
© 2018 [eNotes.com, Inc.](http://eNotes.com) or its Licensors.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

Summary

Like *The Doctor's Dilemma* (pr. 1906, pb. 1911), *Pygmalion* is a problem play that examines a social issue. Shaw deals here with the assumptions of social superiority and inferiority that underlie the class system. He demonstrates how speech and etiquette preserve class distinctions. As he wrote in the play's preface, "It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him." *Pygmalion* therefore tries to illustrate the arbitrariness of basing a person's worth on his or her pronunciation.

The phonetics professor Henry Higgins is an expert in dialects and accents. At Covent Garden he phonetically transcribes all that the innocent flower girl Eliza Doolittle says. Since he boasted of his successes in educating social climbers in speech, Eliza comes to Higgins's house the next day, asking to be taught to speak like a lady so that she might be employed in a classy flower store. A fellow phonetics professor, Colonel Pickering, offers to cover the expenses of the experiment if Higgins can pass Eliza off as a duchess at a garden party six months later. Sure of his abilities, the tyrannical and condescending Higgins is enticed by the Frankensteinian challenge "to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her."

While Higgins is successful in transforming Eliza in terms of speech, his rough manners, rudeness, and swearing do not teach her the accompanying social etiquette. Eliza betrays her lack of refinement at a parlor party not through her pronunciation but through what she says. The comic climax is reached when she uses the vulgar expression "Not bloody likely," although she pronounces it in a ladylike manner.

Higgins and Pickering seem unaware that their experiment has transformed Eliza not only in terms of her speech. Even after she has successfully passed for a lady at a garden party, Higgins still does not treat her like a lady. Higgins's excuse is that while Pickering may treat a flower girl like a duchess, he would also treat a duchess like a flower girl, since he believes in treating everyone equally, regardless of his or her social class. Feeling disappointed and humiliated, Eliza leaves Higgins by night, no longer willing to be treated like a servant. She believes that she has risen to a higher social class and claims that social class is not determined by one's pronunciation but by the respect with which one is treated.

In the meantime, money has been left to Eliza's father by a rich American. This unexpected wealth has transformed him from an alcoholic dustman into a middle-class man in terms of behavior and ideology, although not in terms of pronunciation. Since it is based on money and not on accent, his character transformation seems more secure than his daughter's, although both seem ambivalent about their new status.

Although the play leaves Eliza and Higgins's future open, Shaw wrote in his afterword that she will marry the petit bourgeois Freddy and open a flower and vegetable shop with him instead of continuing to endure

Higgins's unrefinement and rudeness. She has been struggling throughout the play to liberate herself from the professor's tyranny.

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw links the Cinderella story of a transformation from rags to riches with a Frankensteinian creation of a new life. Underneath the play's comedy, questions are raised about the justifiability of social distinction and the role of women in a patriarchal society. Although Shaw felt ambivalent about the feminist movement of the early twentieth century, he presents Eliza as suffering degradation and escaping from it with the help of Pickering's civility, Mrs. Higgins's understanding, and her own awakened self-reliance.

Pygmalion was later made into the popular musical comedy *My Fair Lady* (1956).

Summary

Late one evening in the Covent Garden theater district of London, playgoers are attempting to summon taxicabs in the rain when a crowd gathers around an unkempt young woman selling flowers. The flower girl has been speaking in a very strong Cockney dialect, and a distinguished gentleman has been transcribing her speech into a notebook. The gentleman, Henry Higgins, is a professional phonetician who earns a handsome income teaching people how to change their lower- and middle-class accents so that they can pass as members of the upper class. Higgins amazes the crowd by using his analysis of individuals' accents to pinpoint where each of them lives. Appalled by the flower girl's lower-class dialect, Higgins boasts that in a matter of months he could teach her how to speak properly and pass as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party.

The next morning, in the drawing room and laboratory of Higgins's Wimpole Street residence, Higgins is showing Colonel Pickering his elaborate equipment for recording speech when the housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, announces the arrival of the flower girl, Eliza Doolittle. Eliza wants to take lessons from Higgins so she can improve her speech and get a job as a clerk in a proper flower shop. Higgins is impressed by the percentage of her meager wealth that Eliza is willing to pay and accepts her as a student, making a wager with Pickering that in six months he can pass Eliza off as a duchess. Mrs. Pearce asks what is to become of Eliza when Higgins has finished his teaching, but Higgins dismisses the question as trivial. After Mrs. Pearce takes Eliza away so that the young woman can bathe, Pickering asks Higgins if his intentions toward Eliza are honorable; Higgins assures Pickering that he is a confirmed bachelor, determined not to let women into his life.

After helping Eliza into the bath, Mrs. Pearce reenters the drawing room to set down rules for Higgins's behavior while Eliza is staying in the house—proper dress and table manners and no swearing. Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, a dustman, or trash collector, arrives and attempts to extort money from Higgins. When Higgins insists that Doolittle take his daughter back immediately, he drives down Doolittle's price to a five-pound note. Higgins offers Doolittle ten pounds, but Doolittle refuses the extra five because he does not want to be tempted to save money. On his way out, Doolittle sees his daughter but does not immediately recognize her, as Eliza is clean and well dressed.

After a few months, the training has gone so well that Higgins decides to test Eliza by taking her to his mother's flat for a formal visit. He arrives first to prepare his mother, informing her that Eliza can converse on only two topics—the weather and everyone's health. Unfortunately, as Higgins is explaining the situation, three unexpected visitors are announced: Mrs. Eynsford Hill, her daughter Clara, and her son Freddy. Initially, Higgins is upset with the intrusion of the Eynsford Hills, but then he welcomes them as a greater challenge for Eliza's performance. When Eliza arrives she is exquisitely dressed and produces an impression of remarkable distinction and beauty. She begins conversing quite adeptly, but as she becomes more engaged in the conversation she slips back into some of her lower-class speech patterns. Higgins, however, is able to convince the Eynsford Hills that her speech is a new and fashionable way of speaking, the "new small talk," and they are convinced that she is a lady of high society; by the time Eliza leaves, Freddy has obviously fallen in love with her. After the Eynsford Hills leave, Higgins is exultant, but his mother asks him what is to be

done with Eliza after the lessons are completed.

When the time comes for Eliza's performance at the ambassador's garden party, she succeeds splendidly. Afterward, Higgins and Pickering celebrate their triumph, talking of how glad they are that their work is over and complaining that they had ultimately become bored by the whole affair. Eliza, on the other hand, is brooding and silent. Higgins wonders out loud where his slippers are, and Eliza leaves the room and fetches them for him. Higgins and Pickering talk of the evening as if Eliza were not there, and as they are leaving for bed, Eliza throws Higgins's slippers after him, calling him a selfish brute. Now Eliza asks the question, "What's to become of me?"

That evening, Eliza leaves Higgins's flat to walk the streets of London, and by morning she has gone to stay with Higgins's mother. Later that morning, Higgins and Pickering, bewildered and worried about Eliza's disappearance, arrive at the mother's home. They are shortly followed by Eliza's father, who enters dressed like a gentleman, complaining that his life has been ruined because of Higgins. Higgins had written a joking letter to an American millionaire, and that letter has led to Alfred Doolittle's inheriting a huge sum of money. Now, Doolittle complains, everyone is begging money from him. His life is no longer impoverished, free, and simple.

Higgins's mother reveals that Eliza is upstairs, angered by the insensitivity and indifference Higgins has shown her. Mrs. Higgins asks Doolittle to step outside so that Eliza will not be shocked by his appearance when she comes downstairs. Eliza then enters and meets Higgins and Pickering as a refined lady, the transformation complete. Eliza explains that she has learned her nice manners from Pickering and that the real difference between a lady and a flower girl is not in how she behaves but in how she is treated.

Eliza's father reenters the room, and Eliza is surprised at how he looks. Doolittle reports that he is now a victim of middle-class morality and is on his way to his wedding. He invites everyone to come to the wedding, and Pickering and Mrs. Higgins leave to get ready, leaving Eliza and Higgins behind. Pickering has urged Eliza to return to live with him and Higgins, but in her last conversation with Higgins, Eliza has decided to leave Higgins forever. She claims that she is only looking for a little kindness and that she will marry Freddy Eynsford Hill. She will earn her living as a teacher of phonetics, teaching others as she has been taught. Higgins is incensed but impressed with Eliza's spirit, and finally he sees her as more of an equal. As Eliza leaves, vowing never to see Higgins again, Higgins asserts confidently that she will return.

Summary: Act 1 Summary

The action begins at 11:15 p.m. in a heavy summer rainstorm. An after-theatre crowd takes shelter in the portico of St. Paul's Church in Covent Garden. A young girl, Clara Eynsford Hill, and her mother are waiting for Clara's brother Freddy, who looks in vain for an available cab. Colliding into flower peddler Liza Doolittle, Freddy scatters her flowers. After he departs to continue looking for a cab, Liza convinces Mrs. Eynsford Hill to pay for the damaged flowers; she then cons three halfpence from Colonel Pickering. Liza is made aware of the presence of Henry Higgins, who has been writing down every word she has said. Thinking Higgins is a policeman who is going to arrest her for scamming people, Liza becomes hysterical. Higgins turns out, however, to be making a record of her speech for scientific ends. Higgins is an expert in phonetics who claims: "I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets." Upbraiding Liza for her speech, Higgins boasts that "in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party." Higgins and Pickering eventually trade names and realize they have long wanted to meet each other. They go off to dine together and discuss phonetics. Liza picks up the money Higgins had flung down upon exiting and for once treats herself to a taxi ride home.

Summary: Act 2 Summary

The next morning at 11 a.m. in Higgins's laboratory, which is full of instruments, Higgins and Pickering receive Liza, who has presented herself at the door. Higgins is taken aback by Liza's request for lessons from him. She wants to learn to "talk more genteel" so she can be employed in a flower shop instead of selling flowers on the street. Liza can only offer to pay a shilling per lesson, but Pickering, intrigued by Higgins's claims the previous night, offers to pay for Liza's lessons and says of the experiment: "I'll say you're the greatest teacher alive if you make that good." Higgins enthusiastically accepts the bet, though his housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, pleads with him to consider what will become of Liza after the experiment. Liza agrees to move into Higgins's home and goes upstairs for a bath. Meanwhile, Higgins and Pickering are visited by Liza's father, Doolittle, "an elderly but vigorous dustman." Rather than demanding to take Liza away, Doolittle instead offers to "let her go" for the sum of five pounds. Higgins is shocked by this offer at first, asking whether Doolittle has any morals, but he is persuaded by Doolittle's response, that the latter is too poor to afford them. Exiting quickly with his booty, Doolittle does not at first recognize his daughter, who has re-entered, cleaned up and dressed in a Japanese kimono.

Summary: Act 3 Summary

The setting is the flat of Mrs. Higgins, Henry's mother. Henry bursts in with a flurry of excitement, much to the distress of his mother, who finds him lacking in social graces (she observes that her friends "stop coming whenever they meet you"). Henry explains that he has invited Liza, taking the opportunity for an early test of his progress with Liza's speech. The Eynsford Hills, guests of Mrs. Higgins, arrive. The discussion is awkward and Henry, true to his mother's observations, does appear very uncomfortable in company. Liza arrives and, while she speaks with perfect pronunciation and tone, she confuses the guests with many of her topics of conversation and peculiar turns of phrase. Higgins convinces the guests that these, including Liza's famous exclamation "not bloody likely!" are the latest trend in small talk. After all the guests (including Liza) have left, Mrs. Higgins challenges Henry and Pickering regarding their plans; she is shocked that they have given no thought to Liza's well-being, for after the conclusion of the experiment she will have no income, only "the manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living." Henry is characteristically flip, stating "there's no good bothering now. The thing's done." Pickering is no more thoughtful than Higgins, and as the two men exit, Mrs. Higgins expresses her exasperation.

