

Pygmalion

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Introduction

George Bernard Shaw lived from 1856 to 1950. He was very outspoken about politics and often criticized for his radical views. He won Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925. He believed that the transformation of the individual could lead to the transformation of society.

Shaw wrote the play in the spring of 1912. *Pygmalion* premiered at the Hofburg Theatre in Vienna on October 16, 1913, in a German translation by Shaw's Viennese literary agent and acolyte, Siegfried Trebitsch. Its first New York production opened March 24, 1914 at the

German-language Irving Place Theatre. It opened in London April 11, 1914 at Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's His Majesty's Theatre. Shaw directed the actors through tempestuous rehearsals often punctuated by at least one of the three storming out of the theatre in a rage.

Pygmalion is a comedy about a phonetics expert who, as a kind of social experiment, attempts to make a lady out of an uneducated Cockney flower-girl. Although not as intellectually complex as some of the other plays in Shaw's "theatre of ideas," *Pygmalion* nevertheless probes important questions about social class, human behavior, and relations between the sexes.

The play was viewed (thankfully, by many critics) as one of Shaw's less provocative comedies. Nevertheless, *Pygmalion* did provoke controversy upon its original production. Somewhat ironically, the cause was an issue of language, around which the plot itself turns: Liza's use of the word "bloody," never before uttered on the stage at His Majesty's Theatre. Even though they were well aware of the controversy from its coverage in the press, the first audiences gasped in surprise, then burst

into laughter, at Liza's spirited rejoinder: "Not bloody likely!"

STRUCTURE

During this era, the Victorian, both in the play and in real life, there were huge differences between the rich and the poor. Social classes were clearly defined, and it was hard to move from one class to another. Women did not have the same rights as men and were often looked at as inferior.

Upper class people noble men and women who didn't work. In the play, these are HOST and HOSTESS of the Embassy Ball. Upper middle class citizens worked but were employed in safe, clean jobs such as lawyers, doctors or professors. In the play, they are represented by HENRY HIGGINS, COLONEL PICKERING. While lower middle class worked in dangerous jobs and unsanitary conditions. Lower class did not work or worked little and had no financial freedom, and were often servants. In the play, ELIZA DOOLITTLE is our example.

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw tackles issues about women's rights, language, social class, and the idea of selftransformation. *Pygmalion* is not the typical romance we think of today. Victorian romances, such as Pygmalion examine social issues. They often showcased poor but honourable leading ladies and male protagonists who learned that wealth and social class do not define a person's character.

LANGAUGE

Since *Pygmalion* is a play that concentrates on language, one should not necessarily expect a great deal of plot. Much of the interest and energy of the play comes from discussing language and accents and observing how language is reflected in, for example, manners, habits, and

dress.

In this play and in British society at large, language is closely tied with class. From a person's accent, one can determine where the person comes from and usually what the person's socioeconomic background is.

We hear language in all its forms in *Pygmalion*: everything from slang and "small talk," to heartfelt pleas and big talk about soul and poverty. Depending on the situation, and depending on whom you ask, language can separate or connect people, degrade or elevate, transform or prevent transformation. Language, we learn, can deceive just as easily as it can reveal the truth. It is, ultimately, what binds Pygmalion together, and it pays to read carefully; even something as small as a single word can define a person.

The literary class of English was trying to promote English as a rich and unique language of the world. Here in English society Good Language Skill was a symbol of high rank in society. Shaw has tried to convince the lay man this that the English should pay attention to their language as a universal language. And that class distinction associated with language should be abolished by introducing a Universal system of pronunciation. Shaw's Contribution to English Language Bernard Shaw himself was also disgusted by the way English language was treated, means to say spoken. Most of the people of England didn't care to speak well with good pronunciation. He blamed this onto English spelling system. He had utmost desire to bring reforms in this system of English alphabet. For this purpose he left most of his fortune to the expenses of starting a new English Alphabets based on phonetics principles which would provide a separate symbol or sign for each spoken sound. Thus the alphabets will of course enlarge but it will become easy

to learn the language. Shaw believed that this exact representation of sounds in writing and in print would bring about correct pronunciation by everyone and break down class distinction. The title of the drama shows the idealistic approach of Shaw towards English language. If we consider Shaw as Pygmalion, then English language like Galatea would signify as a perfect language with no shortcomings at all.

