

Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts (1913)

(George Bernard Shaw)

About Author

George Bernard Shaw, born on July 26, 1856, was a leading dramatist of his time. In addition to his contributions as a playwright, he was a music and theatre critic, a novelist, and an outspoken social reformer.

Shaw was born in Dublin as the third and last child of George Carr and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw. He suffered what he described as "a devil of a childhood." His father was a civil servant turned unsuccessful corn merchant, as well as an alcoholic—all of which reduced the family to living in genteel poverty. His mother—the daughter of a well-to-do family—found escape from the family difficulties in music. A professional singer and student of the conductor George Vandeleur Lee, she eventually followed him to London to pursue her own career and improve her situation. These life events encouraged Shaw to be a life-long teetotaler (person who does not drink alcohol), imbued him with a strong interest in music, and kindled his sensitivity to the plight of women in Victorian society.

In 1876, Shaw joined his mother and Vandeleur Lee in London. He expanded his knowledge of music to include literature. He read voraciously, attended socialist lectures and debates, and pursued a career in journalism and writing. His first attempts to write prose—a string of five novels—were rejected by publishers. However, he did land a job as a freelance critic for an influential daily paper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The liberal political leanings of the paper were in line with Shaw's growing interest in socialism. His articles and critiques of art, music, and theatre written for this and other publications brought him at last to the attention of London literary society.

Shaw's interest in socialism had a profound effect on his writing. In 1884, he joined the recently established Fabian Society, a British socialist organization intent on advancing the principles of non-Marxist evolutionary socialism. He became one of its leading members and regularly wrote and lectured on socialist topics. Often he focused on themes of marriage, education, politics, class struggle, and religion. As a self-professed socialist, Shaw was a vigorous proponent of gender equality. He believed that all people have a purpose in life and that women were being denied the chances to play their critical roles in society. He actively supported efforts to alter the marriage laws, eliminate patriarchy, establish female suffrage, and recast gender roles. Shaw felt that "unless woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself." As a playwright, his portrayal of remarkable, clever, and powerful women departed from the 19th-century stereotype of the male-dominated, sweetly fragile, self-sacrificing female. *Pygmalion* clearly demonstrates this departure from the norms of the day.

Shaw's career as a playwright began in 1891 when he met J.T. Grein, the director of The Independent Theatre—a new, progressive venue for "the theatre of ideas" inspired by the realistic "problem plays" of Henrik Ibsen. Grein offered to read Shaw's play, *Widowers' House*. He accepted it almost immediately, and it was first publicly performed in 1892. Over the next six years, Shaw completed a collection of dramas called *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*. Each attacked with varied ferocity the social evils of the day. His writing successes continued to the eve of World War I, when *Pygmalion* opened in Vienna in 1913 and in London in 1914. It was a hit. However, with the outbreak of war, Shaw's plain-spoken antiwar views and pamphlets created uproar. He was shunned by friends and ostracized by the public. Nevertheless, he continued writing plays, and by 1923, with the production of *Saint Joan*, he succeeded in reviving his career. In 1925, Shaw was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Pygmalion remains one of Shaw's most famous plays. It was adapted to film in 1938, earning Shaw an Academy Award for screenwriting. Continuing its rise to fame, a musical adaptation—*My Fair Lady*—opened on Broadway in 1956 and ran for more than nine years. A film version of the musical hit the movie screen in 1964 and earned eight Academy Awards.

Shaw continued writing until his death on November 2, 1950, at age 94. At the time, he was working on yet another play.

About the Title

The title, *Pygmalion*, refers to a Greek character in Ovid's poem *Metamorphoses* who sculpts a woman so perfect that he falls in love with her. Venus, in answer to his prayer, then transforms her into a woman, and her name is Galatea.

Text Variations and Optional Scenes

Pygmalion earned Shaw a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925. Since its German-language translation production in 1913, the play has undergone some changes. One impulse for change came from Shaw's desire to clarify the play's ambiguous ending and the future relationship between Eliza and Higgins. In 1916 Shaw wrote the sequel to the play—a lengthy explanation in which he established that Eliza marries Freddy, not Higgins. Nevertheless, to Shaw's frustration, audiences persisted in believing that Eliza marries Higgins.

A 1938 film version of the play further cemented this idea of a happy ending in the audience's mind. It also inspired some additions to Shaw's original play, incorporating into the text changes made for the film. In 1941, Shaw wrote a "definitive text," which included the additional scenes. A line of asterisks separates these scenes from the earlier theatrical script. While some critics feel that the original text, without the film scenes, is superior, the 1941 text was authorized by Shaw

and widely distributed. However, Shaw was aware of the difficulty and expense of staging these additional scenes and noted that they could be omitted.