A following scene, the most important of the "optional" scenes Shaw wrote for the film version of *Pygmalion*—and included in later editions of the play—takes place at an Embassy party in London. Higgins is nervous that Nepommuck, a Hungarian interpreter and his former student, will discover his ruse and expose Liza as an aristocratic imposter. Nepommuck, ironically, accuses Liza not of faking her social class, but her nationality. He is convinced Liza must be Hungarian and of noble blood, for she speaks English "too perfectly," and "only foreigners who have been taught to speak it speak it well." Higgins is victorious, but finds little pleasure in having outwitted such foolish guests.

Summary: Act 4 Summary

Midnight, in Henry's laboratory. Higgins, Pickering, and Liza return from the party. Higgins loudly bemoans the evening: "What a crew! What a silly tomfoolery!" Liza grows more and more frustrated as he continues to complain ("Thank God it's over!"), not paying attention to her or acknowledging her role in his triumph. Complaining about not being able to find his slippers, Higgins does not observe Liza retrieving them and placing them directly by him. She controls her anger as Higgins and Pickering exit, but when Higgins storms back in, still wrathfully looking for his slippers, Liza hurls them at him with all her might. She derides Higgins for his selfishness and demands of him, "What's to become of me?" Higgins tries to convince her that

her irritation is "only imagination," that she should "go to bed like a good girl and sleep it off." Higgins gradually understands Liza's economic concern (that she cannot go back to selling flowers, but has no other future), but he can only awkwardly suggest marriage to a rich man as a solution. Liza criticizes the subjugation that Higgins's suggestion implies: "I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else." Liza infuriates Higgins by rejecting him, giving him back the rented jewels she wears, and a ring he had bought for her. He angrily throws the ring in the fireplace and storms out.

In the next important "optional scene," Liza has left Higgins's home and comes upon Freddy, who, infatuated with the former flower girl, has recently been spending most of his nights gazing up at Liza's window. They fall into each other's arms, but their passionate kisses are interrupted first by one constable, then another, and another. Liza suggests they jump in a taxi, "and drive about all night; and in the morning I'll call on old Mrs. Higgins and ask her what I ought to do."

Summary: Act 5 Summary

Mrs. Higgins's drawing room, the next day. Henry and Pickering arrive, and while they are downstairs phoning the police about Liza's disappearance, Mrs. Higgins asks the chambermaid to warn Liza, taking shelter upstairs, not to come down. Mrs. Higgins scolds Henry and Pickering for their childishness and the careless manner in which they treated another human. The arrival of Alfred Doolittle is announced; he enters dressed fashionably as a bridegroom, but in an agitated state, casting accusations at Higgins. Doolittle explains at length how by a deed of Henry's he has come into a regular pension. His lady companion will now marry him, but still he is miserable. Where he once could "put the touch" on anyone for drinking money, now everyone comes to him, demanding favors and monetary support. At this point, Mrs. Higgins reveals that Liza is upstairs, again criticizing Henry for his unthoughtful behavior towards the girl. Mrs. Higgins calls Liza down, asking Doolittle to step out for a moment to delay the shock of the news he brings. Liza enters, politely cool towards Henry. She thanks Pickering for all the respect he has shown her since their first meeting: calling her Miss Doolittle, removing his hat, opening doors. "The difference," Liza concludes, "between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she's treated."

At this point, Doolittle returns. He and Liza are reunited, and all the characters (excepting Henry) prepare to leave to see Doolittle married. Liza and Higgins are left alone. Higgins argues that he didn't treat Liza poorly because she was a flower girl but because he treats everyone the same. He defends his behavior by attacking traditional social graces as absurd: "You call me a brute because you couldn't buy a claim on me by fetching my slippers," he says. Liza declares that since Higgins gave no thought to her future, she will marry Freddy and support herself by teaching phonetics, perhaps assisting Nepommuck. Higgins grows furious at Liza and "lays his hands on her." He quickly regrets doing so and expresses appreciation of Liza's newfound independence. At the play's curtain he remains incorrigible, however, cheerfully assuming that Liza will continue to manage his household details as she had done during her days of instruction with him.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

Pygmalion examines this theme primarily through the character of Liza, and the issue of personal identity (as perceived by oneself or by others). Social roles in the Victorian era were viewed as natural and largely fixed: there was perceived to be something inherently, fundamentally unique about a noble versus an unskilled laborer and vice versa. Liza's ability to fool society about her "real" identity raises questions about appearances. The importance of appearance and reality to the theme of *Pygmalion* is suggested by Liza's famous observation: "You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated."

Beauty

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw interrogates beauty as a subjective value. One's perception of beauty in another person is shown to be a highly complex matter, dependent on a large number of (not always aesthetic) factors. Liza, it could be argued, is the same person from the beginning of the play to the end, but while she is virtually invisible to Freddy as a Cockney-speaking flower merchant, he is totally captivated by what he perceives as her beauty and grace when she is presented to him as a lady of society.

Change and Transformation

The transformation of Liza is, of course, central to the plot and theme of *Pygmalion*. The importance at first appears to rest in the power Higgins expresses by achieving this transformation. "But you have no idea," he says, "how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul." As the play unfolds, however, the focus shifts so that the effects of the change upon Liza become central. The truly important transformation Liza goes through is not the adoption of refined speech and manners but the learning of independence and a sense of inner self-worth that allows her to leave Higgins.

Identity

The indeterminacy of appearance and reality in *Pygmalion* reveals the significant examination of identity in the play. Shaw investigates conflicts between differing perceptions of identity and depicts the end result of Higgins's experiment as a crisis of identity for Liza. Liza's transformation is glorious but painful, as it leaves her displaced between her former social identity and a new one, which she has no income or other resources to support. Not clearly belonging to a particular class, Liza no longer knows *who she is*.

Language and Meaning

In an age of growing standardization of what was known as "the Queen's English," *Pygmalion* points to a much wider range of varieties of spoken English. Shaw believed characteristics of social identity such as one's refinement of speech were completely subjective ones, as his play suggests. While Shaw himself hated poor speech and the varieties of dialect and vocabulary could present obstructions to conveying meaning, nevertheless the play suggests that the real richness of the English language is in the variety of individuals who speak it. As for the dialect or vocabulary of any one English variety, such as Cockney, its social value is determined in *Pygmalion* completely by the context in which it is assessed. While Liza's choice of words as a Cockney flower merchant would be thought as absurd as her accent, they are later perceived by the mannered Eynsford Hill family to be the latest trend, when they are thought to emanate from a person of noble breeding.

Sex Roles

Sex and gender have a great deal to do with the dynamics between Liza and Higgins, including the sexual tension between them that many audience members would have liked to see fulfilled through a romantic union between them. In Liza's difficult case, what are defined as her options are clearly a limited subset of options available to a woman. As Mrs. Higgins observes, after the conclusion of the experiment Liza will have no income, only "the manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living." To this problem Higgins can only awkwardly suggest marriage to a rich man as a solution. Liza makes an astute observation about Higgins's suggestion, focusing on the limited options available to a woman: "I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else."

Übermensch ("Superman")

Shaw's belief in the Life Force and the possibility of human evolution on an individual or social level led him to believe also in the possibility of the Superman, a realized individual living to the fullest extent of his or her capacity. (The naming of the concept is credited to the influential German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 1844-1900). Shaw addresses the topic explicitly in his play *Man and Superman* and in many other works, but he also approaches it in *Pygmalion*. Higgins, for example, represents the height of scientific achievement in his field, though he may be too flawed as an individual to continue evolving towards a

superhuman level. Liza, proving herself capable of one type of transformation, also makes an important step towards self-awareness and self-realization, which for Shaw is the beginning of almost endless possibilities for personal development.

Wealth and Poverty

One of the many subjects under examination in *Pygmalion* is class consciousness, a concept first given name in 1887. Shaw's play, like so many of his writings, examines both the realities of class and its subjective markers. The linguistic signals of social identity, for example, are simultaneously an issue of class. Economic issues are central to Liza's crisis at the conclusion of Higgins's experiment, for she lacks the means to maintain the standard of living he and Pickering enjoy. Doolittle's unforeseen rise into the middle class similarly allows Shaw to examine wealth and poverty. Though Doolittle fears the workhouse, he's not happy with his new class identity either; Shaw injects humor through Doolittle's surprising (according to traditional class values) distaste for his new status.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Henry Higgins

Henry Higgins, a linguistic scientist. A robust and handsome forty-year-old bachelor, Higgins is violently enthusiastic about anything scientific, but he is absolutely uncivilized in his relations with people. Although he firmly believes himself to be kindhearted and considerate, he is a bad-tempered and profane bully. Even so, his frankness and lack of malice make it impossible for anyone to dislike him. Higgins makes a bet with another scientist, Colonel Pickering, that he can, in six months, make a Cockney flower girl speak so well that she can be passed off as a duchess.

Eliza Doolittle

Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl. Dirty and ignorant, Eliza comes to Higgins and pathetically begs him to teach her to speak well enough to run a respectable flower shop. He teaches her to speak like a noblewoman. Grown fond of Higgins and grateful to him, Eliza tries to please him and is ignored. Higgins thinks it unnatural for Eliza to have feelings. He does not understand why she is enraged when, after she has successfully passed herself off as a noblewoman, he and Pickering congratulate each other and ignore her. To assert herself, Eliza threatens to go into competition with Higgins, using his own methods of teaching proper speech. Higgins rudely congratulates Eliza on her assertiveness and welcomes her as a friend and equal. Eliza marries not Higgins but Freddy Hill. They open a flower shop that, with Pickering's help, finally becomes prosperous.

Colonel Pickering

Colonel Pickering, a linguist who has traveled to London from India to see Higgins. An elderly, amiable soldier, Pickering is as confirmed a bachelor as Higgins, but he is a gentleman who treats Eliza with respect and helps to moderate Higgins' mistreatment of her.

Alfred Doolittle

Alfred Doolittle, a dustman, Eliza's father. One of the "undeserving poor," Doolittle is distinguished by a good voice, an original mind, and a complete absence of conscience. He plans to blackmail Higgins, mistakenly thinking that Higgins has taken Eliza as his mistress. Higgins and Pickering are so delighted by the scoundrel's straightforwardness that they give him five pounds. In a letter to Ezra D. Wannafeller, an American philanthropist, Higgins calls Doolittle "the most original moralist" in England. Wannafeller leaves Doolittle an income of four thousand pounds a year. Doolittle is thus made middle class, respectable, and, at

first, thoroughly unhappy. He even marries his “old woman.” Eventually, Doolittle’s native talents, his Nietzschean philosophy, and his odd background make him much in demand in the highest society.

Mrs. Higgins

Mrs. Higgins, Henry’s mother, a woman of taste. She has asked her barbaric son to stay away when she is receiving guests. Her poise and competence help to bring some order into the lives of those around her.

Freddy Eynsford Hill

Freddy Eynsford Hill, the uneducated and unintelligent son of an impoverished noble family. He loves Eliza and haunts the street by Higgins’ house to catch a glimpse of her. He marries her at last and submits to her benevolent despotism.

Mrs. Eynsford Hill

Mrs. Eynsford Hill, Freddy’s mother. Quiet and well-bred, Mrs. Hill is plagued by the anxieties natural to an aristocrat without money. Because of her poverty, her children have neither education nor sophistication.

Miss Clara Eynsford Hill

Miss Clara Eynsford Hill, Freddy’s sister. An ignorant, pretentious, and useless snob, Clara is at length redeemed by reading the works of H. G. Wells and becoming a critic of society. In that role, her gaucheness is an asset.

Mrs. Pearce

Mrs. Pearce, Henry Higgins’ housekeeper, a very proper and very middle-class woman. Mrs. Pearce, by sheer force of will, enforces a semblance of order and propriety in Higgins’ house.

Nepommuck

Nepommuck, a spectacularly bewhiskered Hungarian. At the embassy reception at which Eliza is passed off as nobility, Nepommuck, a former pupil of Higgins who makes his living as a translator, testifies that Eliza is certainly of royal blood, perhaps a princess.

