

# Pygmalion

George Bernard Shaw

## Context

Born in Dublin in 1856 to a middle-class Protestant family bearing pretensions to nobility (Shaw's embarrassing alcoholic father claimed to be descended from Macduff, the slayer of Macbeth), George Bernard Shaw grew to become what some consider the second greatest English playwright, behind only Shakespeare. Others most certainly disagree with such an assessment, but few question Shaw's immense talent or the play's that talent produced. Shaw died at the age of 94, a hypochondriac, socialist, anti-vaccinationist, semi-feminist vegetarian who believed in the Life Force and only wore wool. He left behind him a truly massive corpus of work including about 60 plays, 5 novels, 3 volumes of music criticism, 4 volumes of dance and theatrical criticism, and heaps of social commentary, political theory, and voluminous correspondence. And this list does not include the opinions that Shaw could always be counted on to hold about any topic, and which this flamboyant public figure was always most willing to share. Shaw's most lasting contribution is no doubt his plays, and it has been said that "a day never passes without a performance of some Shaw play being given somewhere in the world." One of Shaw's greatest contributions as a modern dramatist is in establishing drama as serious literature, negotiating publication deals for his highly popular plays so as to convince the public that the play was no less important than the novel. In that way, he created the conditions for later playwrights to write seriously for the theater.

Of all of Shaw's plays, *Pygmalion* is without the doubt the most beloved and popularly received, if not the most significant in literary terms. Several film versions have been made of the play, and it has even been adapted into a musical. In fact, writing the screenplay for the film version of 1938 helped Shaw to become the first and only man ever to win the much coveted Double: the Nobel Prize for literature and an Academy Award. Shaw wrote the part of Eliza in *Pygmalion* for the famous actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, with whom Shaw was having a prominent affair at the time that had set all of London abuzz. The aborted romance between Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle reflects Shaw's own love life, which was always peppered with enamored and beautiful women, with whom he flirted outrageously but with whom he almost never had any further relations. For example, he had a long marriage to Charlotte Payne-Townsend in which it is well known that he never touched her once. The fact that Shaw was quietly a member of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, an organization whose core members were young men agitating for homosexual liberation, might or might not inform the way that Higgins would rather focus his passions on literature or science than on women. That Higgins was a representation of *Pygmalion*, the character from the famous story of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who is the very embodiment of male love for the female form, makes Higgins sexual disinterest all the more compelling. Shaw is too consummate a performer and too smooth in his self-presentation for us to neatly dissect his sexual background; these lean biographical facts, however, do support the belief that Shaw would have an interest in exploding the typical structures of standard fairy tales.

## Summary

Two old gentlemen meet in the rain one night at Covent Garden. [Professor Higgins](#) is a scientist of phonetics, and [Colonel Pickering](#) is a linguist of Indian dialects. The first bets the other that he can, with his knowledge of phonetics, convince high London society that, in a matter of months, he will be able to transform the cockney speaking Covent Garden [flower girl](#), Eliza Doolittle, into a woman as poised and well-spoken as a duchess. The next morning, the girl appears at his laboratory on Wimpole Street to ask for speech lessons, offering to pay a shilling, so that she may speak properly enough to work in a flower shop. Higgins makes merciless fun of her, but is seduced by the idea of working his magic on her. Pickering goads him on by agreeing to cover the costs of the experiment if Higgins can pass Eliza off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. The challenge is taken, and Higgins starts by having his housekeeper bathe Eliza and give her new clothes. Then Eliza's father [Alfred Doolittle](#) comes to demand the return of his daughter, though his real intention is to hit Higgins up for some money. The professor, amused by Doolittle's unusual rhetoric, gives him five pounds. On his way out, the dustman fails to recognize the now clean, pretty flower girl as his daughter.

For a number of months, Higgins trains Eliza to speak properly. Two trials for Eliza follow. The first occurs at Higgins' mother's home, where Eliza is introduced to the Eynsford Hills, a trio of mother, daughter, and son. The son [Freddy](#) is very attracted to her, and further taken with what he thinks is her affected "small talk" when she slips into cockney. [Mrs. Higgins](#) worries that the experiment will lead to problems once it is ended, but Higgins and Pickering are too absorbed in their game to take heed. A second trial, which takes place some months later at an ambassador's party (and which is not actually staged), is a resounding success. The wager is definitely won, but Higgins and Pickering are now bored with the project, which causes Eliza to be hurt. She throws Higgins' slippers at him in a rage because she does not know what is to become of her, thereby bewildering him. He suggests she marry somebody. She returns him the hired jewelry, and he accuses her of ingratitude.

The following morning, Higgins rushes to his mother, in a panic because Eliza has run away. On his tail is Eliza's father, now unhappily rich from the trust of a deceased millionaire who took to heart Higgins' recommendation that Doolittle was England's "most original moralist." Mrs. Higgins, who has been hiding Eliza upstairs all along, chides the two of them for playing with the girl's affections. When she enters, Eliza thanks Pickering for always treating her like a lady, but threatens Higgins that she will go work with his rival phonetician, Nepommuck. The outraged Higgins cannot help but start to admire her. As Eliza leaves for her father's wedding, Higgins shouts out a few errands for her to run, assuming that she will return to him at Wimpole Street. Eliza, who has a lovelorn sweetheart in Freddy, and the wherewithal to pass as a duchess, never makes it clear whether she will or not.

## Characters

**Professor Henry Higgins** - Henry Higgins is a professor of phonetics who plays Pygmalion to Eliza Doolittle's Galatea. He is the author of Higgins' Universal Alphabet, believes in concepts like visible speech, and uses all manner of recording and photographic material to document his phonetic subjects, reducing people and their dialects into what he sees as readily understandable units. He is an unconventional man, who goes in the opposite direction from the rest of society in most matters. Indeed, he is impatient with high society, forgetful in his public graces, and poorly considerate of normal social niceties--the only reason the world has not turned against him is because he is at heart a good and harmless man. His biggest fault is that he can be a bully.

