introduction

Pygmalion is a play by George Bernard Shaw, named after the Greek mythological figure. It premiered at the Hofburg Theatre in Vienna on 16 October 1913 and was first presented in German on stage to the public in 1913. Its English-language premiere took place at Her Majesty's Theatre in the West End in April 1914 and starred Herbert Beerbohm Tree as phonetics professor Henry Higgins and Mrs Patrick Campbell as Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle.

In ancient Greek mythology, Pygmalion fell in love with one of his sculptures, which then came to life. The general idea of that myth was a popular subject for Victorian era British playwrights, including one of Shaw's influences, W. S. Gilbert, who wrote a successful play based on the story called Pygmalion and Galatea that was first presented in 1871. Shaw would also have been familiar with the musical Adonis and the burlesque version, Galatea, or Pygmalion Reversed. Shaw's play has been adapted numerous times, most notably as the 1938 film Pygmalion, the 1956 musical My Fair Lady and its 1964 film version.

Shaw mentioned that the character of Professor Henry Higgins was inspired by several British professors of phonetics: Alexander Melville Bell, Alexander J. Ellis, Tito Pagliardini, but above all, the cantankerous Henry Sweet.

## introduction

George Bernard Shaw was born in 1856, in Dublin. His father was a civil servant and his mother was a singer. He changed schools several times as he grew older, and developed a strong dislike of schools and formal education. When he was a teenager, his mother moved to London and he remained in Dublin with his father for some time. But in 1876, he moved to London to join his mother. There, he began writing, starting with novels (though he found no success as a novelist). He also became somewhat politically active, an ardent supporter of socialism. It was only in the 1880s that Shaw turned to drama. He finally found some writing success with his plays, which often involved social critiques. Shaw was a very prolific writer, writing over 50 plays in addition to articles, reviews, essays, and pamphlets. His popularity rose in the early 1900s and he started to become a famous, well-respected playwright. In 1925, he was recognized for his work with the Nobel Prize in Literature and he died 25 years later, at the age of 94.

# Plot[edit]

## Act One[edit]

A group of people are sheltering from the rain. Among them are the Eynsford-Hills, superficial social climbers eking out a living in "genteel poverty", consisting initially of Mrs Eynsford-Hill and her daughter Clara. Clara's brother Freddy enters having earlier been dispatched to secure them a cab (which they can ill-afford), but being rather timid and faint-hearted he has failed to do so. As he goes off once again to find a cab, he bumps into a flower girl, Eliza Doolittle. Her flowers drop into the mud of Covent Garden, the flowers she needs to survive in her poverty-stricken world. Shortly they are joined by a gentleman, Colonel Pickering. While Eliza tries to sell flowers to the Colonel, a bystander informs her that a man is writing down everything she says. The man is Henry Higgins, a linguist. Eliza worries that Higgins is a police officer and will not calm down until Higgins introduces himself. It soon becomes apparent that he and Colonel Pickering have a shared interest in phonetics and an intense mutual admiration; indeed, Pickering has come from India to meet Higgins, and Higgins was planning to go to India to meet Pickering. Higgins tells Pickering that he could pass off the flower girl as a duchess merely by teaching her to speak properly. These words of bravado spark an interest in Eliza, who would love to make changes in her life and become more mannerly, even though to her it only means working in a flower shop. At the end of the act, Freddy returns after finding a taxi, only to find that his mother and sister have gone and left him with the cab. The streetwise Eliza takes the cab from him, using the money that Higgins tossed to her, leaving him on his own.

## Act Two[edit]

**Higgins' home** – the next day

As Higgins demonstrates his phonetics to Pickering, the housekeeper Mrs Pearce tells him that a young girl wants to see him. Eliza has shown up because she wishes to talk like a lady in a flower shop. She tells Higgins that she will pay for lessons. He shows no interest, but she reminds him of his boast the previous day. Higgins claimed that he could pass her for a duchess. Pickering makes a bet with him on his claim and says that he will pay for her lessons if Higgins succeeds. She is sent off to have a bath. Mrs Pearce tells Higgins that he must behave himself in the young girl's presence, meaning he must stop swearing and improve his table manners, but he is at a loss to understand why she should find fault with him. Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father, appears with the sole purpose of getting money out of Higgins, having no paternal interest in his daughter's welfare. He requests and received five pounds in compensation of the loss of Eliza, although Higgins, much amused by Doolittle's approach to morality, is tempted to pay ten. Doolittle refuses; he sees himself as a member of the undeserving poor, and means to go on being undeserving. With his intelligent mind untamed by education, he has an eccentric view of life. He is also aggressive, and when Eliza, on her return, sticks her tongue out at him, he goes to hit her, but Pickering prevents him. The scene ends with Higgins telling Pickering that they really have got a difficult job on their hands.