Characters

Clara

See Miss Clara Eynsford Hill.

Doolittle

See Alfred Doolittle.

Alfred Doolittle

Alfred is Liza's father, whom Shaw describes as "an elderly but vigorous dustman.... He has well marked and rather interesting features, and seems equally free from fear or conscience. He has a remarkably expressive voice, the result of a habit of giving vent to his feelings without reserve." Doolittle describes himself as the "undeserving poor," who need just as much as the deserving but never get anything because of the disapproval of middle-class morality. Nevertheless, he is a skilled moocher who is capable of finessing loans from the

most miserly of people. He is miserable when he comes into money during the course of the play, however, because people then come with hopes of borrowing money.

Eliza Doolittle

A cockney flower girl of around 18 or 20 years of age, Eliza is streetwise and energetic. She is not educated by traditional standards, but she is intelligent and a quick learner. As she presents herself in her "shoddy coat" at Higgins's laboratory, Shaw describes the "pathos of this deplorable figure, with its innocent vanity and consequential air." She learns a genteel accent from Higgins and, washed and dressed exquisitely, passes in society for a Duchess. In this transformed state, she is shown to be capable of inspiring awe in the observer. While she wins Higgins's wager for him, she is shocked to find him lose interest in her once the experiment is complete; she cannot believe that he's given no thought to her future well-being. Pickering, by having been polite to her from the very beginning, provides a contrast, from which Liza is able to realize that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated." She learns from Higgins's behavior an even deeper truth, that social graces and class are not the true measure of a person's worth.

Miss Doolittle

See Eliza Doolittle.

Freddy

See Frederick Eynsford Hill.

Henry Higgins

Henry Higgins is an expert in phonetics and the author of "Higgins's Universal Alphabet." Shaw describes him as "a robust, vital, appetizing sort of man of forty or thereabouts.... He is of the energetic, scientific type, heartily, even violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject, and careless about himself and other people, including their feelings. His manner varies from genial bullying... to stormy petulance... but he is so entirely frank and void of malice that he remains likeable even in his least reasonable moments." In his book *Shaw: The Plays*, Desmond MacCarthy observed that "Higgins is called a professor of phonetics, but he is really an artist—that is the interesting thing about him, and his character is a study of the creative temperament."

For many, this temperament is a difficult one. His housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, observes of Higgins that "when you get what you called interested in people's accents, you never think of what may happen to them or you." Certainly, Higgins gives no thought to Liza's future after his experiment, and when he gradually loses interest in it, he seems, at least from her perspective, to have disposed of her as well. He is shaken by the independence Liza demonstrates and thus by the end of the play is able to show a kind of respect to her. It is on such terms and presented in such a way, however, that a romantic ending between himself and Liza is never really feasible.

Mrs. Higgins

Henry's mother, a generous and gracious woman. She is frequently exasperated by her son's lack of manners and completely sympathizes with Liza when the girl leaves Higgins and takes shelter with her. She is perceptive and intelligent, and capable of putting Henry in his place. It is indicative of Mrs. Higgins's character that after the conflict between her son and Liza, both characters choose to come to her for guidance.

Frederick Eynsford Hill

Freddy is an upper-class young man of around 20, somewhat weak although eager and good-natured. Proper and upstanding, he is infatuated with Liza and thoroughly devoted to her both before and after she takes shelter with him in an all-night cab after leaving Higgins. Liza claims to be going back to him at the end of the play, an idea which Higgins finds preposterous. Freddy does not have the money to support them both (and

from Liza's perspective seems unfit for difficult work), which prompts her idea to earn a living by teaching phonetics.

Miss Clara Eynsford Hill

A pampered socialite of around 20, she is somewhat gullible and easily disgusted. Shaw writes that she "has acquired a gay air of being very much at home in society; the bravado of genteel poverty." Her social position is not secured, however, and this anxiety drives much of her behavior.

Mrs. Eynsford Hill

The middle-aged mother of Freddy and Clara, whom Shaw describes as "well-bred, quiet" and having "the habitual anxiety of straitened means." She is acutely aware of social decorum and highly invested in finding proper spouses for her two children.

Liza

See Eliza Doolittle.

Nepommuck

Higgins's first pupil and later his dupe, a Hungarian of around 30. The mustachioed interpreter, according to Higgins, "can learn a language in a fortnight—knows dozens of them. A sure mark of a fool. As a phonetician, no good whatever." He is completely fooled by Liza's performance as a lady of high society and declares that she must be a European duchess.

Mrs. Pearce

Higgins's middle-class housekeeper. Very practical, she can be severe and is not afraid of reproaching Higgins for his lack of social graces. She is conscious of proper behavior and of her position, and quite proud. She is taken aback by the seeming impropriety of Liza coming into the Higgins household but quickly develops a bond with the girl, often defending her from Higgins.

Pick

See Colonel Pickering.

Pickering

See Colonel Pickering.

Colonel Pickering

A phonetics expert like Higgins, this "elderly gentleman of the amiable military type," meets the latter in a rainstorm at the St. Paul's Church. The "author of Spoken Sanskrit," Pickering excels in the Indian dialects because of his experience in the British colonies there. Courteous and generous, as well as practical and sensible, he never views Liza as just a flower girl and treats her with the respect due a lady of society. "I assure you," he responds to a challenge by Mrs. Higgins, "we take Eliza very seriously." Open-hearted, he finds it easy to sympathize with others and, decidedly unlike Higgins, is conscience-stricken when he fears he's hurt Liza.

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

Throughout his career, George Bernard Shaw agitated for the reform of the vagaries of English spelling and pronunciation, but his assertion that *Pygmalion* was written to impress upon the public the importance of phoneticians is immaterial. *Pygmalion*, like all of Shaw's best plays, transcends its author's didactic intent. The play is performed and read not for Shaw's pet theories but for the laughter its plot and characters provoke.

The play is a modern adaptation of the Pygmalion myth (although some have claimed that it is a plagiarism of Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*, 1751), in which the sculptor-king Pygmalion falls in love with Galatea, a creature of his own making, a statue that the goddess Aphrodite, pitying him, brings to life. The Pygmalion of Shaw's play turns up as Henry Higgins, a teacher of English speech; his Galatea is Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl whom Higgins transforms into a seeming English lady by teaching her to speak cultivated English. In the process of transforming a poor, uneducated girl into a lady, Higgins irrevocably changes a human life. By lifting Eliza above her own class and providing her with no more than the appurtenances of another, Higgins makes her unfit for both. On this change and Higgins's stubborn refusal to accept its reality and its consequences, Shaw builds his play.

From the beginning, when Higgins first observes her dialectal monstrosities, Eliza is characterized as a proud, stubborn girl, though educated only by the circumstances of her poverty and gutter environment. She has the courage to ask Higgins to make good his boast that he can pass her off as a duchess within a matter of months, and she calls on him and offers to pay him for elocution lessons that will enable her to work as a saleswoman in a flower shop. Like all the proud, she is also sensitive, and she tries to break off the interview when Higgins persists in treating her as his social inferior.

Higgins can best be understood in contrast to Colonel Pickering, his foil, who finances the transformation. As a fellow phonetician, Pickering approves of the project as a scientific experiment, but as a gentleman and a sensitive human being, he sympathizes with Eliza. It is Higgins's uproariously tragic flaw that he, like all of Shaw's heroes, is not a gentleman. He is brilliant and cultured, but he lacks manners and refuses to learn or even affect any, believing himself to be superior to the conventions and civilities of polite society and preferring to treat everyone with bluntness and candor. He is, or so he thinks until Eliza leaves him, a self-sufficient man. When he discovers that she has made herself an indispensable part of his life, he goes to her and, in one of the most remarkable courtship scenes in the history of the theater, pleads with her to live with Pickering and himself as three dedicated bachelors. At the end of the play, he is confident that she will accept his unorthodox proposition, even when she bids him good-bye forever.

As a matter of fact, Shaw himself was never able to convince anyone that Eliza and Higgins did not marry and live happily ever after. The first producer of the play, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, insisted on leaving the impression that the two were reconciled in the end as lovers, and this tradition has persisted. Enraged as always by any liberties taken with his work, Shaw wrote an essay that he attached to the play as a sequel in which he denounces sentimental interpretations of *Pygmalion*. He concedes that *Pygmalion* is a romance in that its heroine undergoes an almost miraculous change, but he argues that the logic of the characterization does not permit a conventional happy ending. Higgins is, after all, a god and Eliza only his creation; an abyss separates them. Furthermore, Shaw contends, their personalities, backgrounds, and philosophies are irreconcilable. Higgins is an inveterate bachelor and likely to remain so because he will never find a woman who can meet the standards he has set for ideal womanhood—those set by his mother. Eliza, on the other hand, being young and pretty, can always find a husband whose demands on a woman would not be impossible to meet. Therefore, Shaw insists, Eliza marries Freddy Eynsford Hill, a penniless but devoted young man who has only an insignificant role in the play. Stubbornly, Shaw does not even permit them the luxury of living happily ever after: They have financial problems that are gradually solved by their opening a flower shop subsidized by Colonel Pickering. Shaw's *Pygmalion* is too awe-inspiring for his Galatea ever to presume to love him.

Even with the addition of this unconventional ending to the play, *Pygmalion* would be highly atypical of Shavian drama were it not for the presence of Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father. Through Doolittle, Shaw is able to indulge in economic and social moralizing, an ingredient with which Shaw could not dispense. Like Eliza, Doolittle undergoes a transformation as a result of Higgins's meddling, a transformation that in his case is, however, unpremeditated. Early in the play, Doolittle fascinates Higgins and Pickering with his successful attempt to capitalize on Eliza's good fortune. He literally charms Higgins out of five pounds by declaring

himself an implacable foe of middle-class morality and insisting that he will use the money for a drunken spree. Delighted with the old scoundrel, Higgins mentions him in jest in a letter to a crackpot American millionaire, who subsequently bequeaths Doolittle a yearly allowance of three thousand pounds if he will lecture on morality. Thus this dustman becomes transformed into a lion of London society, and the reprobate becomes a victim of bourgeois morality. Although he appears only twice in the play, Doolittle is so vigorous and funny that he is almost as memorable a comic character as Higgins.

The play itself is memorable because of its vigor and fun, notwithstanding Shaw's protestations about its message. It is likely that Shaw insisted so strenuously on the serious intent of the play because he too realized that *Pygmalion* is his least serious and least didactic play. In 1956, *Pygmalion* was adapted into the Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*; the musical, with book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner and music by Frederick Loewe, was extremely successful, and several revivals have been produced since that time. A film version of *My Fair Lady*, starring Audrey Hepburn as Eliza and Rex Harrison as Higgins, was released in 1964.

Critical Essays: Pygmalion

In this comedy of morals, Shaw tilts at two particularly English windmills, the class structure and an inadequate alphabet. Using the myth of the sculptor Pygmalion, who fell in love with his marble masterpiece, Shaw introduces phonetician Henry Higgins to the Cockney flower-seller Eliza Doolittle. Eliza, kept firmly in her place by her appearance and particularly by her lower-class accent, would love to become genteel and sell flowers in a "proper shop."

When Higgins demonstrates his skill at placing any English person by his or her neighborhood accent, he amazes the bystanders sheltered from the rain under the columns of St. Paul's. Higgins berates Eliza, a product of Lisson Grove slum, for her gutter English--a disgrace to the language of Shakespeare and Milton. Later, the girl bravely appears at Professor Higgins' Wimpole Street home to ask for lessons in speech, and Higgins wagers that he can transform her into a young woman able to pass as a duchess.

The professor threatens and bullies his pupil, nearly driving her mad with his perfectionism. Soon Eliza's accent is correct, but her topics of conversation are wildly unsuitable for the average ruling-class drawing room. Higgins must rapidly explain her utterances as "the new small talk." With a series of comic social coups, Eliza becomes a darling of the fashionable world.