**Eliza Doolittle** - "She is not at all a romantic figure." So is she introduced in Act I. Everything about Eliza Doolittle seems to defy any conventional notions we might have about the romantic heroine. When she is transformed from a sassy, smart-mouthed kerbstone flower girl with deplorable English, to a (still sassy) regal figure fit to consort with nobility, it has less to do with her innate qualities as a heroine than with the fairy-tale aspect of the transformation myth itself. In other words, the character of Eliza Doolittle comes across as being much more instrumental than fundamental. The real (re-)making of Eliza Doolittle happens after the ambassador's party, when she decides to make a statement for her own dignity against Higgins' insensitive treatment. This is when she becomes, not a duchess, but an independent woman; and this explains why Higgins begins to see Eliza not as a mill around his neck but as a creature worthy of his admiration.

**Colonel Pickering** - Colonel Pickering, the author of Spoken Sanskrit, is a match for Higgins (although somewhat less obsessive) in his passion for phonetics. But where Higgins is a boorish, careless bully, Pickering is always considerate and a genuinely gentleman. He says little of note in the play, and appears most of all to be a civilized foil to Higgins' barefoot, absentminded crazy professor. He helps in the Eliza Doolittle experiment by making a wager of it, saying he will cover the costs of the experiment if Higgins does indeed make a convincing duchess of her. However, while Higgins only manages to teach Eliza pronunciations, it is Pickering's thoughtful treatment towards Eliza that teaches her to respect herself.

**Alfred Doolittle** - Alfred Doolittle is Eliza's father, an elderly but vigorous dustman who has had at least six wives and who "seems equally free from fear and conscience." When he learns that his daughter has entered the home of Henry Higgins, he immediately pursues to see if he can get some money out of the circumstance. His unique brand of rhetoric, an unembarrassed, un hypocritical advocacy of drink and pleasure (at other people's expense), is amusing to Higgins. Through Higgins' joking recommendation, Doolittle becomes a richly endowed lecturer to a moral reform society, transforming him from lowly dustman to a picture of middle class morality--he becomes miserable. Throughout, Alfred is a scoundrel who is willing to sell his daughter to make a few pounds, but he is one of the few unaffected characters in the play, unmasked by appearance or language. Though scandalous, his speeches are honest. At points, it even seems that he might be Shaw's voice piece of social criticism (Alfred's proletariat status, given Shaw's socialist leanings, makes the prospect all the more likely).

**Mrs. Higgins** - Professor Higgins' mother, Mrs. Higgins is a stately lady in her sixties who sees the Eliza Doolittle experiment as idiocy, and Higgins and Pickering as senseless children. She is the first and only character to have any qualms about the whole affair. When her worries prove true, it is to her that all the characters turn. Because no woman can match up to his mother, Higgins claims, he has no interest in dallying with them. To observe the mother of Pygmalion (Higgins), who completely understands all of his failings and inadequacies, is a good contrast to the mythic proportions to which Higgins builds himself in his self-estimations as a scientist of phonetics and a creator of duchesses.

**Freddy Eynsford Hill** - Higgins' surmise that Freddy is a fool is probably accurate. In the opening scene he is a spineless and resourceless lackey to his mother and sister. Later, he is comically bowled over by Eliza, the half-baked duchess who still speaks cockney. He becomes lovesick for Eliza, and courts her with letters. At the play's close, Freddy serves as a young, viable marriage option for Eliza, making the possible path she will follow unclear to the reader.

## Act I

### Summary

A heavy late-night summer thunderstorm opens the play. Caught in the unexpected downpour, passersby from distinct strata of the London streets are forced to seek shelter together under the portico of St Paul's church in Covent Garden. The hapless [Son](#) is forced by his demanding sister and mother to go out into the rain to find a taxi even though there is none to be found. In his hurry, he knocks over the basket of a common [Flower Girl](#), who says to him, "Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah." After Freddy leaves, the mother gives the Flower Girl money to ask how she knew her son's name, only to learn that "Freddy" is a common by-word the Flower Girl would have used to address anyone.

An elderly military [Gentleman](#) enters from the rain, and the Flower Girl tries to sell him a flower. He gives her some change, but a bystander tells her to be careful, for it looks like there is a police informer taking copious notes on her activities. This leads to hysterical protestations on her part, that she is only a poor girl who has done no wrong. The refugees from the rain crowd around her and [the Note Taker](#), with considerable hostility towards the latter, whom they believe to be an undercover cop. However, each time someone speaks up, this mysterious man has the amusing ability to determine where the person came from, simply by listening to that person's speech, which turns him into something of a sideshow.

The rain clears, leaving few other people than the Flower Girl, the Note Taker, and the Gentleman. In response to a question from the Gentleman, the Note Taker answers that his talent comes from "simply phonetics...the science of speech." He goes on to brag that he can use phonetics to make a duchess out of the Flower Girl. Through further questioning, the Note Taker and the Gentleman reveal that they are Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering respectively, both scholars of dialects who have been wanting to visit with each other. They decide to go for a supper, but not until Higgins has been convinced by the Flower Girl to give her some change. He generously throws her a half-crown, some florins, and a half-sovereign. This allows the delighted girl to take a taxi home, the same taxi that Freddy has brought back, only to find that his impatient mother and sister have left without him.

### Commentary

This act is carefully constructed to portray a representative slice of society, in which characters from vastly different strata of society who would normally keep apart are brought together by untoward weather. It is no coincidence that this happens at the end of a show at the theater, drawing our attention to the fact that the ensuing plot will be highly theatrical, that its fantastic quality is gleaned from the illusionary magic of theater. While the transformation of Eliza in the play focuses on speech, each one of her subsequent tests is also something highly theatrical, depending on the visual impact she makes, and how she moves. The highly visual, on top of aural (therefore, altogether theatrical), way in which the flower girl is made into a duchess is emphasized right from this opening act. Under these terms, it should help us to think about the comparison of the artificial makeover of Eliza Doolittle that the phonetics scientist can achieve, to the genuine increase in self-esteem that the considerate gentleman can bestow upon her.