## Act Three[edit]

**Mrs. Higgins' drawing room**

Higgins bursts in and tells his mother he has picked up a "common flower girl" whom he has been teaching. Mrs Higgins is unimpressed with her son's attempts to win her approval because it is her 'at home' day and she is entertaining visitors. The visitors are the Eynsford-Hills. Higgins is rude to them on their arrival. Eliza enters and soon falls into talking about the weather and her family. Whilst she is now able to speak in beautifully modulated tones, the substance of what she says remains unchanged from the gutter. She confides her suspicions that her aunt was killed by relatives, mentions that gin had been "mother's milk" to this aunt, and that Eliza's own father was always more cheerful after a goodly amount of gin. Higgins passes off her remarks as "the new small talk", and Freddy is enraptured by Eliza. When she is leaving, he asks her if she is going to walk across the park, to which she replies, "Walk? Not bloody likely!" (This is the most famous line from the play and, for many years after the play's debut, use of the word 'bloody' was known as a *pygmalion*; Mrs Campbell was considered to have risked her career by speaking the line on stage.[7]) After she and the Eynsford-Hills leave, Henry asks for his mother's opinion. She says the girl is not presentable and is concerned about what will happen to her, but neither Higgins nor Pickering understands her thoughts of Eliza's future, and leave feeling confident and excited

about how Eliza will get on. This leaves Mrs Higgins feeling exasperated, and exclaiming, "Men! Men!! Men!!!"

## Act Four[edit]

**Higgins' home** – midnight

Higgins, Pickering, and Eliza have returned from a ball. A tired Eliza sits unnoticed, brooding and silent, while Pickering congratulates Higgins on winning the bet. Higgins scoffs and declares the evening a "silly tomfoolery", thanking God it's over and saying that he had been sick of the whole thing for the last two months. Still barely acknowledging Eliza beyond asking her to leave a note for Mrs Pearce regarding coffee, the two retire to bed. Higgins returns to the room, looking for his slippers, and Eliza throws them at him. Higgins is taken aback, and is at first completely unable to understand Eliza's preoccupation, which aside from being ignored after her triumph is the question of what she is to do now. When Higgins does understand he makes light of it, saying she could get married, but Eliza interprets this as selling herself like a prostitute. "We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court Road." Finally she returns her jewelry to Higgins, including the ring he had given her, which he throws into the fireplace with a violence that scares Eliza. Furious with himself for losing his temper, he damns Mrs Pearce, the coffee, Eliza, and finally himself, for "lavishing" his knowledge and his "regard and intimacy" on a "heartless guttersnipe", and retires in great dudgeon. Eliza roots around in the fireplace and retrieves the ring.

## Act Five[edit]

**Mrs. Higgins' drawing room** – the next morning

Higgins and Pickering, perturbed by the discovery that Eliza has walked out on them, call on Mrs Higgins to phone the police. Higgins is particularly distracted, since Eliza had assumed the responsibility of maintaining his diary and keeping track of his possessions, which causes Mrs Higgins to decry their calling the police as though Eliza were "a lost umbrella". Doolittle is announced; he emerges dressed in splendid wedding attire and is furious with Higgins, who after their previous encounter had been so taken with Doolittle's unorthodox ethics that he had recommended him as the "most original moralist in England" to a rich American founding Moral Reform Societies; the American had subsequently left Doolittle a pension worth three thousand pounds a year, as a consequence of which Doolittle feels intimidated into joining the middle class and marrying his missus. Mrs Higgins observes that this at least settles the problem of who shall provide for Eliza, to which Higgins objects – after all, he paid Doolittle five pounds for her. Mrs Higgins informs her son that Eliza is upstairs, and explains the circumstances of her arrival, alluding to how marginalised and overlooked Eliza felt the previous night. Higgins is unable to appreciate this, and sulks when told that he must behave if Eliza is to join them. Doolittle is asked to wait outside.