Shaw consistently undercuts any idea of romance that might cling to this tale of transformation. While Higgins, Eliza, the talkative dustman Mr. Doolittle, and the callow Freddy Eynsford-Hill are well-realized characters, it is their social dimensions that interest Shaw. If class and accent rather than individual merit determine one's place in society, then society is vulnerable to the satirist's pen. And if the reader expects Higgins in his role as Eliza's Pygmalion to fall in love with his creation, Hollywood's MY FAIR LADY is the place to look.

Bibliography:

Berst, Charles A. *"Pygmalion": Shaw's Spin on Myth and Cinderella*. New York: Twayne, 1995. An excellent source for students that examines the literary and historical contexts of the play and provides an intelligent and thorough interpretation tracing Eliza's transformation into a woman and lady. Focuses on Shaw's use of the Pygmalion myth and the Cinderella fairy tale.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion."* New York: Chelsea House, 1988. A judicious selection of eight critical essays that represent major interpretations of the play. In his introduction, Bloom argues that *Pygmalion* is Shaw's masterpiece. Excellent for students.

Hornby, Richard. "Beyond the Verbal in *Pygmalion*." In *Shaw's Plays in Performance*, edited by Daniel Leary. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983. Examines Shaw's stagecraft and the performance qualities inherent in the play as a script. Goes beyond "the purely verbal or literary" qualities of the play to show how the visual and aural elements convey meaning.

Huggett, Richard. *The Truth About "Pygmalion."* New York: Random House, 1969. A fascinating narrative account of the original 1914 London production, in which "three of the most monstrous egoists the theatre ever produced" participated: actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who played Eliza; actor Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who played Higgins; and Shaw himself.

Silver, Arnold. *Bernard Shaw: The Darker Side*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1982. A major part of this challenging and unconventional book on Shaw is a very thorough and complex psychological interpretation of *Pygmalion* that shows Shaw working out intense personal conflicts. Fascinating materials for more advanced students.

Critical Essays: Critical Overview

Building upon the acclaim *Pygmalion* had received from German-language production and publication, the original English production of the play at His Majesty's Theatre was likewise a success, securing Shaw's reputation as a popular playwright. Still, contemporary reviews of *Pygmalion* are mixed, revealing the somewhat prejudicial views English critics continue to hold towards Shaw's work. For example, an unsigned review in the *Westminster Gazette*, reprinted in *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, criticized many aspects of the production but had qualified praise for the play, "a puzzling work." Aware that Shaw usually "does not use the drama merely as a vehicle for telling stories," the critic expressed a curiosity about what "the foundation idea" of *Pygmalion* might be. "Curiosity, in the present instance," however, "remains unsatisfied. There are plenty of ideas, but none is predominant."

Alex M. Thompson, meanwhile, wrote in a review in the *Clarion* that "Britain's most famous playwright has won his place at last on the stage of Britain's most famous playhouse" but regretted that "while the great playwright's really significant plays" were wasted through production elsewhere, "the play admitted to our classic shrine is one whose purpose, according to the author himself, is 'to boil the pot.'" H. W. Massingham, in a review for the *Nation*, declared that "there is a fault in the piece as well as in its production," namely that Shaw "observes too coldly": in pursuing the clash of wits, the excitement of argument, he obscures real beauty and affection. Shaw, somewhat like Higgins, "hides his spirituality or his tenderness under a mask of coarseness," to the extent that he "has failed to show his audience precisely what he meant."

The sensation caused by Shaw's use of the mild profanity "bloody" (breaking with tradition at His Majesty's Theatre) went a long way to ensure the publicity for *Pygmalion*, but many critics found the language of the play shocking. T. F. Evans commented in his notes for *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, that "[it] is almost impossible ... to assess accurately the critical response to the play itself because of the totally disproportionate amount of space, time and attention that was given to the use by Shaw... of the word 'bloody'.... Some critics who might have been expected to give largely favourable comments on the play seem to have allowed the use of the adjective to affect them. "By 1938, however, the year *Pygmalion* was made into a movie, Shaw's text was still dramatic and challenging but much of the shock had faded. Of the film version, Desmond MacCarthy observed in *Shaw: The Plays* that "'bloody' still gets its laugh, but it no longer releases the roar that greets the crash of a taboo."

In his 1929 study *A Guide to Bernard Shaw*, Edward Wagenknecht demonstrated the delicate balance many critical interpretations of Shaw in that era tried to maintain, explaining how Shaw had succeeded despite breaking many established conventions of dramatic art. Shaw "revolted" against deeply-held ideas that

literature is writing which supersedes a specific purpose other than to communicate life experience, and is not didactic. "It is amazing," Wagenknecht wrote, "that a man whose theory of art is so patently wrong should have achieved such a place as Shaw has won."

By the end of Shaw's life, his status as perhaps the greatest single English dramatist since Shakespeare was secure, but nevertheless critical opinion on him appeared mixed and in many cases prejudiced. Eric Bentley wrote in his book *Bernard Shaw, 1856-1950*, that in reviewing the already voluminous writing on Shaw, "I found praise, but most of it naive or invidious. I found blame, but most of it incoherent and scurrilous." Perhaps Shaw's complexity of thought provoked these mixed (and largely unsatisfying) critical assessments, to the extent that to some critics "Shaw, the champion of will and feeling, is an arch-irrationalist," but to others "Shaw, the champion and incarnation of intellect, is the arch-rationalist." In *Pygmalion* Bentley found a play of "singularly elegant structure ... a good play by perfectly orthodox standards" needing "no theory to defend it."

In his summary of the play's merits, Bentley avoided the tendency of earlier critics to distinguish sharply between various aspects of Shaw's work, instead celebrating the intimate connection between them. *Pygmalion*, he wrote, "is Shavian, not in being made up of political or philosophic discussions, but in being based on the standard conflict of vitality and system, in working out this conflict through an inversion of romance, in bringing matters to a head in a battle of wills and words, in having an inner psychological action in counter-point to the outer romantic action ... in delighting and surprising us with a constant flow of verbal music and more than verbal wit." Bentley's modern assessment of the complexity of Shaw's political thought and dramatic method established a precedent for much Shavian criticism of the last fifty years.

Beginning immediately with the first English production of *Pygmalion*, a popular debate developed as to whether there should have been a romantic ending between Higgins and Liza. Shaw insisted that such an ending would have been misery for his characters but producers and audiences nevertheless tended to prefer a romantic ending. MacCarthy expressed the sentiments of many when he wrote about the original production: "when the curtain fell on the mutual explanations of this pair [Higgins and Liza], I was in a fever to see it rise on Acts VI and VII; I wanted to see those two living together."

When the play was first published in 1916, Shaw added an afterword which recounted what Liza did after leaving Higgins and was intended to show to audiences that there was to be "no sentimental nonsense" about the possibility of Higgins and Liza being lovers. The English-language film of *Pygmalion* gave Shaw another opportunity to remove "virtually every suggestion of Higgins's possible romantic interest in Liza." He was to discover, however, at a press show two days before the film's premiere, that the director had hired other screenwriters who added a "sugar-sweet ending" in which Higgins and Liza are united as lovers. MacCarthy commented in 1938 that the effect of the changes in the film version "is merely that of a wish fulfillment love story of a poor girl who became a lady and married the man who made her one." He observes that the difference is "due to a peculiarity inherent in the art of cinema itself (a need for closure), and that the changed ending is no doubt what accounts for the film's "immense popularity."

Essays and Criticism: *Pygmalion* and Shaw's Other Great Works

Like all of Shaw's great dramatic creations, *Pygmalion* is a richly complex play. It combines a central story of the transformation of a young woman with elements of myth, fairy tale, and romance, while also combining an interesting plot with an exploration of social identity, the power of science, relations between men and women, and other issues. Change is central to the plot and theme of the play, which of course revolves around Higgins's transformation of Liza from a flower-girl who speaks a coarse Cockney dialect (a manner of speech which he says will "keep her in the gutter to the end of her days") into a lady who passes as a duchess in

genteel society. The importance of transformation in *Pygmalion* at first appears to rest upon the power Higgins expresses by achieving his goal. "But you have no idea," he says, drawing attention to his talent, "how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her."

But where does the real transformation occur in Liza? Much more important than her new powers of speech, ultimately, is the independence she gains after the conclusion of Higgins's "experiment." Charles A. Berst noted in his study *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama* that Shaw omitted from *Pygmalion* the scene of the ball at the Ambassador's mansion where Liza shows herself as the triumph of Higgins's art. The reason Shaw does so is "because the emphasis here is not on the fairy-tale climax of the triumphant 'test' ... but on the social and personal ramifications of the real world to which Eliza must adjust after the test." In short, Liza realizes Higgins's lack of concern at her unsure future, and she turns on her "creator," leaving him.

Higgins's successful transformation of Liza contradicts the class rigidity of Victorian and Edwardian society, demonstrating Shaw's belief in the highly subjective construction of social identities. A proponent of a school of thought known as Fabianism, Shaw believed firmly in the power of individuals to transform, to improve themselves. Drawing on a power Shaw called the Life Force, human beings could both evolve to the full extent of their capabilities and collectively turn to the task of transforming society. Eric Bentley wrote in *Bernard Shaw, 1856-1950* that "Fabianism begins and ends as an appeal—emotionally based—for social justice." In the Fabian perspective, social systems are changeable and need to change. Shaw introduced his *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* by encouraging the reader to "clear your mind of the fancy with which we all begin as children, that the institutions under which we live, including our legal ways of distributing income and allowing people to own things, are natural, like the weather. They are not.... They are in fact transient makeshifts; and many of them would not be obeyed, even by well-meaning people, if there were not a policeman within call and a prison within reach. They are being changed constantly by Parliament because we are never satisfied with them."

As a Fabian, Shaw believed in human improvement and evolution as the key to social transformation. What Liza learns by breaking free of Higgins's influence is an independence of thought Shaw believed was a crucial component of personal evolution. Berst emphasized the importance of this process by which "a soul awakens to true self-realization." Having shown that there are no hard and fast rules of social identity, Shaw does not allow his leading character to remain limited within a society in which she can only marry for money. Liza identifies such an arrangement as a kind of prostitution, an explicit example of how, as Bentley summarized, in a culture built around "buying and selling the vast mass of the population has nothing to sell but itself." Instead, Shaw has Liza break free—into an uncertain future to be sure but one in which she will work, struggle, and, hopefully, prosper as an independent woman.

Shaw did not believe in the sense of innate inequality which dominated British society around the turn of the century, in the supposedly natural divisions between classes based on built-in qualities of character. Instead, he believed in the power of "nurture" over "nature," and the "conditioning effects of social circumstance," as discussed by Lynda Mugglestone in the *Review of English Studies*. Though Liza appears rough on the edges to the standards of Edwardian society, she has self-respect, pride, ambition, and a sense of humor—all qualities which help her mature to the independence she achieves by the play's end. That Liza has such great success mastering the speech of a duchess suggests that all people are fundamentally of equal worth, that the social differences between them are merely the result of different levels of opportunity (financial and otherwise). In Shaw's view, meanwhile, a Socialist society would mean "equal rights and opportunities for all," a definition he gave in a Fabian pamphlet published in 1890.

As Mugglestone wrote, Eliza's education in the ways that the English upper classes act and speak provides an opportunity for the playwright to explore "the very foundations of social equality and inequality." What we discover in *Pygmalion* is that phonetics and "correct" pronunciation are systems of markers superficial in

themselves but endowed with tremendous social significance. Higgins himself observes that pronunciation is "the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul." Playwright and character differ, however, in that instead of criticizing the existence of this gulf, Higgins accepts it as natural and uses his skills to help those who can afford his services (or are taken in as experiments, like Liza) to bridge it.