The confusion of the thunderstorm foreshadows the social confusion that will ensue when Higgins decides to play god with the raw material that the unschooled flower girl presents to him. In this act, everyone is introduced in very categorized roles. In this scene, Shaw introduces almost all his major characters, but refers to them by role rather than name in his stage directions: Note-Taker, The Flower Girl, The Daughter, The Gentleman, etc. Furthermore, his stage directions describing where characters stand with every line, particularly in relation to other characters, come across as more than fastidious in their detail. All this evokes a society whose members have rigid relations to one another. The odd, seemingly irrelevant episode when The Mother gives the Flower Girl money to find out how she knew her son's name shows the Mother's fear that her son might be associating with the wrong sort. The incident also conflates a real name with a common term that can apply to anyone; Freddy is for a moment both term and character. By the end of the act, The Note-Taker, The Gentleman, and The Flower Girl have become Higgins, Pickering, and Eliza, respectively. This move will continue through the length of the play, where a less visible blooming of real persons out of mere social positions occurs. If Higgins is one kind of Pygmalion who makes a flower girl a duchess, Shaw is a grander, more total Pygmalion who can will transform mere titles into human names.

Remembering that *Pygmalion* is subtitled "A Romance in Five Acts," this act strikes us as a rather odd, unceremonious way of introducing the heroes of a romance. For starters, the heroine is described as being "not at all a romantic figure." The hero calls the heroine a "squashed cabbage leaf," while she can do no better than "Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo" back at him. The impression she makes on him is abstract (as an interesting phonetic subject) while that which he makes on her is monetary (he throws her some change), so that we get no indication at all that any feelings of affection will eventually develop between these two. Indeed, we must see the play as a deliberate attempt by Shaw to undo the myth of Pygmalion, and, more importantly, the form of the romance itself. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to approach the rest of the play without a preconceived idea of how a romantic play should conclude, and to notice, as Shaw intends, that there are more utilitarian than romantic aspects to the characters' relationships with one another.

## Act II

### Summary

The next day, [Higgins](#) and [Pickering](#) are just resting from a full morning of discussion when [Eliza Doolittle](#) shows up at the door, to the tremendous doubt of the discerning housekeeper Mrs. Pearce, and the surprise of the two gentlemen. Prompted by his careless brag about making her into a duchess the night before, she has come to take lessons from Higgins, so that she may sound genteel enough to work in a flower shop rather than sell at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. As the conversation progresses, Higgins alternates between making fun of the poor girl and threatening her with a broomstick beating, which only causes her to howl and holler, upsetting Higgins' civilized company to a considerable degree. Pickering is much kinder and considerate of her feelings, even going so far as to call her "Miss Doolittle" and to offer her a seat. Pickering is piqued by the prospect of helping Eliza, and bets Higgins that if Higgins is able to pass Eliza off as a duchess at the Ambassador's garden party, then he, Pickering, will cover the expenses of the experiment.

This act is made up mostly of a long and animated three-(sometimes four-)way argument over the character and the potential of the indignant Eliza. At one point, incensed by Higgins' heartless insults, she threatens to leave, but the clever professor lures her back by stuffing her mouth with a chocolate, half of which he eats too to prove to her that it is not poisoned. It is agreed upon that Eliza will live with Higgins for six months, and be schooled in the speech and

manners of a lady of high class. Things get started when Mrs. Pearce takes her upstairs for a bath.

While Mrs. Pearce and Eliza are away, Pickering wants to be sure that Higgins' intentions towards the girl are honorable, to which Higgins replies that, to him, women "might as well be blocks of wood." Mrs. Pearce enters to warn Higgins that he should be more careful with his swearing and his forgetful table manners now that they have an impressionable young lady with them, revealing that Higgins's own gentlemanly ways are somewhat precarious. At this point, [Alfred Doolittle](#), who has learned from a neighbor of Eliza's that she has come to the professor's place, comes a-knocking under the pretence of saving his daughter's honor. When Higgins readily agrees that he should take his daughter away with him, Doolittle reveals that he is really there to ask for five pounds, proudly claiming that he will spend that money on immediate gratification and put none of it to useless savings. Amused by his blustering rhetoric, Higgins gives him the money.

Eliza enters, clean and pretty in a blue kimono, and everyone is amazed by the difference. Even her father has failed to recognize her. Eliza is taken with her transformation and wants to go back to her old neighborhood and show off, but she is warned against snobbery by Higgins. The act ends with the two of them agreeing that they have taken on a difficult task.

### **Commentary**

Even though Higgins is immediately obvious as the Pygmalion figure in this play, what this act reveals is that there is no way his phonetic magic could do a complete job of changing Eliza on its own. What we see here is that Mrs. Pearce and Colonel Pickering are also informal Pygmalions, and with much less braggadocio (the alliteration of Pygmalion, Pearce, and Pickering would support this notion). Only with Mrs. Pearce working on the girl's appearance and manners, and with Pickering working, albeit unknowingly, on her self-respect and dignity, will Eliza Doolittle become a whole duchess package, rather than just a rough-mannered common flower girl who can parrot the speech of a duchess. We learn in this scene, quite significantly, that while Higgins may be a brilliant phonetician, Mrs. Pearce finds fault with his constant swearing, forgetful manners, quarrelsome nature, and other unpleasant habits. His own hold on polite respectability is tenuous at best, and it is only his reputation, and his fundamental lack of malice that keeps him from being disliked by others. If Higgins cannot be a Pygmalion on his own, and is such an untidy, mannerless Pygmalion at that, then the obvious question posed to us is if Pygmalion, the transformer of others, can himself be transformed. Implicit in this question is another: whether it could be imperviousness to change, rather than superior knowledge, which differentiates Pygmalion from Galatea.