TITLE

Pygmalion is named after Pygmalion (mythology). Professor of phonetics Henry Higgins makes a bet that he can train a bedraggled Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, to pass for a duchess at an ambassador's garden party by teaching her to assume a veneer of gentility, the most important element of which, he believes, is perfect speech.

In ancient Greek mythology, Pygmalion fell in love with one of his sculptures that came to life and was a popular subject for Victorian era English playwrights, including one of Shaw's influences, W. S. Gilbert, who wrote a successful play based on the story in 1871, called *Pygmalion and Galatea*.

In addition to the importance of the original Pygmalion myth to Shaw's play, critics have pointed out the possible influence of other works, such as Tobias Smollett's novel *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (which similarly involves a gentleman attempting to make a fine lady out of a "coarse" working girl), and a number of plays, including W.S. Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*. Shaw denied borrowing the story directly from any of these sources, but there are traces of them in his play.

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ACT I

Covent Garden at 11.15 p.m. Torrents of heavy summer rain. Cab whistles blowing frantically in all directions. Pedestrians running for shelter into the market and under the *portico* of St. Paul's Church, where there are already several people, among them a lady and her daughter in evening dress. They are all peering out gloomily at the rain, except one man with his back turned to the rest, who seems wholly preoccupied with a notebook in which he is writing busily.

The church clock strikes the first quarter.

THE DAUGHTER [*in the space between the central pillars, close to the one on her left*] I'm getting chilled to the bone. What can Freddy be doing all this time? He's been gone twenty minutes.

THE MOTHER [*on her daughter's right*] Not so long. But he ought to have got us a cab by this.

A BYSTANDER [*on the lady's right*] He won't get no cab not until half-past eleven, missus, when they come back after dropping their theatre fares.

THE MOTHER. But we must have a cab. We can't stand here until half-past eleven. It's too bad.

THE BYSTANDER. Well, it ain't my fault, missus.

ACT I

THE DAUGHTER. If Freddy had a bit of *gumption*, he would have got one at the theatre door.

THE MOTHER. What could he have done, poor boy?

THE DAUGHTER. Other people got cabs. Why couldn't he?

Freddy rushes in out of the rain from the Southampton Street side, and comes between them closing a dripping umbrella. He is a young man of twenty, in evening dress, very wet around the ankles.

THE DAUGHTER. Well, haven't you got a cab?

FREDDY. There's not one to be had for love or money.

THE MOTHER. Oh, Freddy, there must be one. You can't have tried.

THE DAUGHTER. It's too tiresome. Do you expect us to go and get one ourselves?

FREDDY. I tell you they're all engaged. The rain was so sudden: nobody was prepared; and everybody had to take a cab. I've been to Charing Cross one way and nearly to Ludgate Circus the other; and they were all engaged.

THE MOTHER. Did you try Trafalgar Square?

FREDDY. There wasn't one at Trafalgar Square.

THE DAUGHTER. Did you try?

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FREDDY. I tried as far as Charing Cross Station. Did you expect me to walk to Hammersmith?

THE DAUGHTER. You haven't tried at all.

THE MOTHER. You really are very helpless, Freddy. Go again; and don't come back until you have found a cab.

FREDDY. I shall simply get soaked for nothing.

THE DAUGHTER. And what about us? Are we to stay here all night in this *draught*, with next to nothing on. You selfish pig—

FREDDY. Oh, very well: I'll go, I'll go. [He opens his umbrella and dashes off Strandwards, but comes into collision with a flower girl, who is hurrying in for shelter, knocking her basket out of her hands. A blinding flash of lightning, followed instantly by a rattling peal of thunder, orchestrates the incident]

THE FLOWER GIRL. Nah then, Freddy: look wh'y' gowin, deah.

FREDDY. Sorry [he rushes off].

THE FLOWER GIRL [picking up her scattered flowers and replacing them in the basket] There's mennen f' yer! Te-oo banches o voylets trod into the mad. [She sits down on the plinth of the column, sorting her flowers, on the lady's right. She is not at all an attractive person. She is perhaps eighteen, perhaps twenty, hardly older. She wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed.]