pauline: Because galleries are run by men who think like you ... or like you did till two minutes ago. They want safe, decorative art that doesn't challenge their assumptions about women and how they can be controlled.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Controlled? Hmm...she's saying I'm part of the problem? Treating women like they're for my own benefit. Never thinking about their point of view *(to Pauline)* What if someone could help you get these pictures seen? I mean, like in a gallery?

Pauline: *(sceptical)* You mean someone like you? What do you know? Sorry to sound patronising, Alfie.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Now, why did I offer that? Getting involved in causes ...well, it ain't exactly my style, is it? I don't know though...looking at her pictures, and listening to her – hmm... she's a serious bird, this one. *(to Pauline)* I know people; film people and that...Maybe I could...

Pauline: *(interrupting)* I don't need rescuing, Alfie. Not by you or any man. What needs changing is the system. I need men to see women not as conquests but to start seeing us as equals. That's what I want.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Equals? That's a simple word...it's like she's speaking a foreign language. *(to Pauline)* And how do I do that, then? How do I start seeing you as 'equal'?

Pauline: Well for a start, Alfie, you can try listening to us. Stop making assumptions about what we want or what we need. And when you meet a woman who challenges you, don't try to charm her into submission, 'cos I know that's your instinct. Try to understand why she's challenging you.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Blimey. She's asking me to give up everything I thought I knew how about how to treat women. But I'm a bloke. Hmm...but she has a point of view, doesn't she? Maybe I am a selfish, self-centred geezer, dressed up in a nice suit? *(to Pauline)* Your pictures...there's something different about them. They make me see women differently. Sort of independently; not something for me to win over and control.

Pauline: Well, you've made a start, Alfie. I've given you my point of view and it's equal to yours. As valid as any man's.

Alfie: Yeah, that's right, Pauline. But you've got to keep painting. Don't bloody give up.

Pauline: I don't intend to, Alfie. With or without permission, there are things about women that I want to express in my paintings. One day they'll be seen and appreciated.

Alfie picks up his suit, but doesn't move to the door straightaway.

Alfie: *(to camera)* Do you know, when I came in 'ere today I thought I'd add another notch on my belt. But instead, I've had a conversation with this bird Pauline and I think I've learned what it means to respect a woman. Well, I never knew, did I? And all because I was challenged to listen to her. *(to Pauline)* Thanks for that, Pauline¹...see you around. And good luck too!

The shop doorbell chimes and Alfie exits.

¹ Pauline Boty died in July 1966. In the previous year she became pregnant. During a prenatal examination, a tumour was discovered and she was diagnosed with cancer. She refused to have an abortion and in February 1966 her daughter Boty (known as Katy) was born. After Pauline Boty's death, her paintings were stored away in a barn for nearly 30 years until they were discovered in the 1990s. This led to a wider recognition of her work and inclusion in subsequent Pop Art exhibitions. A Blue Plaque honouring her life was erected at 7A Addison Avenue, Holland Park, London W11 in 2023.