This act shows Higgins as an incorrigible scientist. He is not only "violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject," but interested in them only as subjects of scientific study. For that reason, when "quite a common girl" is said to at his door, Higgins thinks it is a lucky happenstance that will allow him to show Pickering the way he works. When he sees it is Eliza, he chases her away, for, having learned all he can about the Lisson Grove accent, he cannot see how she can be of any more use to him. Later, his mind seizes upon her as being "no use to anybody but me." And when Alfred Doolittle is announced, Higgins is not worried about the trouble, but looks forward instead to listening to this new accent. He displays such a dogged determination and exaggerated focus on his work that it is hard to tell if Shaw wants to make fun of this character or put it on a pedestal. In either case, there is no denying that Higgins makes an absolutely inept romantic hero. For him, if women do not inform his science in any way, "they might as well be blocks of wood." Eliza's criticism comes well-deserved--"Oh, you've no feeling heart in you: you don't care for nothing but yourself." Even Mrs. Pearce chides him for treating people like objects--"Well, the matter is, sir, that you can't take a girl up like that as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach."

Alfred Doolittle is one of those delightful, quintessential characters that populate all of Shaw's plays. He makes the most iconoclastic, scandalous statements, but all with such wit and humor that we cannot help but find his ideas attractive. In this act, Doolittle performs the extra role of inspiring Higgins break off in the middle of their conversation to analyze Doolittle's language and comment that "this chap has a certain natural gift of rhetoric." This unnatural break to the flow of talk forces us to pay a similar attention to all the rhetoric of the play.

There is a brief episode in this act in which Eliza threatens to leave because Higgins is being so rude to her, and he calls her an ingrate. She does not leave because he uses chocolates to tempt her back. This is in contrast to the final act when Higgins again calls her an ingrate. However, in the last act, to his request that she return with him, she does indeed step out the door, leaving Higgins alone in the room.

### Act III

#### Summary

It is [Mrs. Higgins'](#) at-home day, and she is greatly displeased when Henry [Higgins](#) shows up suddenly, for she knows from experience that he is too eccentric to be presentable in front of the sort of respectable company she is expecting. He explains to her that he wants to bring the experiment subject on whom he has been working for some months to her at-home, and explains the bet that he has made with [Pickering](#). Mrs. Higgins is not pleased about this unsolicited visit from a common [flower girl](#), but she has no time to oppose before Mrs. and Miss Eynsford Hill (the mother and daughter from the first scene) are shown into the parlor by the parlor-maid. Colonel Pickering enters soon after, followed by [Freddy Eynsford Hill](#), the hapless son from Covent Garden.

Higgins is about to really offend the company with a theory that they are all savages who know nothing about being civilized when Eliza is announced. She makes quite an impact on everyone with her studied grace and pedantic speech. Everything promises to go well until Mrs. Eynsford Hill brings up the subject of influenza, which causes Eliza to launch into the topic of her aunt, who supposedly died of influenza. In her excitement, her old accent, along with shocking facts such as her father's alcoholism, slip out. Freddy thinks that she is merely affecting "the new small talk," and is dazzled by how well she does it. He is obviously infatuated with her. When Eliza gets up to leave, he offers to walk her but she exclaims, "Walk! Not bloody likely. I am going in a taxi." The Mrs. Eynsford Hill leave immediately after. Clara, Miss Eynsford Hill, is taken with Eliza, and tries to imitate her speech.

After the guests leave, Mrs. Higgins chides Higgins. She says there is no way Eliza will become presentable as long as she lives with the constantly-swearing Higgins. She demands to know the precise conditions under which Eliza is living with the two old bachelors. She is prompted to say, "You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll," which is only the first of a series of such criticisms she makes of Higgins and Pickering. They assail her simultaneously with accounts of Eliza's improvement until she must quiet them. She tries to explain to them that there will be a problem of what to do with Eliza once everything is over, but the two men pay no heed. They take their leave, and Mrs. Higgins is left exasperated by the "infinite stupidity" of "men! men!! men!!!"

#### Commentary

In this, Eliza's first debut and debacle, we are shown that just speaking correctly is not enough to pass a flower girl off as a duchess. As Higgins knows, "You see, I've got her pronunciation all right; but you have to consider not only how a girl pronounces, but what she pronounces." Mrs. Higgins puts it succinctly with the line, "She's a triumph of your art and of her dressmaker's; but

if you suppose for a moment that she doesn't give herself away in every sentence she utters, you must be perfectly cracked about her." In other words, there are aspects to a person that are susceptible to change or improvement, but these cannot override those aspects that are innate to that person, which will surface despite the best grooming.

While it may seem that this is the act in which Eliza is exposed for what she is, just about all the other characters are shown up in the process. Pickering and Higgins are an example. After they have been shown to be the undoubted masters of their (phonetic) dominion, lording it over Eliza, here, in Mrs. Higgins' feminine environment, they come across more like over-enthusiastic, ineffective little boys than mature men of science. Mrs. Higgins repeatedly rebukes Higgins for his lack of manners, his surly behavior towards her guests, and for his klutzy habit of stumbling into furniture, and is very reluctant to have him in front of company. This act also reveals middle class civility for what it really is--something dull and uninspiring. Mrs. Higgins' at-home turns out to be an unexciting conversation determinedly choked full with "how do you do's" and "goodbye's," with barely anything interesting said in between. In fact, the only time something is said with any spirit is when Eliza forgets herself and slips back into her normal manner of speaking. Clara Eynsford Hill, for example, is shown to be a useless wannabe with no character of her own (quite in contrast to the feisty and opinionated Eliza). So unremarkable is the mother-son-daughter threesome of the Eynsford Hills that Higgins cannot recall where he has met them (at Covent Garden, in the first act) until halfway through this act. He can only tell that their voices are familiar, suggesting that all they have to recommend them is their accents, and nothing else. If staged well, this act can expose the clumsiness and vapidness of polite Victorian society, causing us to question if the making of a duchess out of a flower girl is really doing her a favor.