Eliza enters, at ease and self-possessed. Higgins blusters but Eliza is unshaken and speaks exclusively to Pickering. Throwing Higgins' previous insults back at him ("Oh, I'm only a squashed cabbage leaf"), Eliza remarks that it was only by Pickering's example that she learned to be a lady, which renders Higgins speechless. Eliza goes on to say that she has completely left behind the flower girl she was, and that she couldn't utter any of her old sounds if she tried – at which point Doolittle emerges from the balcony, causing Eliza to relapse into her gutter speech. Higgins is jubilant, jumping up and crowing over her. Doolittle explains his situation and asks if Eliza will come with him to his wedding. Pickering and Mrs Higgins also agree to go, and leave with Doolittle and Eliza to follow.

The scene ends with another confrontation between Higgins and Eliza. Higgins asks if Eliza is satisfied with the revenge she has brought thus far and if she will now come back, but she refuses. Higgins defends himself from Eliza's earlier accusation by arguing that he treats everyone the same, so she shouldn't feel singled out. Eliza replies that she just wants a little kindness, and that since he will never stoop to show her this, she will not come back, but will marry Freddy. Higgins scolds her for such low ambitions: he has made her "a consort for a king." When she threatens to teach phonetics and offer herself as an assistant to Higgins' academic rival Nepommuck, Higgins again loses his temper and vows to wring her neck if she does so. Eliza realises that this last threat strikes Higgins at the very core and that it gives her power over

him; Higgins, for his part, is delighted to see a spark of fight in Eliza rather than her erstwhile fretting and worrying. He remarks "I like you like this", and calls her a "pillar of strength". Mrs Higgins returns and she and Eliza depart for the wedding. As they leave, Higgins incorrigibly gives Eliza a list of errands to run, as though their recent conversation had not taken place. Eliza disdainfully explains why they are unnecessary and wonders what Higgins shall do without her (in another version, Eliza disdainfully tells him to do the errands himself; Mrs Higgins says that she'll get the items, but Higgins cheerfully tells her that Eliza will do it after all). Higgins laughs to himself at the idea of Eliza marrying Freddy as the play ends.

## Critical reception[edit]

The play was well received by critics in major cities following its premieres in Vienna, London, and New York. The initial release in Vienna garnered several reviews describing the show as a positive departure from Shaw's usual dry and didactic style.[8] The Broadway premiere in New York was praised in terms of both plot and acting, described as "a love story with brusque diffidence and a wealth of humor."[9] Reviews of the production in London were slightly less unequivocally positive, with *The Telegraph* noting that the play was deeply diverting with interesting mechanical staging, although the critic ultimately found the production somewhat shallow and overly lengthy.[10] *The Times*, however, praised both the characters and actors (especially Sir Herbert Tree as Higgins and Mrs. Patrick Campbell as Eliza) and the happy if "unconventional" ending.[11][12]

## Ending[edit]

*Pygmalion* was the most broadly appealing of all Shaw's plays. But popular audiences, looking for pleasant entertainment with big stars in a West End venue, wanted a "happy ending" for the characters they liked so well, as did some critics.[13] During the 1914 run, Tree sought to sweeten Shaw's ending to please himself and his record houses.[14] Shaw remained sufficiently irritated to add a postscript essay, "'What Happened Afterwards",[15] to the 1916 print edition for inclusion with subsequent editions, in which he explained precisely why it was impossible for the story to end with Higgins and Eliza getting married.

He continued to protect what he saw as the play's, and Eliza's, integrity by protecting the last scene. For at least some performances during the 1920 revival, Shaw adjusted the ending in a way that underscored the Shavian message. In an undated note to Mrs. Campbell he wrote,

When Eliza emancipates herself – when Galatea comes to life – she must not relapse. She must retain her pride and triumph to the end. When Higgins takes your arm on 'consort battleship' you must instantly throw him off with implacable pride; and this is the note until the final 'Buy them yourself.' He will go out on the balcony to watch your departure; come back triumphantly into the room; exclaim 'Galatea!' (meaning that the statue has come to life at last); and – curtain. Thus he gets the last word; and you get it too.[16]

(This ending, however, is not included in any print version of the play.)