Act III of *Pygmalion* highlights the importance of Liza's double transformation, by showing her suspended between the play's beginning and its conclusion. At Mrs. Higgins's "At Home" reception, Liza is fundamentally the same person she was in Act I, although she differs in what we learn to appreciate as "superficialities of social disguise" (according to Mugglestone): details of speech and cleanliness. "In modern society, however, as Shaw illustrates, it is precisely these superficial details which tend to be endowed with most significance." Certainly the Eynsford Hills view such details as significant, as Liza's entrance produces for them what Shaw's stage directions call "an impression of ... remarkable distinction and beauty." Ironically, however, Liza's true transformation is yet to occur. She experiences a much more fundamental change in her consciousness when she realizes that Higgins has more or less abandoned her at the conclusion of his experiment.

At first, Liza experiences a sense of anxiety over not belonging anywhere: she can hardly return to flower peddling, yet she lacks the financial means to make her new, outward identity a social reality. "What am I fit for?" she demands of Higgins. "What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?" Berst wrote that "while Pickering is generous, Eliza is shoved into the wings by Higgins. The dream has been fulfilled, midnight has tolled for Cinderella, and morning reality is at hand." Liza must break away from Higgins when he shows himself incapable of recognizing her needs. This response of Higgins is well within his character as it has been portrayed in the play. Indeed, from his first exposure to Liza, Higgins denied Liza any social or even individual worth. Calling Liza a "squashed cabbage leaf," Higgins states that "a woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live." While treated primarily with humor, Higgins is a kind of anti-hero in Shaw's dramatic universe, because he accepts as natural the divisions among the classes. Assuming that Liza has no inherent worth, Higgins believes only he can bestow worth upon her, by helping her pass in society as a lady.

A romantic union between Liza and Higgins is impossible primarily because unlike her, he is incapable of transformation. He remains the confirmed bachelor that he has always been, an unsuitable Prince Charming denying either a fairy-tale ending to *Pygmalion* or a satisfactory marriage to its "Cinderella." Nowhere is Higgins shown more strongly to be incapable of change than in his response to Liza's challenge to him. Liza has thrown his slippers at him out of frustration with his lack of concern for her. "I'm nothing to you," she observes, "not so much as them slippers." Higgins instantly corrects her with "those slippers," a mechanical response which shows him clinging to the externals of his trade, incapable of recognizing the importance of the change which has come over Liza.

The response of audiences and actors alike was strongly in favor of a romantic liaison between Higgins and Liza, but such a future for the characters would depend upon a transformation in Higgins which he is incapable of making. Indeed, Berst ventured, a "close examination of Higgins's character and comments cannot support a romantic conclusion. He is by nature celibate and self-centered, slightly perverse in both respects." Shaw altered the play's ending to make his point more explicit, and when the play was first published in 1916, he added an afterword which recounted what Liza did after leaving Higgins. This was intended to show to audiences that there was to be "no sentimental nonsense" about the possibility of Higgins and Liza being lovers.

Source: Christopher Busiel, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Essays and Criticism: The Ending of *Pygmalion*: A Structural View

Pygmalion is one of Shaw's most popular plays as well as one of his most straightforward ones. The form has none of the complexity that we find in *Heartbreak House* or *Saint Joan*, nor are the ideas in *Pygmalion* nearly as profound as the ideas in any of Shaw's other major works. Yet the ending of *Pygmalion* provokes an interesting controversy among critics. Higgins and Eliza do not marry at the end of the written text, while the play as it is usually produced often does reconcile the two main characters. Obviously many directors and many readers feel that the apparent unromantic ending is an arbitrary bit of sarcasm appended to the play merely for spiteful humor.

It is my contention that the only valid approach to the problem of *Pygmalion*'s ending is to analyze the structure of the dramatic movement. In examining the play, I will consider the central situation and the dramatic problem it raises in preparation for the ending, which is the solution to that problem. All other critical approaches applied to the ending have tended to introduce extraneous information and lead to inconclusive suppositions about which of the possible endings is to be preferred. For instance, in evaluating the ending, one would probably be wise to pass over two extremely interesting but contradictory pieces of evidence which, at first, seem to bear directly on the matter. On the one hand we have the postscript which Shaw added to the published version of *Pygmalion*. In it he explains vehemently and reasonably why Eliza will not marry Higgins. On the other hand there is the movie version ending which Shaw rewrote so that it becomes clear to the audience that Eliza will marry Higgins. We can speculate about Shaw's real intention, but lacking conclusive external evidence we should justify or condemn the ending of the stage play only in relation to the text itself.

The controversy over the ending deserves some scrutiny, however, because the criticism represents a good many different approaches to Shaw's work. One approach is the "instinctive" method, a method which is outside the realm of literary criticism but is certainly of value in judging a play, since Shaw or any good dramatist realizes that during a performance the spectators will intuitively "feel" that an action is right or wrong without bothering to analyze their feelings. After considering the structure of *Pygmalion*, Milton Crane, in an often-quoted article, concludes that Shaw was either wrong or not serious in his ending. But Professor Crane gives no objective reason for his point of view, nor does he tie it in with his analysis of structure. A similar view is expressed by St. John Ervine concerning the denouement:

[The ending] convinces nobody who reads it.... The facts of the play cry out against its author. The end of the fourth act as well as the end of the fifth act deny ... [the postscript], and assure all sensible people that she married Henry Higgins and bore him many vigorous and intelligent children (*Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work, and Friends*, [New York], 1956).

The trouble with such opinions is that a great many people may instinctively feel that the play ends correctly. We cannot depend too much on a director's view of the text, for if the play in production has been interpreted romantically, the ending of the stage version seems inappropriate; on the other hand, if the play is produced "anti-romantically," the ending of this version is necessary.

Two directly opposing interpretations of the ending can be based on an analysis of character and situation. In one view, Eliza, a representative of Shavian vitality, is in the vitalistic sense superior to Higgins who is "the prisoner of 'system,' particularly of his profession" (Eric Bentley in his *Bernard Shaw*, [Norfolk], 1957). Higgins and Eliza are unsuited for one another since their temperaments are totally dissimilar. Another interpretation places emphasis on the growth of Eliza's character to the point where she is able, at the end of the play, to rid herself of her fear of the rich (her middle-class morality); thus, no longer the intimidated flower girl, Eliza has no need to bargain for Higgins' affection. On the other hand, Eliza may be considered as

less than a match for Higgins, for her desires are the commonplace ones of marriage and security. Higgins, then, is the representative of Shavian vitality, the true superman, and as such he is superior to Eliza. In each interpretation, the Shavian denouement is justified by the critics' belief that a marriage between the two characters would be a misalliance; or, as Eric Bentley has said, "Eliza's leaving Higgins is the outcome of the realities of the situation" (*Modern Drama*, September, 1958).

The criterion of realism is of questionable value here. Shaw is a realist—if we must classify him at all—but dramatic realism does not always call for a "realistic" (that is, "true-to-life") ending. After all, Shaw often does marry off his heroine and hero (e.g., *Arms and the Man*, *Man and Superman*, *The Millionairess*, *Buoyant Billions*), and when he does so, it is not because he is particularly concerned with "true-to-life" probabilities, but because he is doing the correct dramatic thing. Furthermore, even if the criterion of realism were valid, we would face a difficult task in trying to prove that a marriage between Higgins and Eliza is hopelessly unrealistic. The two have existed in the same environment for a long time, they have grown used to one another—even reliant on one another, and they are no longer very far apart in social position. The fact is, as Shaw himself points out and as Professor Bentley notes, such a marriage would be a bad one. But what is more realistic than a bad marriage! It happens so often in real life that one can hardly accuse an author of being a romanticist if he includes it in his play. It is not quite right dramatically, but for critics to attribute Shaw's ending to "the realities of the situation" is to evince a rather unnecessarily limited view of what reality is.

An examination of the structure of *Pygmalion* can leave little doubt that Shaw's ending is the only logical one. The most direct way to approach the structure is to discern what the dramatic problem of the plot is. Some possibilities that might come immediately to mind concern the superficiality of class distinctions, the inability of Higgins to dominate Eliza's spirit, and the satire on middle-class morality. All of the preceding are aspects of the play, but further thought on the matter of what happens in *Pygmalion* will eventually lead us to some statement about Higgins' making Eliza into a "lady." Indeed, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is just what the play is about since the action, obviously, is mainly taken up with the development of Eliza from Act I through Act V. Furthermore, the play is concerned not only with the fact of her development but with the peculiar circumstances surrounding it, that is, the manner in which she is transformed.

It is important to decide whether Eliza or Higgins is the main character, for the main plot will be constructed around the actions of this central character. If we try to put the subject of the play's action into the form of a dramatic question, we would ask, "Will Eliza become a lady?" The action is done either *by* or *to* Eliza, but in either case we may be certain that the passive *main* character does not occur in Shaw's work. We need not assume that he is the most interesting character in the play or that he is the one who occupies the author's greatest attention. It appears that Shaw was more interested in Eliza than in Higgins because he explains in detail what happens to her after the play is over. Nevertheless, Higgins must be the main character because he manipulates the action. In a comedy it is not necessary for the main character to undergo a change or show character development. Higgins remains the same from first to last; to use Shaw's term, he is "incorrigible." Eliza changes, but Higgins makes her change; she is his product. Thus, a more accurate way of stating the dramatic question would be: Will Higgins succeed in recreating the common flower girl into a truly different person, inwardly as well as outwardly?

Once we see the dramatic problem of the play in this light, we can begin to trace the steps leading to the logical conclusion of *Pygmalion*. The first act is dramatically essential to the play not merely because it introduces the characters or serves as a prologue, but because it begins the action: Higgins makes such an impression on the flower girl that she is filled with a desire for her physical improvement, her external recreation. In Act II, the question is raised as to whether Higgins will succeed in his experiment.

As is usual in a play with a traditional five-act structure, the climax occurs in Act III and virtually resolves the question. Although the question is not definitely answered, certainly some strong indication is given the

audience as to the direction which the following action will take. A shift in the direction of the action after the climax would surely confuse the spectators and might result in bringing the play to the level of romance. But *Pygmalion* is not romance, in spite of the subtitle, and thus Shaw makes his denouement consistent with his climax.

After the second act, the audience might expect the reception scene to contain the climax as it does in the movie and in *My Fair Lady*, but Shaw does not dramatize this scene. It is necessary to have a scene precede the ambassador's reception so as to show the developing process of Eliza's education, and Shaw is skillful enough to make the scene of Mrs. Higgins' at-home serve both as an expository scene of characterization and as climax. However, a few critics are determined to make the omitted garden party into the climax. Professor Bentley says:

If again we call Act I the prologue, the play falls into two parts of two Acts apiece. Both parts are *Pygmalion* myths. In the first a duchess is made out of a flower girl. In the second a woman is made out of a duchess. Since these two parts are the main, inner action, the omission of the climax of the outer action—the ambassador's reception—will seem particularly discrete, economical, and dramatic.

But we need not be deceived by the subtlety and calmness of Shaw's climax. The dramatic question is answered at the home of Mrs. Higgins when Eliza encounters society and passes as acceptable to the Hills, and even to the much cleverer Mrs. Higgins. We now feel certain that, with more practice, Eliza will succeed in her official debut at the ambassador's party, although she probably would not be able to do so at the time of the climax. Nevertheless, what is important is the knowledge which one now has that Higgins is on the verge of succeeding with his experiment. Eliza's success will be Higgins' success. The question, "Will Higgins be able to recreate the flower girl?" is answered affirmatively.

But Higgins' success is not complete in Act III. In Act I, he had expressed a wish to Pickering to demonstrate what kind of a *Pygmalion* he could be in regard to Eliza if he had the chance. He wanted to see if he could create a new human being, not merely a duchess, out of a flower girl. The climax, then, only indicates his accomplishment but does not actually show it. It remains for Act V to reveal to us the full extent of Higgins' achievement. Then we see that Higgins has succeeded so well—he has turned the frightened, easily-dominated Eliza into an independent woman—that he loses the prize possession itself; irony of such a success is evident. Thus, *Pygmalion* has created a masterpiece, a real person—and to Shaw a real person is one who is not dominated in spirit by the elements of his environment. *Pygmalion* loses his Galatea, for he has recreated her with the great humanizing qualities of character: independence of spirit and vitality of mind.