We get another indication in this act that Higgins is incapable of being the romantic hero of the play. We see that when he says to this mother, "My idea of a lovable woman is somebody as like you as possible. I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women: some habits lie too deep to be changed." The irony is that even though he has no doubt that he can transform Eliza, he takes it as a given that there are natural traits in himself that cannot be changed.

## Act IV

### Summary

The trio return to [Higgins'](#) Wimpole Street laboratory, exhausted from the night's happenings. They talk about the evening and their great success, though Higgins seems rather bored, more concerned with his inability to find slippers. While he talks absentmindedly with [Pickering](#), [Eliza](#) slips out, returns with his slippers, and lays them on the floor before him without a word. When he notices them, he thinks that they appeared out of nowhere. Higgins and Pickering begin to speak as if Eliza is not there with them, saying how happy they are that the entire experiment is over, agreeing that it had become rather boring in the last few months. The two of them then leave the room to go to bed. Eliza is clearly hurt ("Eliza's beauty turns murderous," say the stage directions), but Higgins and Pickering are oblivious to her.

Higgins pops back in, once again mystified over what he has done with his slippers, and Eliza promptly flings them in his face. Eliza is mad enough to kill him; she thinks that she is no more important to him than his slippers. At Higgins' retort that she is presumptuous and ungrateful, she answers that no one has treated her badly, but that she is still left confused about what is to happen to her now that the bet has been won. Higgins says that she can always get married or open that flower shop (both of which she eventually does), but she replies by saying that she wishes she had been left where she was before. She goes on to ask whether her clothes belong to her, meaning what can she take away with her without being accused of thievery. Higgins is

genuinely hurt, something that does not happen to him often. She returns him a ring he bought for her, but he throws it into the fireplace. After he leaves, she finds it again, but then leaves it on the dessert stand and departs.

### Commentary

If we consider the conventional structure of a romance or fairy tale, the story has really already reached its climax by this point, because Cinderella has been turned into a princess, and the challenge has been met. Then why does the play carry on for another two acts? This would appear completely counter-productive, only if one thinks that this play is only about changing appearances. The fact that the play carries on indicates that there are more transformations in Eliza to be witnessed: this act shows the birth of an independent spirit in the face of Higgins' bullying superiority. The loosely set-up dichotomy between people and objects (i.e., whether Higgins treats people like people or objects) is brought to a head when Eliza flings his slippers in his face, and complains that she means no more to him than his slippers--"You don't care. I know you don't care. You wouldn't care if I was dead. I'm nothing to you--not so much as them slippers." Not only does she object to being treated like an object, she goes on to assert herself by saying that she would never sell herself, like Higgins suggests when he tells her she can go get married. This climactic move forces Higgins to reconsider what a woman can be, and, as he confesses in the final act, marks the beginning of his considering Eliza to be an equal rather than a burden.

One thing to consider in this act is why Shaw has chosen not to portray the climax at the ambassador's party where Eliza can prove how well she has been instructed by Higgins (although his movie screenplay does allow for a scene at the embassy). One reason is that most theatrical productions do not have the capacity to stage an opulent, luxurious ball just for a short scene. But another reason is that Shaw's intention is to rob the story of its romance. We are spared the actual training of Eliza as well as her moment of glory (that is, both the science and the magic); instead, all we get is scenes of her pre- and post- the dramatic climax.

## Act V

### Summary

[Higgins](#) and [Pickering](#) show up the next day at [Mrs. Higgins'](#) home in a state of distraction because [Eliza](#) has run away. They are interrupted by [Alfred Doolittle](#), who enters resplendently dressed, as if he were the bridegroom of a very fashionable wedding. He has come to take issue with Henry Higgins for destroying his happiness. It turns out that Higgins wrote a letter to a millionaire jokingly recommending Doolittle as a most original moralist, so that in his will the millionaire left Doolittle a share in his trust, amounting to three thousand pounds a year, provided that he lecture for the Wannafeller Moral Reform World League. Newfound wealth has only brought him more pain than pleasure, as long lost relatives emerge from the woodwork asking to be fed, not to mention that he is now no longer free to behave in his casual, slovenly, dustman ways. He has been damned by "middle class morality." The talk degenerates into a squabble over who owns Eliza, Higgins or her father (Higgins did give the latter five pounds for her after all). To stop them, Mrs. Higgins sends for Eliza, who has been upstairs all along. But first she tells Doolittle to step out on the balcony so that she will not be shocked by the story of his new fortune.

When she enters, Eliza takes care to behave very civilly. Pickering tells her she must not think of herself as an experiment, and she expresses her gratitude to him. She says that even though Higgins was the one who trained the flower girl to become a duchess, Pickering always treated her like a duchess, even when she was a flower girl. His treatment of her taught her not

phonetics, but self-respect. Higgins is speaking incorrigibly harshly to her when her father reappears, surprising her badly. He tells her that he is all dressed up because he is on his way to get married to his woman. Pickering and Mrs. Higgins are asked to come along. Higgins and Eliza are finally left alone while the rest go off to get ready.

They proceed to quarrel. Higgins claims that while he may treat her badly, he is at least fair in that he has never treated anyone else differently. He tells her she should come back with him just for the fun of it--he will adopt her as a daughter, or she can marry Pickering. She swings around and cries that she won't even marry Higgins if he asks. She mentions that [Freddy](#) has been writing her love letters, but Higgins immediately dismisses him as a fool. She says that she will marry Freddy, and that the two will support themselves by taking Higgins' phonetic methods to his chief rival. Higgins is outraged but cannot help wondering at her character--he finds this defiance much more appealing than the submissiveness of the slippers-fetcher. Mrs. Higgins comes in to tell Eliza it is time to leave. As she is about to exit, Higgins tells her offhandedly to fetch him some gloves, ties, ham, and cheese while she is out. She replies ambivalently and departs; we do not know if she will follow his orders. The play ends with Higgins's roaring laughter as he says to his mother, "She's going to marry Freddy. Ha ha! Freddy! Freddy!! Ha ha ha ha ha!!!!!"