Shaw fought against a Higgins-Eliza happy-end pairing as late as 1938. He sent the 1938 film version's producer, Gabriel Pascal, a concluding sequence which he felt offered a fair compromise: a tender farewell scene between Higgins and Eliza, followed by one showing Freddy and Eliza happy in their greengrocery-flower shop. Only at the sneak preview did he learn that Pascal had finessed the question of Eliza's future with a slightly ambiguous final scene in which Eliza returns to the house of a sadly musing Higgins and self-mockingly quotes her previous self announcing, "I washed my face and hands before I come, I did".

# Characters

- **Professor Henry Higgins**

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

- **Eliza Doolittle**

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

- **Colonel Pickering**

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

- **Alfred Doolittle**

  Alfred Doolittle is Eliza's father, an elderly but vigorous dustman who has had at least six wives and who "seems equally free from fear and conscience." When he learns that his daughter has entered the home of Henry Higgins, he immediately pursues to see if he can get some money out of the circumstance. His unique brand of rhetoric, an unembarrassed, unhypocritical advocation of drink and pleasure (at other people's expense), is amusing to Higgins. Through Higgins' joking recommendation, Doolittle becomes a richly endowed lecturer to a moral reform society, transforming him from lowly

dustman to a picture of middle class morality--he becomes miserable. Throughout, Alfred is a scoundrel who is willing to sell his daughter to make a few pounds, but he is one of the few unaffected characters in the play, unmasked by appearance or language. Though scandalous, his speeches are honest. At points, it even seems that he might be Shaw's voice piece of social criticism (Alfred's proletariat status, given Shaw's socialist leanings, makes the prospect all the more likely).

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

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

## theme

## Language and Speech 0

**Shaw's play explores aspects of language in a variety of ways. Higgins and Pickering study linguistics and phonetics, taking note of how people from different backgrounds speak differently. In Act Three, we see the importance of proper small talk in a social situation. And the play also reveals some of the powers of language: Eliza's transformation is spurred simply by Pickering calling her by the name Miss Doolittle, while Higgins' insults and coarse language, which severely hurt Eliza's feelings, show the potential violence of language. The play is most interested, though, in the connections between a person's speech and his or her identity. As we**

**see in the beginning of the play, Higgins can easily guess where people are from based on their accent, dialect, and use of particular slang. How different people speak the same language thus reveals a surprising amount about their identity. However, Shaw also exposes how shallow and imprecise this conception of identity is, how it doesn't actually capture or represent the full person. After all, Eliza's way of speaking transforms over the course of the play. Eliza is able to change her identity simply by learning to talk differently.**

## Appearance and Identity 1

*Pygmalion* explores how social identity is formed not only through patterns of speech, but also through one's general appearance. Much like speech, one's physical appearance signals social class. In the opening scene, as people from different walks of life are forced to take shelter under the same portico, characters' social class is discernible through their clothing: the poor flower-girl (later revealed to be Eliza) and the gentleman, for example, easily know each other's...

## Social Class and Manners 2

Written in 1912, *Pygmalion* is set in the early 20th century, at the end of the Victorian period in England. Among other things, this period of history was characterized by a particularly rigid social hierarchy—but one that was beginning to decline as social mobility became increasingly possible. The wealthy, high-class characters of the play are thus especially concerned with maintaining class distinctions. This means more than a mere distinction between rich and poor. The Eynsford...

## Education and Inelligence 3

Two of the play's main characters—Higgins and Pickering—are academics. Shaw in some sense pits their intellectual intelligence against the wits of others, like Eliza. Early in the play, Eliza is intimidated and confused by Higgins' academic language. However, while characters like Eliza, Mrs. Higgins, and Mr. Doolittle lack the kind of education that Higgins and Pickering have had, the play reveals them to be smart in their own ways. Eliza, for...

## Femininity and Gender Roles 4

The title of Shaw's play is taken from the myth of Pygmalion. In this story, Pygmalion scorns all the women around him and makes a sculpture of his ideal woman. The sculpture is so beautiful that he falls in love with it and it comes to life. By titling his play after this story, Shaw calls attention to questions of femininity and

gender. As Pygmalion sculpts his ideal woman, so Higgins and Pickering mold Eliza...

**Act 1 Quotes**

It's aw rawt: e's a genleman: look at his ba-oots.

Related themes 2 1

And how are all your people down at Selsey?
Who told you my people come from Selsey?