It is now possible to see why Shaw's ending is the only satisfying one, and why certain adapters such as Alan Lerner in *My Fair Lady* contradict the meaning of the play. Suppose Eliza's last line were changed from one of disdain (in answer to Higgins' confident order to her as his servant) to an acquiescent reply that indicates she will return to Higgins. If this were the case, then Higgins would not have really succeeded. He would have taken Eliza, the flower girl, the servant of society, and changed her physically but not spiritually. In the end, she will still be a servant girl at heart. Shaw's ending is not an arbitrary imposition of the author's temperament. Without the essential paradox involved in Higgins' accomplishment of recreation, the play becomes sentimental and one-dimensional.

The traditional structure serves Shaw well here. Professor Bentley is right in dividing the inner development of Eliza into two parts. But he does not go far enough, for the inner development is also dramatized; both inner development and plot structure are connected inseparably—that is, theme and action are virtually the same thing. *Pygmalion* is one of Shaw's best-constructed plays, and this is an important reason for its repeated success in production.

Source: Stanley J. Solomon, "The Ending of *Pygmalion*: A Structural View" in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 16, no. 1, March, 1964, pp. 59-63.

Essays and Criticism: The Denouement of *Pygmalion*

Alan Jay Lerner, probably the most successful adapter of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, commented: "Shaw explains how Eliza ends not with Higgins but with Freddy and—Shaw and Heaven forgive me!—I am not certain he is right." Many critics would agree with this sentiment. A recent analysis of the play goes so far as to dismiss the Epilogue as a bit of Shavian frivolity and to cite the "happy ending" Shaw himself wrote for Pascal's film as the proper denouement of a play which is persuasively categorized by one critic as a play which follows "the classic pattern of satirical comedy" [Milton Crane in *PMLA*, vol. 66, 1956].

Such an ending has been popular also with audiences and actors ever since the play first appeared in 1913. Shaw chided both Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Beerbohm Tree for their romantic interpretations in the first productions: "I say, Tree, must you be so treachy?" he asked during the rehearsals. Tree's stage business before the curtain fell left no doubts in the minds of audiences that Higgins's marriage to Eliza was imminent. Justifying it, Tree wrote Shaw: "My ending makes money; You ought to be grateful." Shaw replied: "Your ending is damnable: You ought to be shot." And he continued fulminating against romantic portrayals of an ending which caters to what, in the Epilogue written for *Pygmalion* later, he called "imagination. . . 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."

Nonetheless, the recurrent arousing of inappropriate audience expectations and the apparent inability of the play to arouse the appropriate expectations (or those which Shaw considered appropriate) raise a question about *Pygmalion*'s success on the playwright's terms. Perhaps even more important, they call for a reexamination of these terms; for I think that the ending is significant and dramatically inevitable, and that it is the ending Shaw himself rewrote for the film (thereby confusing the matter further)—rather than his Epilogue—which is frivolous....

While one of the most penetrating and suggestive of the analyses of Shaw's work accepts the original ending of *Pygmalion*, it seems to do so for the wrong reasons. I cannot agree with the assertion in that analysis that "the 'education of Eliza' in Acts I to III is a caricature of the true process." No educative process is in fact represented in the play (although Shaw inserted "a sample" for film production at a later date—a hint which was deftly developed in *My Fair Lady*). But more important, the conclusion that "Eliza turns the tables on Higgins, for she, finally, is the vital one, and he is the prisoner of 'system,' particularly of his profession," seems to me to miss the point (Eric Bentley in his *Bernard Shaw*, [New York], 1957).

Rather the reverse is true. The magnificent comic subplot underlines the point, for Doolittle was once, like Higgins, outside of class or "system" and had vitality. Both Doolittle and Eliza are brought to join the middle class. What is sharply contrasted, however, is the consequence of the transformation: for Doolittle it is a descent while for Eliza it is an ascent—the transformation makes the previously articulate (vital) father comically impotent while it gives the previously inarticulate ("crooning like a bilious pigeon") daughter human life. In sum, Higgins, the life-giver, will continue his study of phonetics while Eliza will settle for the life her father describes so picturesquely in the last act when all the cards are put on the table. Higgins, that is, will continue to teach proper, *civilized* articulation, a superman attempting to transform subhumans into humans, while Eliza will lead an admirable if circumscribed middle-class existence, having been given humanity—life—by Higgins.

Her ability to undergo successfully such a transformation evidences her superior qualities and often makes her appear as the hero of the play. She is only a Shavian hero *manque*, however, and she is not the wife for

Higgins. She can not even understand him, their values and interests being so different. Higgins genuinely admires Eliza, although he is first shocked and then amused by her values: in a most effective and inevitable denouement, the curtain falls as "he roars with laughter"—at the thought of her marrying Freddy. Admirable as she now is—especially when compared with what she was when he met her—she is not, and never can be, his equal. She is now part and parcel of the system of "middle class morality" which the early Doolittle and Higgins find ludicrous. Higgins and Eliza, then, still do not speak the same language, although this is true now only in the figurative sense. This does not, however, preclude the existence of an affinity between them, perhaps one comparable to the one existing between Caesar and Cleopatra. Nevertheless, marrying Eliza would be preposterous for Higgins, a superman with the vitality of a soul and a "Miltonic mind" (as he himself labels it) who lives on an entirely different plane, a plane where sex and marriage, indeed, are unknown.

What causes audiences to wish for it (as Eliza herself, for that matter, was wishing for it) is the Cinderella guise of the plot—which buttresses audiences' perennial desires, as Shaw rightly said in the Epilogue, for the marriage of the hero and the maiden—and the sentimental part of the myth which the title incidentally also calls to mind. The Cinderella guise, however, is accidental and irrelevant; it is purposely negated by the omission of scenes depicting the process of the transformation and by the omission of the grand ball scene, the highpoint of any Cinderella story. The title specifically and intentionally focuses attention away from the heroine and on Higgins, and on Higgins's life-giving qualities in particular.

It is very appropriate, therefore, that the most recent popular production is called *My Fair Lady*, focusing attention, as the musical itself does, on the Cinderella theme. At the same time, with all the brilliance of this version, even with the dialogue culled from the original play, this one is a very different play throughout. All the noncomic lines... are omitted, for in *My Fair Lady* Higgins is the conventional romantic hero and not what he surely is in *Pygmalion*: the Shavian hero, standing alone, a superman embodying a life force divorced from human social and sensual drives, but representative of the vitality and creative evolution in which, in Shaw's philosophy, lies the ultimate hope of mankind.

Source: Myron Matlaw, "The Denouement of *Pygmalion*," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 1, no. 1, May, 1958, pp. 29, 33-34.

Analysis: Places Discussed

***London**

*London. In the early twentieth century, London was the center of world commerce and the leading city of the democratic societies. However, for all its importance to world democracies, London was home to the British Empire and organized into a rigid class system, which permitted no crossing of boundaries. One of the chief means of enforcing such a system was categorizing people according to their language patterns. *Pygmalion* is about how a guttersnipe, Eliza Doolittle, overcomes the English class system by exchanging her Cockney accent for an upper-class English one with the help of linguistics expert Henry Higgins. During the course of the lessons, they fall in love with each other, but Higgins is never able to escape his own class sufficiently to reciprocate Eliza's love.

***St. Paul's Cathedral**

*St. Paul's Cathedral. Magnificent late seventeenth century church located located in Covent Garden, London's entertainment and market district. St. Paul's portico, at the entrance to the building, is a place where the different classes are permitted to mingle. There, Eliza encounters Higgins and decides to accept the challenge of changing her speech patterns.

27A Wimpole Street

27A Wimpole Street. Address of Henry Higgins's Covent Garden home and speech laboratory, located in an upscale area. It comes to represent the place of learning where Eliza is reborn as a "lady," with an entirely new habit of speech. Higgins assumes that Eliza will never leave Wimpole Street, but to his surprise she does leave him to marry a young man from fashionable Earls Court, the final proof of her transformation.

Mrs. Higgins's home

Mrs. Higgins's home. As a test of her new social skills, Higgins brings Eliza to his mother's home in exclusive Chelsea. There, Eliza meets the Eynsford Hills, who, although poor, are nevertheless members of the upper crust residing in Earl's Court. Freddy Eynsford Hill falls in love with her almost immediately. Mrs. Higgins's home is also where Eliza passes her first test in a new social setting and where she ultimately rejects Higgins.

Analysis: Historical Context

World War I

Nineteen-fourteen, the year of *Pygmalion's* London premiere, marked tremendous changes in British society. On July 28, the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia, setting off an international conflict due to a complicated set of alliances which had developed in Europe. Within two weeks, this conflict had erupted into a world war (known in Britain at the time as the "Great War"). By the end of World War I (as it came to be known later), 8.5 million people had been killed and 21 million wounded, including significant civilian casualties. The war constituted the most intense physical, economic and psychological assault on European society in its history; Britain was not alone in experiencing devastating effects on its national morale and other aspects of society.

It is ironic, Eldon C. Hill wrote in *George Bernard Shaw*, that *Pygmalion*, "written partly to demonstrate that language (phonetics particularly) could contribute to understanding among men, should be closed because of the outbreak of World War I." The war brought out Shaw's compassion, as well as his disgust with the European societies that would tolerate the destruction of so many lives. When the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell informed Shaw of the death of her son in battle, he replied that he could not be sympathetic, but only furious: "Killed just because people are blasted fools," Hill quoted the playwright saying. To Shaw, the war only demonstrated more clearly the need for human advancement on an individual and social level, to reach a level of understanding that would prevent such tragic devastation.

Colonialism and the British Empire

In 1914 Great Britain was very much still a colonial power, but while victory in the First World War actually increased the size of the British Empire, the war itself simultaneously accelerated the development of nationalism and autonomy in the provinces. Even before the war, British pride in its Empire had reached a climax prior to the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, and the brutalities of the Boer War (1899-1902), fought to assert Britain's authority in South Africa. Still, British society proudly proclaimed that "the sun never sets on the British Empire" and believed in Britain's providential mission in geographies as widely diverse as Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, India, Burma, Egypt, the Sudan, South Africa, Nigeria, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, and numerous other islands throughout the Caribbean, and Canada.

In addition to providing a symbolic unity to the Empire, the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) also gave coherence to British society at home, through a set of values known as Victorianism. Victorian values revolved around social high-mindedness (a Christian sense of charity and service), domesticity (most education and entertainment occurred in the home, but children, who "should be seen and not heard," were

reared with a strict hand) and a confidence in the expansion of knowledge and the power of reasoned argument to change society. By the time of Victoria's death, many of the more traditional mid-Victorian values were already being challenged, as was the class structure upon which many of these values depended. Victorianism, however, survived in a modified form through the reign of Victoria's son, Edward. 1914, the year of *Pygmalion* and the onset of the Great War, constituted a much different kind of break, symbolic and social.

Industrialization

The growth of industrialization throughout the nineteenth century had a tremendous impact on the organization of British society, which had (much more so than the United States) a tradition of a landed aristocracy and a more hierarchical class system—a pyramid of descending ranks and degrees. Allowing for the growth of a merchant middle class, industrialization changed British society into a plutocracy—an aristocracy of money more than land. Social mobility, however, still did not widely extend into the lower classes, propagating a lack of opportunity reflected in Liza's anxiety over what is to happen to her following Higgins's experiment.