### **Commentary**

This final act brings together many of the themes that we have examined in the other acts, such as what constitutes the determinants of social standing, the fault of taking people too literally, or for granted, the emptiness of higher English society, etc. With regard to the first of these themes, Eliza makes the impressively astute observation that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated." The line packs double meaning by stating clearly that what is needed is not just one's affectation of nobility, while her delivery is proof of the statement itself as she has grown enough to make such an intelligent claim. Quite contrary to the dresses, the vowels, the consonants, the jewelry (significantly, only hired) that she learned to put on, probably the greatest thing she has gained from this experience is the self-respect that Pickering endowed her with from the first time he called her "Miss Doolittle." In contrast to the "self-respect" that Eliza has learned is the "respectability" that Doolittle and his woman have gained, a respectability that has "broke all the spirit out of her." While respectability can be learned, and is what Higgins has taught Eliza, self-respect is something far more authentic, and helps rather than hinders the growth of an independent spirit. Alfred Doolittle makes the unmitigated claim that acquiring the wealth to enter this society has "ruined me. Destroyed my happiness. Tied me up and delivered me into the hands of middle class morality." Higgins' haughty proclamation--"You will jolly soon see whether she has an idea that I haven't put into her head or a word that I haven't put into her mouth."--mistakes the external for the internal, and betrays too much unfounded pride, which is the ultimate cause of his misunderstanding with Eliza.

The greatest problem that people have with *Pygmalion* is its highly ambivalent conclusion, in which the audience is left frustrated if it wants to see the typical consummation of the hero and heroine one expects in a romance--which is what the play advertises itself to be after all. Most people like to believe that Eliza's talk about Freddy and leaving for good is only womanly pride speaking, but that she will ultimately return to Higgins. The first screenplay of the movie, written without Shaw's approval, has Eliza buy Higgins a necktie. In the London premier of the play, Higgins tosses Eliza a bouquet before she departs. A contemporary tour of the play in America had Eliza return to ask, "What size?" Other films of the play either show Higgins pleading with Eliza to stay with him, or Higgins following her to church. Doubtless, everyone wanted to romanticize the play to a degree greater than that which the playwright presented it. All this makes us question why Shaw is so insistent and abrupt in his conclusion.

However, in an epilogue that Shaw wrote after too many directors tried to adapt the conclusion into something more romantic, he writes, "The rest of the story need not be shewn in action, and indeed, would hardly need telling if our imaginations were not so enfeebled by their lazy dependence on the ready-mades and reach-me-downs of the ragshop in which Romance keeps its stock of 'happy endings to misfit all stories." He goes on to deliver a detailed and considered argument for why Higgins would never marry Eliza, and vice versa. For one, Higgins has too much admiration for his mother to find any other woman even halfway comparable, and even "had Mrs. Higgins died, there would still have been Milton and the Universal Alphabet." To Shaw's mind, if Eliza marries anyone at all, it must be Freddy--"And that is just what Eliza did." The epilogue goes on to give a dreary account of their married life and faltering career as the owners of a flower and vegetable shop (an ironic treatment of the typical "happily ever after" nonsense) in which Freddy and Eliza must take accounting and penmanship classes to really become useful members of society. One can see this whole play as an intentional deconstruction of the genre of Romance, and of the myth of Pygmalion as well.

## Analysis

Pygmalion derives its name from the famous story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Pygmalion, disgusted by the loose and shameful lives of the women of his era, decides to live alone and unmarried. With wondrous art, he creates a beautiful statue more perfect than any living woman. The more he looks upon her, the more deeply he falls in love with her, until he wishes that she were more than a statue. This statue is Galatea. Lovesick, Pygmalion goes to the temple of the goddess Venus and prays that she give him a lover like his statue; Venus is touched by his love and brings Galatea to life. When Pygmalion returns from Venus' temple and kisses his statue, he is delighted to find that she is warm and soft to the touch--"The maiden felt the kisses, blushed and, lifting her timid eyes up to the light, saw the sky and her lover at the same time" (Frank Justus Miller, trans.).

Myths such as this are fine enough when studied through the lens of centuries and the buffer of translations and editions, but what happens when one tries to translate such an allegory into Victorian England? That is just what George Bernard Shaw does in his version of the Pygmalion myth. In doing so, he exposes the inadequacy of myth and of romance in several ways. For one, he deliberately twists the myth so that the play does not conclude as euphorically or conveniently, hanging instead in unconventional ambiguity. Next, he mires the story in the sordid and mundane whenever he gets a chance. Wherever he can, the characters are seen to be belabored by the trivial details of life like napkins and neckties, and of how one is going to find a taxi on a rainy night. These noisome details keep the story grounded and decidedly less romantic. Finally, and most significantly, Shaw challenges the possibly insidious assumptions that come with the Pygmalion myth, forcing us to ask the following: Is the male artist the absolute and perfect being who has the power to create woman in the image of his desires? Is the woman necessarily the inferior subject who sees her lover as her sky? Can there only ever be sexual/romantic relations between a man and a woman? Does beauty reflect virtue? Does the artist love his creation, or merely the art that brought that creation into being?

