



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Pygmalion

George Bernard Shaw

**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Pygmalion

George Bernard Shaw

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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**ISBN 978-1-50204-095-4**

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## Summary

Speech professor Henry Higgins takes it upon himself to teach a cockney flower girl, Liza Doolittle, to be a lady—and a unique relationship blossoms. It turns out that Liza is equipped to teach the vain professor something about what gentility really means.

## About the Author

George Bernard Shaw is considered not only one of the great writers of the English language—but one of the great thinkers. He was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1856 and over his lengthy lifetime, wrote in many different forms. His literary career began at 20, after a move to London. His mother had been a singer, so it is not surprising that he worked for several years as a music critic. He was also an esteemed drama critic—his essays on Shakespeare are found in several present-day editions of the bard's plays.

He became interested in socialism in the 1870's, and legend has it that after an all-night walk across London that took him across its expanse of slums, he decided that one of his goals in life would be to help rid the world of poverty. Since capitalism allows the existence of a poverty-stricken class, Shaw held capitalism in low regard. He began to write plays in 1892. He was—and still is—faulted by some critics for using his play as a vehicle for “preaching” his ideas about how to cure the ills of mankind. Unabashed about the “didacticism” of his plays, Shaw wrote elaborate stage directions (that often cannot be expressed by the actors)—which often help convey the “lesson” central to the play.

Shaw earned public attention with *Widowers' Houses* (1892), *The Philanderer* (1893), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), and *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, and *You Never Can Tell* (1896). The public also loved his next set of plays: *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901), *The Devil's Disciple* (1897), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1899), *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1900), *Man and Superman*, *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) and *Major Barbara* (1905).

His most successful play was *Pygmalion* (based on the myth of Galatea and Pygmalion), published in 1913. Unlike most of Shaw's plays, *Pygmalion* is somewhat personally revealing. Shaw wrote the play while in his fifties—and while in love with a beautiful actress named Mrs. Campbell who rejected him for a younger man (but went on to play the role of Liza). Several years later he contributed additional material for a film version of the story (with Wendy Hiller and Leslie Howard). Finally, the story was transformed into the musical, “My Fair Lady” (originally with Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews) and later made into a movie (with Audrey Hepburn as Eliza). That movie was considered a debasement of the original play by some, but has been enjoyed by millions of others.

Beginning in 1904 or so, critics noted in Shaw's work less emphasis on story and more development of Shaw's political and social ideas. *Heartbreak House* (1917)—written during World War I—was about the collapse of civilization. Next came *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw's longest play (1920) and *Saint Joan* (1923). Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925 “for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty.” He continued to write plays in later life, but they did not meet with the acclaim of his earlier work, and he died at age 94 in 1950.

## Vocabulary Activities

1. Have students keep a running list of words in the play that are unfamiliar to them. Instruct them to write down what they think each word means, from its context — and why. Then they should consult a dictionary, jot down the appropriate definition, and use the word in a sentence. For each word, a graphic like the one below might be used.

| Word                            | Pg. | What I Think It Means | Clues I Used | Dictionary Definition |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
|                                 |     |                       |              |                       |
| <b>Sentence:</b> _____<br>_____ |     |                       |              |                       |

2. From the vocabulary lists provided in this guide, choose selected words. Have students work individually or in a group to map the words, using the following graphic organizer.

**synonyms**

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**magazine cut-out, drawing, or symbol that shows what the word means**

**word**

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**definition in your own words**

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**word used in a sentence**

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## Preface, pages 5-9

The long prefatory essay became Shaw's trademark—developed, in large part, to make the plays more publishable. In these thought-provoking prefaces, he laid out for readers the doctrine promoted in the story.

In the preface to *Pygmalion*, Shaw decries the failure of the English to teach their children how to speak the language properly. It is that failure, he says, that led him to make the hero of *Pygmalion* a phoneticist. Henry Higgins is modeled loosely after an actual phonetician admired by Shaw, a scornful academic named Henry Sweet, who developed a form of shorthand that rivaled the popular Pitman system. Shaw ends the preface with encouragement for those who are hindered from career advancement by their lower-class dialects: Have a phonetic expert teach you how to speak and you, like Liza, will be able to change and rise in social station.