A Note about Punctuation and Spelling

Some texts of the play preserve Shaw's distinctive punctuation and spelling practices. He preferred to use the apostrophe only when absolutely necessary and removed it whenever he could, as in *I've*, *that's*, *werent*, and *wont*. However, he retained the apostrophe where its omission might cause confusion, as in *I'll*, *it's*, and *he'll*. Shaw also preferred to use the archaic spelling of *shew* for *show*.

Plot Summary

Pygmalion opens on a summer night in the London marketplace Covent Garden. A sudden downpour has pedestrians sprinting for shelter or taxis. Beneath the portico of St. Paul's Church, several people have gathered, including a young Cockney flower girl, an older gentleman of military bearing, and a man taking notes on the flower girl's speech.

The flower girl assumes the note taker is a policeman. Terrified, she protests her innocence of any wrongdoing. Soon it becomes clear that the man is only interested in phonetically noting her "kerbstone" English—"English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days." He boasts that he could teach her to speak like a duchess in three months. It turns out that he is the famous phonetician Henry Higgins. The elderly gentleman is Colonel Pickering, an admirer and fellow speech expert. Higgins invites Pickering to come around the next day to his home on Wimpole Street. Then, flinging a generous collection of coins at the flower girl, Higgins departs for supper with the colonel.

The next morning, the flower girl—Eliza Doolittle—boldly shows up at Higgins's home. She explains that she wants to be a lady in a flower shop, and she offers to pay him to teach her to "talk more genteel." Pickering, who is present, says he will cover all expenses if, in six months, Higgins can pass Eliza off as a lady. Intrigued, Higgins accepts the terms of the bet. Mr. Higgins's housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, urges Higgins to consider the girl's future: "What is to become of her when you've finished your teaching?" she asks. "You must look ahead a little."

While Higgins's housekeeper bathes Eliza and orders new clothes, another visitor arrives: Alfred Doolittle—Eliza's never-do-well father. A poor dustman (garbage man), he has no paternal interest in Eliza beyond handing her over to Higgins for five pounds. His callousness is slightly diminished by the fact that he believes Higgins's motives are honorable. Higgins gives him "a fiver," and Doolittle departs.

Some months later, Higgins takes Eliza on a surprise visit to his mother, an intelligent and dignified lady. While the girl's pronunciation is quite good, she needs to learn what to say, and Higgins hopes his mother can help. Also at the gettogether are Mrs. and Miss Eynsford Hill, a

mother and daughter encountered earlier in Covent Garden, as well as Pickering and Freddy. Though Eliza now looks and acts the part of a fine lady, her vocabulary and unfortunate choice of topics gives away her humble beginnings. With some difficulty, Higgins covers her gaffes, and Freddy is smitten with the lovely Eliza.

Later, Mrs. Higgins scolds her son and Pickering both for "playing with your live doll" without considering what will happen to Eliza when the experiment is over. She points out that Eliza will have the refinements of a lady, which inevitably will bar her from earning a living. Untroubled by this prospect the two depart, and Mrs. Higgins cries out in frustration, "Oh, men! men!! men!!!"

Months later, after Eliza has further honed her skills, Higgins and Pickering put Eliza's accomplishments to the test, and she performs flawlessly. Back at the Wimpole Street laboratory, Higgins and Pickering bask in the victory, with no thought of Eliza. Higgins declares "Thank God it's over," so now he can go to bed "without dreading tomorrow." Directing Eliza to turn off the lights, Higgins starts upstairs, but then returns to get his slippers and finds Eliza weeping with rage. She flings the slippers at him and asserts that they mean more to him than she does; she has won his bet for him, and now he will toss her back into the gutter. The stormy scene that ensues ends with Higgins stalking out and slamming the door. In his anger and hurt, he is oblivious to the fact that Eliza intends to leave.

The next morning, Higgins and Pickering visit Mrs. Higgins to tell her that Eliza is missing. Shortly, the parlor maid announces that a gentleman is waiting to speak to Mr. Higgins. His name is Mr. Doolittle. Higgins learns, to his astonishment, that an offhand mention of Doolittle in a letter to a rich American has made the former dustman very well off. Far from pleased by this turn of luck, Doolittle accuses Higgins of robbing him of his freedom and happiness. Now he is trapped by middle-class morality and on his way to get married, like a respectable citizen.