Famous for writing "talky" plays in which barely anything other than witty repartee takes center stage (plays that the most prominent critics of his day called non-plays), Shaw finds in *Pygmalion* a way to turn the talk into action, by hinging the fairy tale outcome of [the flower girl](#) on precisely how she talks. In this way, he draws our attention to his own art, and to his ability to create, through the medium of speech, not only Pygmalion's Galatea, but Pygmalion himself. More powerful than Pygmalion, on top of building up his creations, Shaw can take them down as well by showing their faults and foibles. In this way, it is the playwright alone, and not some

divine will, who breathes life into his characters. While Ovid's Pygmalion may be said to have idolized his Galatea, Shaw's relentless and humorous honesty humanizes these archetypes, and in the process brings drama and art itself to a more contemporarily relevant and human level.

### Study Questions

**1.** In his preface to the play, Shaw writes that the figure of Henry Higgins is partly based on Alexander Melville Bell, the inventor of Visible Speech. How does Shaw utilize this idea of "Visible Speech"? Is it an adequate concept to use to approach people?

#### Answer to Question 1:

Through the concept of "Visible Speech," Shaw hits on the two aspects of theater that can make the greatest impression on an audience: sight and sound. Therefore, the transformation of Eliza Doolittle is most marked and obvious on these two scales. In regard to both these senses, Pygmalion stays faithful to the most clichéd formula of the standard rags-to-riches stories, in that the heroine changes drastically in the most external ways. However, while Eliza certainly changes in these blatant external ways, these changes serve as a mask for a more fundamental development of self-respect that Eliza undergoes. Because Higgins only ever charts "Visible Speech," it makes him liable to forget that there are other aspects to human beings that can also grow. But in the possible loss that Higgins faces in the final scene, and in his inability to recognize that loss as a possibility at all, the play makes certain that its audience sees the tension between internal and external change, and that sight and sound do not become measures of virtue, personality, or internal worth.

**2.** It has been said that Pygmalion is not a play about turning a flower girl into a duchess, but one about turning a woman into a human being. Do you agree?

#### Answer to Question 2:

When Eliza Doolittle threatens Higgins that she will take his phonetic findings to his rival in order to support herself, art imitates life, and Shaw's literature echoes a significant episode from his own youth. As a boy, Shaw's mother was an accomplished singer who dedicated herself to the perfection of "The Method," her teacher George Vandeleur Lee's yoga-like approach to voice training. She went so far as to leave her husband to follow her teacher to London. However, upon realizing that Lee was concerned only about his appearances and the status of his street address, she left him and brought up her daughters by setting up shop herself, teaching "The Method" as if it were her own. Shaw could not have helped but be impressed and influenced by this courageous move on the part of his mother to strike out on her own and to create an independent life for herself. Thus, though Pygmalion shows a lot of sympathy for the flower girl who wants a higher station in life, it is even more concerned with the unloved, neglected woman who decides to make herself heard once and for all. The play's determination to have Eliza grow into a full human being with her own mind and will also explains why the play makes seemingly inexplicable structural moves like leaving out the climax, and carrying on for a further two acts after the climax. In other words, the superficial climax is not the real climax at all, and Shaw's project is deeper than that of a fairy godmother.

3. What is the Pygmalion myth? In what significant ways, and with what effect, has Shaw transformed that myth in his play?

### Answer to Question 3:

The Pygmalion myth comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Pygmalion is a sculptor who creates a sculpture of a woman so perfectly formed that he falls in love with her. Aphrodite is moved by his love and touches the statue to life so that she becomes Galatea, and the sculptor can experience live bliss with his own creation. While Shaw maintains the skeletal structure of the fantasy in which a gifted male fashions a woman out of lifeless raw material into a worthy partner for himself, Shaw does not allow the male to fall in love with his creation. Right to the last act, Higgins is still quarrelsome and derisive in his interaction with Eliza, and does not even think of her as an object of romantic interest. Shaw goes on to undo the myth by injecting the play with other Pygmalion figures like Mrs. Pearce and Pickering, and to suggest that the primary Pygmalion himself is incomplete, and not ideal himself. In transforming the Pygmalion myth in such a way, Shaw calls into question the ideal status afforded to the artist, and further exposes the inadequacies of myths and romances that overlook the mundane, human aspects of life.

"I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way and been built into my house. What more can you or anyone ask?" Henry Higgins has this to say to Eliza when she complains that he does not care for anybody and threatens to leave him. How does the professor of phonetics treat the people in his life? Can one ask for more?

Describe the primary ways in which Eliza Doolittle changes in the course of the play. Which is the most important transformation, and what clues does Shaw give us to indicate this?

While Eliza Doolittle is being remade, Victorian society itself can be said to be unmade. How does Shaw reveal the pruderies, hypocrisies, and inconsistencies of this higher society to which the kerbstone flower girl aspires? Do his sympathies lie with the lower or upper classes?

"The great secret, Eliza, is not having bad manners or good manners or any other sort of manners, but having the same manner for all human souls: in short, behaving as if you were in Heaven, where there are no third-class carriages, and one soul is as good as another." It is no small coincidence that the author of Higgins' *Universal Alphabet* is the same man to blur social distinctions, thereby suggesting that social standing is a matter of nurture, not nature. Examine carefully Higgins' attitude towards his fellow men. Can this be taken as an admirable brand of socialism? Or does he fail as a compassionate being in his absolutism?

Is "A Romance in Five Acts" an accurate description of the play *Pygmalion*? How does the play conform (or not) to the traditional form of a romance (for example: boy meets girl, boy likes girl, boy meets girl's father/evil twin/ex-fiance, boy learns to love girl despite everything, boy and girl live happily ever after...)? What do you think Shaw is trying to achieve in highlighting the concept of the romance in the title? (Hint: You might want to look closely at the written sequel to the play, in which Shaw gives some very strong opinions about romances.)

If you were to create a sixth act to *Pygmalion*, who would Eliza marry? Or does she marry at all? Use the lines and behavior of the characters throughout the first five acts to support the outcome of your finale.