Industrialization brought about a demographic shift throughout the nineteenth century, with more and more agricultural laborers coming to seek work in the cities. Unskilled laborers like the Doolittles competed for limited employment amid the poverty of the inner city and were largely at the mercy of employers. Increased health standards combated urban crises like tuberculosis and cholera, but slum conditions and rampant urban poverty remained a major social problem after the turn of the century. *Pygmalion* suggests the subjectivity of class identity, and the rapid deterioration of many pre-industrial social structures, but strict class distinctions of another kind nevertheless persisted. This fact is suggested by the severely disproportionate distribution of wealth in Britain at the time: during the years 1911-1913, the top 1% of the population controlled 65.5% of the nation's capital. The poorest of the poor, meanwhile, were often forced into workhouses, institutions which had been developed in the 17th century to employ paupers and the indigent at profitable work. Conditions in the workhouses differed little from prisons; they were deliberately harsh and degrading in order to discourage the poor from relying upon them. Conditions in the workhouses improved later in the 19th century but were still unpleasant enough that fear of going to one, for example, causes Doolittle in *Pygmalion* to accept his new position in the middle class even though it is displeasing to him for other reasons.

The Rise of Women and the Working Classes

During the decade which produced *Pygmalion*, the political power of the working class increased greatly, through massive increases in trade union membership. Bitter class divisions gave rise to waves of strikes and disturbances, including a major railway strike in 1911, a national miners' strike in 1912, and the "Triple Alliance" of miners, railway, and transport workers in 1914. A new political party, Labour, came into existence in 1893, advancing an eight-hour work day and other workplace reforms. Meanwhile, reforms to laws concerning suffrage, the right to vote, further brought men (and later, women) of the working class into Britain's ever-more participatory democracy. Suffrage (the right to vote) had in Britain always been based on requirements of property ownership, reflecting the contemporary idea that only landowners were considered reasoned and informed enough to vote but also that they would do so in the best interest of those in the classes below them. These property requirements were gradually relaxed throughout the nineteenth century, gradually increasing the size of the male electorate.

Only after many years of political struggle by organizations of women known as "suffragettes" did women achieve the right to vote: first in 1918 for women over 30 who also met a requirement of property ownership, then extended in 1928 to all women over the age of 21 (as was already the case for men). Increased political participation further prompted a shift in sex roles: British society had already noted the phenomenon of "the new woman," and was to see further changes such as increasing numbers of women in the work force, as well as reforms to divorce laws and other impacts upon domestic life.

Analysis: Literary Style

Plotting with a Purpose

In *Pygmalion's* plot, Higgins, a phonetics expert, makes a friendly bet with his colleague Colonel Pickering that he can transform the speech and manners of Liza, a common flower girl, and present her as a lady to fashionable society. He succeeds, but Liza gains independence in the process, and leaves her former tutor because he is incapable of responding to her needs.

Pygmalion has a tightly-constructed plot, rising conflict, and other qualities of the "well-made play," a popular form at the time. Shaw, however, revolutionized the English stage by disposing of other conventions of the well-made play; he discarded its theatrical dependence on prolonging and then resolving conflict in a sometimes contrived manner for a theater of ideas grounded in realism. Shaw was greatly influenced by Henrik Ibsen, who he claimed as a forerunner to his theatre of discussion or ideas. Ibsen's *A Doll House*, Shaw felt, was an example of how to end a play indeterminately, leading the audience to reflect upon character and theme, rather than simply entertaining them with a neatly-resolved conclusion.

Intellect vs. Entertainment

Shaw broke both with the predominant intellectual principle of his day, that of "art for art's sake," as well as with the popular notion that the purpose of the theatre was strictly to entertain. Refusing to write a single sentence for the sake of either art or entertainment alone, Shaw openly declared that he was for a theater which preached to its audience on social issues. Edward Wagenknecht wrote in *A Guide to Bernard Shaw* that Shaw's plays "are not plays: they are tracts in dramatic form." He further reflected a popular perception of Shaw's plays as intellectual exercises by stating that Shaw "has created one great character—G.B.S. [George Bernard Shaw]—and in play after play he performs infinite variations upon it." Thus, in his day Shaw was viewed as succeeding *despite* his dramatic technique rather than because of it. Wagenknecht again: "it is amazing that a man whose theory of art is so patently wrong should have achieved such a place as Shaw has won."

Though his plays do tend towards ideological discussion rather than dramatic tension, Shaw succeeded because he nevertheless understood what made a play theatrical, wrote scintillating dialogue, and always created rich, complex characters in the center of a philosophically complex drama. Among his character creations are some of the greatest in the modern theatre, especially the women: Major Barbara, Saint Joan, Liza Doolittle. Also, Shaw's deep belief in the need for social improvement did not prevent him from having a wry sense of humor, an additional component of his dramatic technique which helped his plays, *Pygmalion* most predominantly, bridge a gap between popular and intellectual art.

Romance

In calling *Pygmalion* a *romance* (its subtitle is "A Romance in Five Acts"), Shaw was referencing a well-established literary form (not usually employed in theatre), to which *Pygmalion* does not fully conform. (Shaw was aiming to provoke thought by designating his play thusly.) The term romance does not imply, as it was misinterpreted to mean by many of Shaw's contemporaries, a romantic element between Liza and Higgins. Since the middle ages, romances have been distinguished from more realistic forms by their exotic, exaggerated narratives, and their idealized characters and themes. Shaw playfully suggests *Pygmalion* is a romance because of the almost magical transformations which occur in the play and the idealized qualities to which the characters aspire.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1910s: Women in Britain do not have the right to vote, and their opportunities for education and employment remain limited.

Today: Since 1928, all women over the age of 21 have had the right to vote in Britain. The direct participation of women in government continues to be more limited than that of men, although the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 set an important precedent. Women were admitted to full admission at Oxford in 1920 and to Cambridge University in 1948. Women make up a much larger portion of the work force than they did at the turn of the century, and although their compensation and employment opportunities continue to lag behind those of men, the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and other measures have addressed this issue. It is no longer the case that a woman's natural role is widely assumed to be limited to domestic work.

1910s: With industrialization and legislative reform beginning a process of diversification, Britain's society is still rigidly hierarchical, with a tradition of a landed aristocracy and a pyramid of descending ranks and degrees. In 1911, the power of the royally-appointed House of Lords in Parliament to veto the legislation of the democratically-elected House of Commons is reduced to a power to delay legislation.

Today: The political power of royalty and the nobility has been greatly reduced through a process of legislative reform. While titles of nobility remain, Britain's society remains stratified primarily by wealth rather than rank. While the middle class grew considerably throughout the century and there was significant growth in economic indicators such as owner-occupation of homes, sharp divisions between rich and poor persist in Britain. With the growth of the technical institutes, the "polytechnics," the expansion of the university system after World War II greatly increased opportunities for higher education in the country.

1910s: Despite the promotion of a standard "Queen's English," beginning in the Victorian era, the British Isles—even London itself—is marked by a wide diversity of spoken English. The diversity of British population (including its varieties of English) was further shaped by large-scale immigration, by Irish beginning in the 1830s, Germans in the 1840s, Scandinavians in the 1870s, and Eastern Europeans in the 1880s.

Today: The diversity of English culture—especially in London and the major cities—has been further increased, along with the diversity of English dialects, by twentieth-century immigration from Britain's colonies and former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, and the Far East.

1910s: Europe is devastated by the 8.5 million dead and 21 million wounded in "the Great War" (World War I), including unprecedented levels of civilian casualties. Britain was not alone in experiencing the most intense physical, economic, and psychological assault in its history.

Today: The specter of civilian death leads to a realization that modern warfare potentially endangers the future of the entire nation. This feeling has been accentuated since the end of World War II by the threat of nuclear destruction. Much more so than at the beginning of the century, citizens have come to perceive war and the necessity of avoiding it as their business, and they often try to impact their government's policies to this end. Shaw's position against war, still somewhat radical in his day, has become much more common.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

Research the history of phonetics and speech as a subject of study; does Shaw's depiction of the scientific interests of his character Higgins seem to have been well-grounded in historical precedent?

Compare and contrast the ways in which both Liza and her father are thrust into the middle class (she through learning to speak "properly," he through obtaining money), and why each is not comfortable in it. Through these characters, what does Shaw seem to be saying about class distinctions?

Contrast Colonel Pickering and Henry Higgins in terms of manners and behavior. What are the implications of their very different treatments of Liza?

Research the social position of women in early twentieth-century Britain (economic opportunities, cultural conventions, legal rights), and use this information to explain further why Liza is so concerned about her future following the conclusion of Higgins's "experiment."

Analysis: Media Adaptations

Pygmalion was adapted as a film produced by Gabriel Pascal, directed by Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, starring Howard and Wendy Hiller; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1938. The film received Academy Awards for Shaw's screenplay and for the adaptation by Ian Dalrymple, Cecil Lewis, and W. P. Lipscomb.

Pygmalion was also filmed for American television, directed by George Schaefer for the Hallmark Hall of Fame series, starring Julie Harris and James Donald, adapted by Robert Hartung; Compass, 1963.

The play has also been produced in audio recordings. In 1972 Peter Wood directed a recording starring Michael Redgrave, Donald Pleasence, and Lynn Redgrave (Caedmon TRS 354). In 1974, the play was recorded in association with the British Council, starring Alec McCowen and Diana Rigg (Argo SAY 28).

Pygmalion was also adapted into the musical *My Fair Lady* by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe. An original cast recording was released in 1959, starring Rex Harrison, Julie Andrews, and Stanley Holloway (CK 2015 Columbia).

My Fair Lady was made into a film in 1964, produced by Jack L. Warner and directed by George Cukor, starring Audrey Hepburn as Liza with Rex Harrison reprising his stage role of Higgins. The film was nominated for twelve Academy Awards and received eight. It is considered a film classic in the musical genre.

Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

Major Barbara, another of Shaw's plays, first produced in 1905, and considered his first major work. It explores the ideological conflict between "Major" Barbara Undershaft, who strives to lift up the poor through her untiring effort with the Salvation Army, and her father, Sir Andrew Undershaft, a fabulously wealthy arms manufacturer. Both achievers represent Shaw's theory of the Life Force, or human advancement through "creative evolution." The play explores the question of whose actions better serve society, Barbara's or those of her father, who provides a comfortable existence for his employees but can only do so through his profiting by the destruction of human life. Similar to *Pygmalion* (and many of Shaw's other plays), the action revolves around a strong, independent female character and explores issues of class, social identity, and human worth.

The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism. A significant example of Shaw's political writing, one which examines many themes central to *Pygmalion*. The text demonstrates Shaw's firm, lifelong belief that only members of a socialist society—with collective ownership of wealth and equal opportunity for all—could look forward to the future with hope. Writing ten years after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Shaw viewed that experiment as a failure (recognizing the developing trend towards totalitarianism in the Soviet state). In general, Shaw looked with hope not to revolution but to a democratic transition to socialism, a truly collective evolution towards an equitable society. That "the intelligent woman" was his audience for the work was a deliberate choice; Shaw was particularly concerned with the exploitation of women, both through their unpaid but crucial domestic labor and their limited and underpaid positions in the work force. "Our whole commercial system," he wrote, "is rooted ... in cheap female labour." Shaw perceived the special

need during his era to increase educational and employment opportunities for women. This text is of a significant length but has an encyclopedic structure.

Plays and Players: Essays on the Theatre, edited by A. C. Ward (Oxford University Press, 1952); and *Shaw on the Theatre*, edited by E. J. West (Hill and Wang, 1958). These volumes compile a number of Shaw's extensive writings on the theatre (commenting on both the plays and productions of his own career, as well as on other playwrights such as Shakespeare and Ibsen.)

Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence, edited by Alan Dent (Knopf, 1962). The compiled correspondence between Shaw and the actress who created the part of Liza in the English premiere. Shaw also wrote *Caesar and Cleopatra* for her and the actor Johnston Forbes-Robertson, though she never performed in it. *Pygmalion* is discussed extensively.