In this, Mrs. Higgins sees good fortune for Eliza, who now will have someone to support her. She reveals that the young lady is upstairs and defends Eliza's choice to leave him and Pickering. The two have behaved heartlessly and selfishly toward her.

A calm, composed Eliza comes downstairs and greets the men. She thanks Pickering for treating her with respect from the very beginning. To Higgins she explains that he will always treat her like a common flower girl, though now she has it in her power to be his equal. No, she will not come back.

Higgins is pleased with Eliza's unexpected transformation from whimpering girl to self-assured woman, and tells her so. All the same, as she leaves with Mrs. Higgins to see her father wed, Higgins cannot resist instructing her to buy some gloves and a tie for him. Eliza replies, "Buy them yourself," and sweeps out. Complacently, Higgins chuckles, certain that "she'll buy em allright enough."

ACT SUMMARIES

Pygmalion is written in five acts. Unlike plays written with scenes that have multiple settings, the play has only three settings: Covent Garden, Henry Higgins's apartment, and Mrs. Higgins's apartment.

Act 1

In Covent Garden, a district of London, a sudden torrent of rain sends people hurrying for shelter under the portico of St. Paul's Church. Among them are a finely dressed lady and her daughter, who have been to the theater and are now desperate to find a taxi to take them home. Another is a man with a notebook in which he is busily writing. The lady's son, Freddy, rushes in bearing the bad news that no cabs are available. Impatiently, his mother sends him back out to try again. As he sets off he runs into a dirty and untidy girl selling flowers and sends her flower basket flying. With a swift apology he dashes out into the rain, leaving her to pick up her scattered flowers. Despite the objections of the lady's daughter, Clara, the lady pays the girl for two bunches of ruined violets.

Moments later, an elderly gentleman dressed in evening clothes hurries in out of the rain. He pauses near the flower girl, who tries to sell him some flowers. He hasn't enough loose change to pay for any but gives the girl three hapence, or half pennies, and walks off. A bystander warns the girl to give the gentleman a flower in exchange as there is another man eavesdropping and taking down her every word. He may be a detective. Panicked that she will be accused of soliciting for prostitution, the girl hysterically confronts the note taker, who dismisses her fear, saying, "Oh, shut up, shut up. Do I look like a policeman?" However, a general hubbub among the bystanders erupts in defense of the frightened girl. Things turn a bit hostile when the note taker begins identifying where various speakers come from, based on their speech. The people don't like the sense of being played with or patronized. The tension eases when the note taker turns his trick on the elderly gentleman, and then on the lady and her daughter. The note taker brags to the elderly gentleman that he could make a duchess of the flower girl by teaching her to speak properly. Meanwhile, the rain stops, and soon the bystanders, including the two ladies, have dispersed.

Only the elderly gentleman, note taker, and flower girl remain. It turns out the men share a common interest in language and have been intending to seek each other out. The elderly gentleman is Colonel Pickering, a student of Indian dialects and the author of *Spoken Sanscrit*. The gentleman is Professor Henry Higgins, author of *Higgins's Universal Alphabet*. Higgins invites Pickering around to his home at 27A Wimpole Street the next day, and the two men depart for a chat over some supper. At the pricking of his conscience, Higgins tosses a handful of coins in the flower girl's basket as he leaves. It's a fortune by her standards, and when poor Freddy pulls up in a taxi for his mother and sister (who have taken the bus), she takes it off his hands and goes home in style.

Act 2

The morning after the gathering under the portico of St. Paul's Church, Pickering visits Higgins at his home and laboratory on Wimpole Street. As the professor winds up an exhaustive demonstration of the various devices he uses to study speech, his housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, announces the arrival of a young woman. She is "quite a common girl," has a dreadful accent, and insists on seeing Higgins. Thinking this may offer an opportunity for further demonstrations, Higgins tells Mrs. Pearce to send the young woman in.

Immediately he recognizes the flower girl from the night before and, having no further use for her, tells her to go away. But the flower girl, whose name is Eliza, stops him with the revelation that she has come for speech lessons, "and to pay for em, too." Eliza aspires to become a lady in a flower shop "stead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. But they won't take me unless I can talk more genteel." She reminds Higgins of his claim that he could teach her, and offers him a shilling an hour to do so—quite a substantial sum for a person with her income. The challenge intrigues Higgins. Pickering says he'll pay for the lessons if Higgins succeeds, and count him the greatest teacher alive. Higgins accepts the wager, vowing to "make a duchess of this draggetailed guttersnipe" in six months. Then he instructs Mrs. Pearce to find a room for Eliza to stay in and to give her a bath, burn her clothes, and order new garments.