If possible, try to watch the film version of *Pygmalion* (1938, screenplay by Shaw), and even the Audrey Hepburn film of the musical *My Fair Lady* (1956). Consider what has been changed, removed, or enhanced in the move from the stage to the screen, and from a talking play to a musical. What does each subsequent adaptation reveal about popular expectations of a romance, versus the original intentions of the playwright? In your opinion, which of these works is the best? Why?

## Review Quiz

BY what name does Eliza address Freddy the first time that they encounter each other?

- (A) Charlie
- (B) Freddy
- (C) Captain
- (D) Kind sir

When the Flower Girl gets in the taxi at Covent Garden after the thunderstorm, where does she initially tell the taxicab to take her?

- (A) 27A Wimpole Street
- (B) Bucknam Pellis [Buckingham Palace]
- (C) The Ambassador's garden party
- (D) Angel Court, Drury Lane

Higgins claims that English is the language of:

- (A) The Queen
- (B) The noblest race
- (C) All mankind
- (D) Shakespeare, Milton, and The Bible

Why does the crowd hiding from the rain get so upset with Higgins for taking notes of the Flower Girl's speech?

- (A) They think that he is a busybody plainclothes policeman who won't leave an innocent girl alone
- (B) They think he is trying to take advantage of her
- (C) They think he has not enough gumption to get his own taxi
- (D) He's ugly

What have Pickering and Higgins written respectively?

- (A) Sanskrit in Mime; Higgins Says
- (B) Dialects of India; Higgins' Guide to Phonetics
- (C) Spoken Sanskrit; Higgins' Universal Alphabet
- (D) The Speech of Gentlemen; How to Make a Duchess in Six Months

How does Eliza Doolittle dress herself up when she visits Higgins to ask to take speech lessons?

- (A) She takes a long-overdue bath
- (B) She wears a blue kimono with cunning white flower embroidery
- (C) She brings her voluble father as a reference
- (D) She wears three mismatched ostrich feathers in her tattered hat

What reason does Higgins give for deciding to take on the experiment?

- (A) He wants to prove to Pickering that he is indeed the greatest teacher alive
- (B) Eliza's presence in the house will be an amusement to Mrs. Pearce
- (C) Only to shut the girl up from all her dreadful crying
- (D) Because life is but a series of inspired follies, and one must never lose a chance to commit one

After she threatens to leave because is so unfeeling, what does Henry give Eliza to convince her to stay?

- (A) Half a chocolate cream
- (B) A silk handkerchief
- (C) Five pounds
- (D) A blue kimono

What does Eliza usually wear to sleep?

- (A) A ragged nightgown
- (B) Her day clothes
- (C) Stolen coats
- (D) Nothing

When Alfred Doolittle says he is willing to sell his daughter for fifty pounds, Pickering asks him if he has no morals. Alfred says what in response?

- (A) "What's the good of morals?"
- (B) "Have you any?"
- (C) "Can't afford them."
- (D) "My wife won't let me have any."

All of the following witness Eliza Doolittle's phonetic debut at Mrs. Higgins' at-home except:

- (A) Mrs. Eynsford Hill
- (B) Clara and Freddy
- (C) Alfred Doolittle
- (D) Colonel Pickering

Which of the following summarizes Higgins' essential attitude towards women?

- (A) "They'd never want me."
- (B) "Pretty girls are a dime a dozen."
- (C) "What are women?"
- (D) "They're all idiots."

What does Freddy think Eliza is speaking when he meets her at Mrs. Higgins' at-home?

- (A) Cockney
- (B) Queen's English
- (C) Gutter slang
- (D) The new small talk

Upon finding out about the experiment, Mrs. Higgins thinks that her son and his friend Pickering are:

- (A) Adorably eccentric
- (B) Entirely correct
- (C) Infinitely stupid
- (D) Relentlessly scientific

Who claims that Eliza must be a Hungaraian princess?

- (A) Henry Higgins
- (B) Nepommuck
- (C) The ambassador
- (D) Clara

What does Eliza fling in Higgins' face

- (A) Half-eaten chocolates
- (B) The money he lent her
- (C) His damned slippers
- (D) Her rotten flowers

Eliza has been called all the following except

- (A) The beauty of the Orient (by the Ambassador)
- (B) Heartless guttersnipe (by Higgins)
- (C) A common girl (by Mrs. Pearce)
- (D) Darling, darling, darling (by Freddy)

When Freddy catches Eliza running out of Higgins' house, what is she actually on her way to do?

- (A) To ask her father to take her back
- (B) To jump into the river
- (C) To offer her services to Nepommuck
- (D) To sell all the jewelry she has stolen from the house

From whom does Eliza say she learns self-respect?

- (A) Mrs. Pearce
- (B) Colonel Pickering
- (C) Her father
- (D) Mrs. Higgins

Why does Higgins tell Eliza she should return to with him?

- (A) For the fun of it
- (B) For the hell of it
- (C) For the aesthetics of it
- (D) For the science of it

Who does Eliza marry in the course of the play, to a viewing audience's understanding?

- (A) Pickering
- (B) Freddy
- (C) Higgins
- (D) No one

For what organization must Alfred Doolittle lecture in order to make three thousand pounds a year?

- (A) The Church of England
- (B) The American Philanthropic Brotherhood
- (C) The Wannafeller Moral Reform World League
- (D) The Fabian Society

How much money does Alfred Doolittle want for his daughter from Higgins?

- (A) Three thousand pounds a year
- (B) Fifty pounds
- (C) Five pounds
- (D) Nothing

"A-a-a-a-ah-ow-oo!" is the favorite call of which of following characters?

- (A) Alfred Doolittle
- (B) Eliza
- (C) Clara
- (D) Higgins

The last act shows the characters getting ready for whose wedding?

- (A) Alfred Doolittle and his woman's
- (B) Higgins and Mrs. Pearce
- (C) Pickering and Eliza's
- (D) Clara and H.G. Wells'

### **Further Reading**

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