### Vocabulary

phonetics 5  
libellous 6  
inscrutable 7  
cloistered 8  
didactic 9  
plutocracy 9

accessible 5  
repudiation 6  
cryptograms 7  
transcribe 8  
concierge 9

patriarch 6  
rabid 7  
lithographed 7  
verbatim 8  
sloughed 9

derisive 6  
allusion 7  
syndicate 7  
exorbitant 8  
aspirant 9

### Discussion Questions

1. What do you learn in the preface about Shaw's development of his character, Higgins? (*Shaw admires phoneticians and so made one the hero of his story.*) Is Higgins actually Henry Sweet? (*Higgins is modeled somewhat after the curmudgeonly Sweet.*)
2. Why didn't Henry Sweet and his method of shorthand become more famous? (*Sweet was scornful, unconventional; Sweet didn't market his product the way Pitman did theirs.*) What does Shaw mean by comparing Sweet with Sybil (p. 7)? (*Sybil is the name given by the Greeks and Romans to a prophetess inspired by Apollo; there were several sybils—one of whom prophesied the Trojan War; collections of the prophecies of the sybils were known as the Sibylline Books, several of which were burned when King Tarquin refused at first to buy them from the Cumaean Sybil.*) Do you think a person's personality should affect his or her academic success? Do you think it does?
3. Shaw says that his play is "intensely didactic." What does he mean? (*Pygmalion conveys a strong lesson to audiences.*)
4. What sort of encouragement does Shaw give in the final paragraph? (*He suggests that people whose dialect gets in the way of employment seek help from a phonetic expert.*) Where would a person go, today, if he or she wanted to work on changing his or her oral speech? (*There are speech/language pathologists who specialize in voice; also, there are books on public speaking.*)
5. What seems to be Shaw's general purpose in writing this preface? (*to convince the audience that the play is about acquiring proper speech*)
6. **Prediction:** What will be the main "lesson" in *Pygmalion*?

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## Supplementary Activities

**Research:** Find out more about the Pitman and Gregg systems of shorthand mentioned in the preface. What do they look like? Has technology eliminated the need for training in shorthand?

### Literary Analysis: Didacticism and Platonic/Aristotelian Criticism

**Didacticism** is the quality of instructiveness in a literary work—an author’s intention to give guidance in moral or ethical matters. If the author’s primary goal is to instruct, the purpose of the work is didactic. When the term is used in literary criticism, it often has a negative connotation, the objection being that those who insist that literature be relevant neglect to make it artistically beautiful. When Shaw refers to the “wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic” he is probably referring to the New Critics, who declare that the meaning of a piece of art lies within itself, and who are bitter enemies of didacticism.

**Aristotelian criticism**, as advocated by the New Critics, involves judgment of the work itself, based on its own merits; the historical, moral, or religious context are not used as criteria for evaluating the literary merit of a work. **Platonic criticism**, on the other hand, finds the values of a work of art in its usefulness for nonartistic purposes. Have students discuss which type of criticism Shaw seems to advocate when he says “great art can never be anything else [but didactic]”—page 9. (*Platonic*)

## Act One, pages 13-32

The curtains open on a street scene in London on a rainy night. Clara complains about her brother Freddy’s lack of success in hailing a cab. When Freddy collides with a flower girl and rushes off, Freddy’s mother pays for the dropped flowers. A man has been taking notes and a commotion arises when the flower girl assumes he is going to have her arrested. The notetaker, Henry Higgins, amuses the bystanders by pinpointing where each is from based on dialect. Soon a gentleman in the crowd introduces himself as Pickering, a student of Indian dialects. Higgins tosses some money to the flower girl and heads off with Pickering for supper. Freddy returns with a cab for his mother and sister—who have left by now—and Liza takes the cab home.

### Vocabulary

portico 13  
inapt 21  
melancholy 24  
explosively 27  
florins 28  
prodigal 31

plinth 15  
genially 23  
repudiates 25  
incarnate 27  
grandeur 29

deprecating 20  
appalled 23  
distinction 26  
mendacity 28  
fashion plate 31

sensibility 20  
subsiding 24  
brogue 26  
Pharisaic 28  
chronically 31

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the setting of the play? (*London, sometime after the turn of the century*) What mood is set by the rainy opening scene? (*The general irritability and reactivity of the bystanders is pretty humorous; the mood is light.*)