Mrs. Pearce chides Higgins for thinking he can "take a girl up like that as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach." She advises Eliza to go home to her parents, but Eliza says they have turned her out to earn her own living. Mrs. Pearce sternly asks Higgins on what terms Eliza will stay in the house and what will become of her when the experiment is done. Impatient with such details, Higgins leaves them to Mrs. Pearce to settle with Eliza.

While Eliza bathes, "an elderly but vigorous dustman" who claims to be Eliza's father visits Higgins and Pickering. He is Alfred Doolittle, a callous, unprincipled scoundrel who has come to touch Higgins for money in exchange for Eliza. Higgins is struck by Doolittle's natural gift of rhetoric and shocked by the man's lack of morals. But Doolittle unabashedly explains that he is too poor to afford them, and he assures Higgins that the money will be well spent: "There won't be a penny of it left by Monday ... Just one good spree for myself and the missus." As he leaves five pounds richer, he encounters a young "Japanese lady" in a blue kimono. Begging her pardon, he is astonished to discover that it's Eliza. She has cleaned up quite nicely. With a last word of advice to Higgins to take a strap to her if he wants her mind improved, Doolittle departs.

Eliza is darkly pleased to see him go and has no desire to see him again. Moments later, her new clothes arrive, and with a howl of delight she rushes from the room to try them on. Higgins and Pickering can see they have "taken on a stiff job."

Act 3

The story moves to the drawing room at the home of Higgins's mother. Elegantly furnished, it reflects a woman of wealth and refinement. It is Mrs. Higgins's day for receiving visitors, and she is not pleased when her son bursts in without warning. He lacks social graces and tends to insult her guests. Higgins further surprises her with news that he has asked a common flower girl whom he has taught to speak properly to come see her. However, as he explains, while her pronunciation is quite good she still needs to learn what to talk about. He hopes his mother can help. The extent of the problem soon becomes humorously clear.

Mrs. Higgins's other guests arrive, and among them is Mrs. Eynsford Hill, the genteel lady from Act 1 who purchased the flowers spoiled by her son, Freddy. He, too, is present, as are her daughter, Clara, and Pickering—the last to arrive before Eliza makes her entrance. Elegantly dressed, the former flower girl creates an impression of exceptional beauty and sophistication while she perfectly articulates her greetings. As Mrs. Higgins later comments, Eliza is "a triumph of [her son's] art and of her dressmaker's." Nevertheless, in a scene that is both hilarious and nerve-racking, Eliza soon slips into an unsuitable family tale of a "pinched" straw hat, a suspected murder, and some hard gin drinking. With a bit of quick thinking, Higgins passes it all off as "the new small talk," and Eliza tells the tale so charmingly that the Eynsford Hills suspect nothing. Freddy, in fact, is captivated by her loveliness and odd ways. As she leaves, he takes her to the door and inquires if she intends to walk home. Her reply, "Not bloody likely. I am going in a taxi," is shocking but fails to destroy the overall delightful impression she has made.

Once alone with Higgins and Pickering, Mrs. Higgins passes judgment on the whole affair, telling them that Eliza is not presentable and gives herself away "in every sentence she utters." Learning more about the experiment, she chides both men for treating Eliza like a live doll—a thing to be dressed and taught to speak but with no feelings or future. The results of teaching Eliza to look and sound like a fine lady will likely leave her caught between two worlds—one in which she still needs to earn a living, the other in which her new status disqualifies her from doing so. Both men miss the point completely, vaguely assuring Mrs. Higgins that "we'll do what's right." Then they leave with plans to take Eliza to a Shakespeare exhibition. Alone with her frustration over the obtuseness of the two, Mrs. Higgins cries out, "Oh, men! men!! men!!!"

In later editions of the play, an important "optional scene" follows, influenced by the screenplay Shaw wrote for the film adaptation of *Pygmalion*. The setting is a party one summer evening at an embassy in London, where Higgins puts Eliza's education to the final test. The greatest obstacle to her success is Nepommuck, a Hungarian interpreter and Higgins's former student who may expose her as an aristocratic impostor. Nepommuck does accuse her of being a fraud, but for speaking English too perfectly. He determines she is a Hungarian princess. The experiment proves a success, and Higgins wins the wager with Pickering.