Related themes 0

## SYMBOLS

In *Pygmalion*, clothing is an important part (perhaps the most important part) of characters' appearances and how they display their identity and social standing. In the opening scene, the different people under the church portico are able to discern each other's social class particularly by their clothes. **Pickering** is easily recognizable as a gentleman, whereas **Eliza** is easily identifiable as a poor flower-girl. Because of this, clothing is naturally an important part of Eliza's transformation. In Act Two, after she changes clothes, her own father doesn't even recognize her at first—and this is before she even begins to act or talk differently. Mr. Doolittle's own social transformation is also symbolized by clothing. He arrives at Mrs. Higgins' house in Act Five dressed like a gentleman, and Higgins assumes that this cannot be Eliza's father, whom he met earlier. The importance of clothes in the formation of one's social identity suggests that such identity is rather shallow. Indeed, a central ambiguity in the play is whether one's identity can really be changed by learning to speak differently or putting on a different outfit, or whether this is merely a façade that covers up one's true, unchanging identity. This tension comes to the forefront in Act Four when Eliza asks Higgins whether her new, expensive clothes actually belong to her now. Behind the question of whether she is or isn't the owner of the clothes, Eliza also wants to know whether her new, upper-class identity is really hers, or whether it is just a role she is playing, a costume she is wearing but will have to give up eventually. Clothes thus symbolize the importance of appearances in

establishing one's identity and class, while also questioning how deep this kind of social identity goes.

**Quotes**

It's aw rawt: e's a genleman: look at his ba-oots.

One rainy night in Covent Garden, London, a crowd of people from various social classes all seek shelter under the same church portico. A wealthy mother (later revealed to be **Mrs. Eynsford Hill**) waits exasperatedly with her daughter **Clara** for her son **Freddy** to find a taxi. Freddy enters, unable to find one, but his mother sends him back out into the rain to look again. Under the portico, a poor flower-girl (**Eliza Doolittle**) sells a flower to a gentleman (**Colonel Pickering**). A bystander tells Eliza to watch out for a strange man in the back of the crowd taking notes. Eliza thinks that the man is a policeman and that she is in trouble. The man, who turns out to be **Henry Higgins**, steps forward and guesses where everyone is from based on their manner of speech. Everyone is confused and annoyed by the meddlesome Higgins. Eliza thinks he is a policeman trying to get her in trouble and insists that she is "a good girl." Pickering asks Higgins how he can tell where everyone is from, and Higgins explains that he studies phonetics and teaches people how to speak in different accents. He says that he could teach the flower-girl Eliza to speak so well in just three months that she could pass for a noble lady. Higgins and Pickering introduce themselves to each other, realizing that they are familiar with each other's work (Pickering is also a linguist). The rain stops and the crowd under the portico disperses. Higgins and Pickering leave to get dinner together, while Clara and her mother walk to a bus. Freddy finally returns with a cab, only to find that his family is no longer there.

The next morning, in Higgins' "laboratory" at his home, Higgins is showing all of his scientific instruments and tools for recording and studying speech to Pickering. Eliza arrives and offers to pay Higgins for speaking lessons, so that she can learn to "talk more genteel," and get a better job. Higgins doesn't think she can afford to pay him, and scoffs rudely at her. Pickering steps in and bets Higgins that he can't teach Eliza to speak so well that she passes as a wealthy lady at an ambassador's garden party in six months. He offers to pay for her lessons. Higgins likes the idea and tells his housekeeper **Mrs. Pearce** to wash Eliza and dress her in new clothes, though Eliza protests. Eliza refuses to participate in the bet, and Mrs.

Pearce tells Higgins not to "walk over" Eliza. Higgins neglects Eliza's feelings, ordering her to live with him for six months and take speaking lessons. Mrs. Pearce takes Eliza away to talk to her in private. Meanwhile, Eliza's father, **Alfred Doolittle**, comes to Higgins' house. He says that he hasn't seen his daughter in months, but learned of her whereabouts from the taxi driver who brought her to the house. He asks Higgins for five pounds in return for letting Eliza stay with him. Higgins and Pickering are scandalized by Mr. Doolittle's willingness to "sell" his daughter, but Higgins eventually agrees to give him money. As Mr. Doolittle leaves, he runs into Eliza, who has washed and changed into new clothes. Mr. Doolittle calls her "miss" before recognizing her, getting into a fight with her, and leaving. Mrs. Pearce enters and tells Eliza that she has more clothes for her to try on. Eliza leaves eagerly, having seemingly accepted the offer to stay with Higgins.