The Story of English by Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil (Viking Penguin, 1986; revised, 1992). A companion book to a public-television series (available on video at most libraries) about the history of English: its historical development out of Germanic, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon roots; its transition from an early, to a middle and then a modern form; and its unprecedented spread throughout the world through British colonialism and emigration (approximately 1 billion people worldwide speak it as a first or second language). Students interested in Shaw's exploration of issues of speech and dialect in *Pygmalion* will be especially interested in this book, which further examines the seemingly innumerable varieties of spoken English throughout the world. This text examines how standards of "the Queen's English" developed in the Victorian era, and how social identities were constructed based on variations from this standard. The Cockney of Liza Doolittle, among numerous varieties in the British Isles, is given close attention. *The Story of English* provides the basis of valuable discussion on topics such as: what constitutes "Standard" English? What is a dialect? An accent? In what ways is dialect still a mark of social position?

Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources

Berst, Charles A. *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama*, University of Illinois Press (Urbana), 1973, pp. 197-218.

Further Reading

Bentley, Eric, *Bernard Shaw, 1856-1950*, amended edition, New Directions, 1957.

Though Bentley's book (originally published in 1947) is not adulatory, Shaw considered it "the best book written about himself as a dramatist." Bentley states that his double intention in the book is "to disentangle a credible man and artist from the mass of myth that surrounds him, and to discover the complex component parts of his 'simplicity.'" *Pygmalion* is discussed in detail, pages 119-126, and elsewhere in the book.

Crane, Milton. "Pygmalion: Bernard Shaw's Dramatic Theory and Practice" in *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, Vol. 66, no 6, December, 1951, pp. 879-85.

Crane begins with the question of whether Shaw was old-fashioned in his approach to drama or innovative. Wrapped up in this issue is the figure of Ibsen, who Shaw declared was revolutionary for giving his plays indeterminate endings and concluding with "discussion," rather than the clear unraveling of a dramatic situation in the "well-made play"—the popular form of the day. Crane demonstrates that Ibsen did not present a new innovation so much as modify earlier forms and claims that something similar holds true for Shaw as well. Although Shaw denied his audience a romantic ending in *Pygmalion*, Crane does not feel it is true of the playwright what many have said, "that he is primarily a thinker, who chose for rhetorical reasons to cast his ideas in dramatic form." Rather than viewing his characters abstractly, as means to a rhetorical end, Shaw was passionately invested in their lives and destinies, which highlights a basic "conventionality" in his technique.

Dukore, Bernard F. "The Director As Interpreter: Shaw's *Pygmalion*" in *Shaw*, Vol. 3, 1983, pp. 129-47. A three-part article analyzing, first, "Shaw's concept of the question of directorial interpretation"; then his own directorial interpretation of *Pygmalion* (in the London premiere and several subsequent productions); and finally, the revisions he made to *Pygmalion* as a result of the experience of directing the play. Dukore shows the careful separation Shaw maintained between "Playwright Shaw" and "Director Shaw": rather than explain to his actors the ideas in his play in a literary manner, Shaw was able to help them in very practical terms to develop their performances. Often these actors led him to new insights about his own characters. "While he recognized that there are a variety of appropriate ways to interpret any well-written role," however, Shaw also "rejected what he considered inappropriate interpretations."

Evans, T. R., editor. *Shaw: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge & Kegan Paul (London), 1976. An extremely useful collection of 135 contemporary writings on Shaw's plays: reviews, essays, letters, and other sources. Arranged roughly in chronological order and grouped by play, the items "give a continuing picture of the changing and developing reaction to Shaw's dramatic work." *Pygmalion* is covered on pages 223-29.

Harvey, Robert C. "How Shavian is the *Pygmalion* We Teach?" in *English Journal*, Vol. 59, 1970, pp. 1234-38.

This article by a former high school English teacher begins with the observation that while Shaw lived, he absolutely refused to let his plays be published in school textbooks: "My plays were not designed as instruments of torture," he wittily commented. Harvey recognizes that despite the wishes of the playwright, there are definite values to students reading his work in a school setting. Too often, however, the work is taught to support grammar lessons, with the message that like Liza, students can succeed if they learn to speak "correctly." Harvey affirms that the real value of the piece for students is in trying to grasp its literary complexity. If anything, the play should show students "the social importance of all varieties of language ... the equality of every dialect," rather than being used "to forge the very chains [Shaw] wrote the play to break."

Henderson, Archibald. *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century*, Appleton-Century-Crofts (New York), 1956.

A final, culminating book by Shaw's "official" biographer, incorporating much material from his previous works. Henderson studied Shaw first-hand and wrote on him for over fifty years.

Hill, Eldon C. *George Bernard Shaw*, Twayne (Boston), 1978.

A biography and critical study intended not for the Shaw specialist but for the general reader "who seeks an understanding of Shaw's life and work." *Pygmalion* is discussed in detail, pages 118-21.

Huggett, Richard. *The Truth about Pygmalion*, Heinemann (London), 1969.

Focusing predominantly on Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the actress who created Liza for the London premiere, this study is the result of three years of research into the play and its performances.

Kaufman, R. J., editor. *G. B. Shaw: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ), 1965.

While none of the essays examines *Pygmalion* exclusively, the topics of these compiled studies overlap extensively with issues in that particular play. Notable contributions include a short, provocative piece by Bertolt Brecht, showing Shaw's influence on his work. Brecht states of Shaw's view towards society, "it should be clear by now that Shaw is a terrorist. The Shavian terror is an unusual one, and he employs an unusual weapon—that of humor." In his article "Born to Set It Right. The Roots of Shaw's Style," Richard M. Ohmann investigates the development of Shaw's position as a social outsider, "the critic of things as they are." Eric Bentley's "The Making of a Dramatist" examines the formative years 1892-1903 in Shaw's life.

MacCarthy, Desmond. *Shaw. The Plays*, Newton Abbott, 1951.

Originally published as a series of essays from 1907 to 1950, this book offers a unique chance to trace the development of a particular perspective on Shaw's long and prolific career. *Pygmalion* is discussed in detail, pages 108-13.

Miller, Jane M. "Some Versions of *Pygmalion*" in *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, edited by Charles Martindale, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

A study of Ovid's version of the *Pygmalion* myth (including possible antecedents for it), and its influence on later works, Miller stresses the sexual implications of the *Pygmalion*-Galatea relationship in Ovid's story (which suggest possible consequences for Shaw's version). Miller states that the various versions of *Pygmalion* tend in general to be of two types: historical, which depict a social transformation and which usually contain "an element of social comment" (she places Shaw's *Pygmalion* in this category); and mystical, which explore "love as a divine experience." Miller suggests Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* as an early example of the "mystical" interpretation but comments that the form abounded in the nineteenth century in particular. Miller concludes that the "historicist" versions of *Pygmalion*, Shaw's included, "are interesting products of their time but lack the vitality of the Ovidian original."

Muggleston, Lynda. "Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in *Pygmalion*" in *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language*, Vol. 44, no. 175, August, 1993, pp. 373-85.

A detailed study of the social importance of *Pygmalion*'s, exploration of accent and pronunciation as determiners "not only of social status but also of social acceptability." Although difficult only in places for readers not familiar with some linguistic vocabulary, the article's central argument is easily grasped, that Shaw rebelled against the idea that there was something inherently better about people of the upper classes and therefore demonstrated that social judgments of a person's merit depend on superficial, subjective qualities (like proper speech). *Pygmalion* is a "paradigm of social mobility," illustrating that social transformation is possible, and "a paean to inherent equality," suggesting that a person's merit is distinct and separate from one's level of social acceptability.

Quinn, Martin. "The Informing Presence of Charles Dickens in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*" in the *Dickensian*, Vol. 80, no. 3, Autumn, 1984, pp. 144-50.

This article traces a number of connections between *Pygmalion* and various works of Dickens, who Quinn states "entered Shaw's life early and completely and was thereafter always at his fingertips when not on the tip of his tongue." Quinn shows that Dickens was specifically on Shaw's mind when writing *Pygmalion* in 1912, because he was completing at the same time an introduction to Dickens's novel *Hard Times*. The influence of Dickens was "pervasive" throughout Shaw's career, however. The value of Quinn's article is in documenting the exhaustive reading of "[a]n intellect as comprehensive as Shaw's," and inserting the name of Dickens, a novelist, among the list of dramatic artists considered to be Shaw's major influences: Shakespeare, Moliere, and Ibsen.

Shaw Bulletin, Shaw Review, Shaw: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies, the Shavian.

Publications of the Shaw Society of America (*The Shaw Bulletin*, 1952-1958; *Shaw Review*, 1951-1980; and the *Shaw annual*, 1981-present) and the Shaw Society, London (the *Shavian*, 1953-present). These journals have published extensively on all topics related to Shaw's work; check their title and subject indexes for further information.

Small, Barbara J. "Shaw on Standard Stage Speech" in *Shaw Review*, Vol. 22, 1979, pp. 106-13.

A short but enlightening study of Shaw's interest in diction and stage speech. Not entirely about *Pygmalion*, but its references to that play suggest the close relationship between Higgins and Shaw's own ideals of spoken speech. "Shaw was preoccupied with the dearth of good standard speech on the English stage," Small wrote

"Good diction was, for Shaw, associated with fine acting." Shaw did not blame individuals for their poor pronunciation; in his preface to *Pygmalion*, for example, he decries the problems stemming from English not being a language with phonetic spellings of words. These larger issues Shaw addressed through a phonetic system of his own devising, and other means, but regarding individual persons what Shaw hated most was pretension. "An honest slum dialect" was preferable to him "than the attempts of phonetically untaught persons to imitate the plutocracy."

Wagenknecht, Edward. *A Guide to Bernard Shaw*, Russell & Russell (New York), 1929.

A study written while Shaw was alive and at the peak of his career (he had won the Nobel Prize only a few years previously). Wagenknecht wrote that the purpose of his book is expository rather than critical: that is, "to gather together... all the information which, in my judgment, the student or general reader needs to have in mind in order to read Shaw's plays intelligently." As a study, it has largely been superseded by other later works, but it remains an important historical document.

Bibliography

Berst, Charles A. "*Pygmalion*": *Shaw's Spin on Myth and Cinderella*. New York: Twayne, 1995. An excellent source for students that examines the literary and historical contexts of the play and provides an intelligent and thorough interpretation tracing Eliza's transformation into a woman and lady. Focuses on Shaw's use of the Pygmalion myth and the Cinderella fairy tale.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion."* New York: Chelsea House, 1988. A judicious selection of eight critical essays that represent major interpretations of the play. In his introduction, Bloom argues that *Pygmalion* is Shaw's masterpiece. Excellent for students.

Hornby, Richard. "Beyond the Verbal in *Pygmalion*." In *Shaw's Plays in Performance*, edited by Daniel Leary. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983. Examines Shaw's stagecraft and the performance qualities inherent in the play as a script. Goes beyond "the purely verbal or literary" qualities of the play to show how the visual and aural elements convey meaning.

Huggett, Richard. *The Truth About "Pygmalion."* New York: Random House, 1969. A fascinating narrative account of the original 1914 London production, in which "three of the most monstrous egoists the theatre ever produced" participated: actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who played Eliza; actor Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who played Higgins; and Shaw himself.

Silver, Arnold. *Bernard Shaw: The Darker Side*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1982. A major part of this challenging and unconventional book on Shaw is a very thorough and complex psychological interpretation of *Pygmalion* that shows Shaw working out intense personal conflicts. Fascinating materials for more advanced students.

Questions and Answers: What is the significance of Pygmalion's title?

In ancient Greek mythology, Pygmalion was a Cyprian sculptor who created a statue of a woman and subsequently fell in love with it. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion is shown as an uptight artist who is judgmental about the way women in his town conduct themselves (he blames Aphrodite, the goddess of love). However, he ends up falling in love with his own creation because it seems so realistic and beautiful. In the end, the statue woman (named Galatea) comes to life after an offering to Aphrodite. The parallels are clear: uptight scholar Henry Higgins transforms a woman into someone she isn't originally. The themes of

transformation and desire are evident.