Act 4

It's midnight, and Eliza, Higgins, and Pickering are returning to Wimpole Street after the exhausting but highly successful final test of Eliza's skills. Higgins scornfully remarks, "Oh Lord! What an evening! What a crew! What a silly tomfoolery!" Then, complaining that he cannot find his slippers, he takes no notice when Eliza finds and places them before him and continues to sound off about the party, saying, "Thank God it's over!" Oblivious to Eliza's growing resentment, he labels the whole experiment as a "bore" and "simple purgatory," and then states that he "can go to bed at last without dreading tomorrow." Eliza holds her temper until Higgins and Pickering leave the room, and then bursts into tears of rage.

Moments later, Higgins returns, once more searching for his slippers, and she throws them at him with all her strength. She has won his bet for him, and now he has no more use for her. "What's to become of me?" she demands. Higgins attempts to persuade her that she is simply tired and suffering a case of nerves; a good night's sleep will make things right. After all, she is now free and can do what she likes. Gradually, he understands that she has no idea what she is fit for or what will become of her. Clumsily, he suggests that she could find a rich man to marry who will take care of her—a solution Eliza rejects: "We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court ... I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself."

Refusing to take the problem seriously, Higgins starts off for bed. He stops when Eliza quietly asks, "Do my clothes belong to me or to Colonel Pickering?" She wants to know what she can take with her and doesn't "want to be accused of stealing." He is shocked, then further angered when she hands him the jewels he rented for her along with a ring that he bought her, telling him she doesn't want it anymore. Dashing the ring into the fireplace, he stalks out and slams the door.

In another important "optional scene" Eliza changes clothes and leaves the house. Outside, she comes upon Freddy gazing up at her window. Love-struck, he spends most of his nights there on the street. Hungry for comfort, Eliza falls into his arms and responds to his passionate kisses—until first one, then another constable tells them to move along. They end up in a taxi with a plan to drive around all night. In the morning, Eliza will visit Mrs. Higgins and ask her advice on what she should do.

Act 5

The next day, Mrs. Higgins is in her drawing room when the parlor-maid announces that Higgins and Pickering are downstairs phoning the police about Eliza's disappearance. Mrs. Higgins sends the parlor-maid upstairs, where Eliza has taken shelter, to ask that she stay there until she is sent for. Mrs. Higgins then chastises her son and Pickering for their thoughtless treatment of the girl, but the arrival of Doolittle cuts the scolding short. He enters dressed in the height of fashion for a bridegroom and in a highly agitated state. Without greetings, he accosts Higgins with the heated accusation, "See here! Do you see this? You done this." Doolittle then explains that Higgins's offhand remark in a letter to a rich gentleman has delivered him into the hands of "middle class morality." The gentleman died and left the dustman a generous yearly pension. Now his happy

days are over as one of the undeserving poor, and everyone wants to "touch" him for money, just as he used to do. In addition, his live-in missus now wants to get married.

Seeing a solution to Eliza's financial future in her father's newfound wealth, Mrs. Higgins reveals that the girl is upstairs. Explaining how she came to be there, Mrs. Higgins again reproaches her son and Pickering for their callous conduct the night before. Then sending for Eliza, she asks Doolittle to wait on the balcony until Eliza is ready for the shock of his news.

Eliza enters, looking coolly self-possessed, and politely greets the two men. She then thanks Pickering for always treating her well and showing her respect. "The difference between a lady and a flower girl," she explains, "is not how she behaves, but how she's treated ... I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will." Higgins's arrogant, ill-mannered reaction to this prompts Doolittle to make his presence known to Eliza. After an awkward moment, he and Eliza are guardedly reunited, and she agrees to come along to see him married.

For a few moments before leaving, Eliza and Higgins are left alone. Higgins tries to convince her that he did not treat her any differently than anyone else, that he treats everybody rudely. Then he softens a bit and tells her that he will miss her if she leaves. Knowing Higgins will never change and refusing to be trapped by sentimentality, Eliza suggests that she may marry Freddy and support them both by teaching phonetics, possibly as an assistant to Nepommuck. Outraged, Higgins grabs her and threatens to wring her neck if she does. Yet he suddenly sees something in Eliza that he has overlooked until now: No longer a sniveling flower girl, Eliza is a woman, "a tower of strength: a consort battleship." He likes her like this. Even so, as the play closes, Eliza seems set on a path away from Higgins. In contrast, the professor remains cheerfully confident that she will return to Wimpole Street and continue to be part of his life.

(Source: Cliff Notes and Course Hero)