

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Pygmalion

by George Bernard Shaw

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Prestwick House

Item No. 308639

Pygmalion

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the significance of the play's title.
2. analyze the use of both representational and presentational techniques in the play.
3. analyze and explain the function of the epilogue, prologue, and detailed stage directions.
4. analyze the use of humor, sarcasm, coincidence, and irony in the play.
5. analyze the use of allusion in the play.
6. discuss the function of language and dialect in the play.
7. examine the impact of the social and political issues present in the play on plot, character, and theme.
8. discuss prominent themes in the play.
9. explain the relevance and the meaning of the symbols and motifs present in the play.
10. explain the effects of the literary and rhetorical devices used in the play.
11. discuss the functions of the minor characters in the play.
12. evaluate the play as a didactic piece of literature.
13. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
14. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

Introductory Lecture

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1856 to George Carr Shaw, a civil servant and later an unsuccessful merchant, and Lucinda Gurley Shaw, a professional singer and music teacher. It is from his father that Shaw inherited his comic gift for satire and from his mother that he developed a lifelong passion for classical music and opera.

Shaw briefly attended numerous schools, both public and private, but insisted that formal education was a complete waste of time and that he had learned nothing during his years in the classroom. He is famously quoted as saying, “Schools and schoolmasters, as we have them today, are not popular as places of education and teachers, but rather prisons and turnkeys in which children are kept to prevent the disturbing and chaperoning of their parents.” An independent, deeply self-motivated thinker, Shaw saw no reason to continue his studies within the confines of such a regimented environment that so stifles intellectual curiosity and the human spirit.

When he was 16 years old, his mother followed her voice teacher, George Vandeleur, to London with his two sisters. Shaw elected to stay in Dublin with his father and worked for several years as a clerk in an estate office. Resolved to become a professional writer, Shaw then moved to London to join his mother in 1876. With his mother’s financial support, he worked solely on his writing career and wrote five novels between 1879 and 1883. However, none of the novels proved nearly as successful as his later plays eventually would. All five were rejected by publishers.

Shaw eventually supported his writing endeavors by becoming an arts critic, ghostwriting Vandeleur’s music column and reviewing drama, art, and music for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Dramatic Review*, *Our Corner*, and the *Saturday Review*. His work was well-respected and he was able to make a lucrative living as a writer.

Of major credit to Shaw was the result of his critique of the practice of editing Shakespeare’s plays to create “acting versions.” Though a tradition for two-hundred years, Shaw’s scathing public denouncement of this practice led to its abolishment in the theater community.

Also of particular note is Shaw’s influence in bringing another fellow author to London’s forefront: Henrik Ibsen. Initially rejected as a “muck-ferreting dog” by a theater-going community who only embraced romance and melodrama as appropriate subject matter, Ibsen eventually became a renowned playwright in his own right through Shaw’s public championing of his work.

Shaw recognized that Ibsen was both a philosopher and a social critic, and these qualities heavily influenced his work as he developed characters who struggled with moral dilemmas and challenged social mores. Many of Shaw’s own works were similarly informed. He made his plays a forum for considering moral, political and economic issues, possibly his most lasting and important contribution to dramatic art.

Pygmalion

Preface

1. Explain what Shaw means in saying that “English is not accessible even to Englishmen.” What other major points about the English’s attitude towards language does the author expound upon?

2. What is Shaw’s explanation for the creation of the character of Henry Higgins? In what ways does Higgins both parallel and differ from Henry Sweet, whom Shaw greatly admired?

3. What reason does Shaw give for having written the play?

Act I

1. Consider the narrative perspective from which the play is told. What is both predictable and unique about the narration?

2. What is the reader's immediate impression of the Mother, the Daughter, and Freddy? Characterize their relationships as seen in the opening of the play.

3. What is the significance of the author's comment that "her features are no worse than theirs" when comparing the Flower Girl to the Mother and Daughter? What other earlier comment does it parallel and why?

Act II

1. What is the significance of the description of the setting at the beginning of Act II? What do these details reveal about Higgins?

2. What seemingly inconsequential detail revealed at the end of Act I becomes pertinent in Act II?

3. Compare and contrast Shaw's descriptions of Henry Higgins in Act I and the beginning of Act II. What portrait is the reader given of his nature? Consider the extent to which the reader's perceptions of Higgins are therefore different than the audience's perceptions.

Act III

1. What role does coincidence play in Act III? Why is the coincidence important to the play's narrative? And is the coincidence a believable one? Why or why not?

2. Examine the relationship between Higgins and his mother and the role she plays in his life. What are her primary character traits?

3. Explore the theme of feminism and the ideal woman as presented in Act III.

Act IV

1. Through what narrative technique(s) does Shaw create dramatic tension in the first portion of Act IV?

2. Trace the changes in Eliza's demeanor throughout Act IV. Which incidents provoke her the most, and why? Do these actions and reactions seem consistent with her character?

3. Analyze the shifts in Higgins's attitude towards Eliza in Act IV and what causes these shifts. What moments, if any, indicate that Higgins does, in fact, care about Eliza?

Act V

1. What is Mrs. Higgins's attitude towards Pickering and her son in the opening of Act V, and what do her reactions reveal about her character?

2. How does Shaw use the character of Doolittle to provide commentary on middle-class morality in this act? In what ways has his life changed considerably? And what does it say about Doolittle's character that he does not just reject his new position in life? What is the irony present in his taking the money?

3. Reflect on the relationship between Eliza and her father. What details suggest a total lack of paternal feeling? What small detail suggests otherwise? How are their current situations ironically similar?

Epilogue

1. What is the author's overall attitude toward the reader in the epilogue? How does his attitude toward the reader reveal his purpose in writing the epilogue?

2. What reasons does Shaw provide as to why Eliza would never marry Higgins?

3. What concerns do Freddy's family have about him opening a flower shop? What ultimately leads to Clara and her mother granting their approval?
