

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Pygmalion

by George Bernard Shaw

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Pygmalion

Notes

Born in Dublin in 1856, George Bernard Shaw is considered by many critics to be the greatest British playwright of the modern age. Shaw began his literary career upon moving to London in his early twenties, where he worked as a theater critic and novelist. During this time period, he also developed an interest in politics and the plight of the poor, becoming a prominent member of the Fabian Society, an organization committed to social reform. Shaw's dedication to social issues would continue to play a major role in his life and work.

Shaw began writing for the stage in his mid-thirties. His first play, *Widowers' Houses* (1892), was a scathing criticism of slumlords and their exploitation of the working class poor. Another of his early plays, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), promoted equality for women and attacked sexual discrimination in the workplace. Throughout his long career, Shaw would continue to use his skills as a dramatist to explore and comment on controversial issues such as poverty, war, classism, unemployment, and society's treatment of women. Influenced by the realist drama of the 19th century Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, Shaw believed that drama should not merely entertain, but should also provide important moral and/or philosophical instruction. By using humor and satire to expose contemporary social issues, his goal was to induce audiences to think about such issues and to promote social reform. As a result, Shaw has been credited with introducing the "theater of ideas" to modern drama, characteristics of which include: social commentary, an emphasis on realism, and a rejection of sentimentality and romantic conventions.

Over the course of his career, Shaw wrote more than sixty plays. In 1925, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature "...for his work, which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty." Shaw's most well known works include *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), and *Saint Joan* (1923). *Pygmalion*, written in 1912, remains his most popular and best-loved play. As you read the play, watch for Shaw's trademark wit, his rejection of romantic conventions, and his satirical exposé of issues such as poverty, prejudice, classism, and the social expectations imposed upon women.

All references come from the *Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classic™* edition of *Pygmalion*, copyright 2005.

Objectives

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

1. summarize the classical myth upon which Shaw based *Pygmalion*, pointing out where Shaw's play parallels the myth and where it departs from it; identify the themes and major concepts that the two stories have in common.
2. trace Eliza Doolittle's transformation over the course of the play, pointing out the ways in which she has changed and the various roles that other characters play in her transformation.
3. explain the meaning of the phrase "theater of ideas" as it relates to Shaw's work; point out and discuss those features in *Pygmalion* that make the play a "drama of ideas."
4. define the term "didactic" and point out the ways in which *Pygmalion* is a didactic play; discuss Shaw's views on didactic art and literature, according to his own remarks in the Preface.
5. identify and discuss at least two incidents in the play that can be seen as examples of what is referred to as "Shavian wit," a technique in which Shaw takes conventional wisdom and shows that thinking to be false or superficial.
6. discuss the social and economic concerns that Shaw deals with in the play, specifically the plight of the poor, the inequalities that exist among the classes, and the objectification of women.
7. discuss the extent to which Professor Higgins is an "alter ego," or mouthpiece, for Shaw.
8. explain how Shaw uses humor and satire to explore contemporary social issues, and point out at least two targets of his satirical attacks.
9. infer from the dialogue and stage notes on the last page of the play what the future holds for Liza and Henry, supporting that inference with examples from the text.
10. explain how Shaw presents class distinctions in early 20th-century English society, pointing out how speech and dress, in particular, influence a person's perceived social standing.
11. identify the differences between the poor working class, as represented by Eliza Doolittle, and an elite upper class whose money and power derive from inherited wealth and tradition, as represented by the Eynsford Hills; explain how Shaw presents these two classes and discuss his apparent attitude toward each of them.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In his Preface, Shaw explains why he made a professor of phonetics the hero of his play. What are his reasons? How do they relate to his comments about the state of the English language, as it is spoken, and the importance of proper speech and grammar?
2. As a professor of phonetics, what are Henry Higgins's goals and priorities? How does he profit financially from people who have moved upward in socioeconomic status, yet still speak with lower class dialects?
3. Define "didactic literature," and explain how Shaw feels about it, according to his Preface. Discuss why Shaw considers *Pygmalion* a didactic play.
4. Why does Eliza Doolittle initially come to Higgins's house to ask for speech lessons? What does she hope to achieve by improving her manner of speaking?
5. Describe the wager that sets the main plot in motion. Who proposes this wager, and of what does it consist?
6. Describe Mrs. Pearce and discuss her role in the play. What is her major concern regarding Henry's efforts to transform Liza? Which other characters share this concern?
7. What does the reader learn about Henry's personal habits and manners from Mrs. Pearce? In light of this information, what is both hypocritical and ironic about Henry's plan to transform Liza into a refined lady?
8. Describe Liza's father, Alfred Doolittle. Explain his meaning when he refers to himself as one of the "undeserving poor." How are Doolittle's views on "middle class morality" characteristic of what is referred to as "Shavian wit," a technique in which Shaw takes conventional wisdom and turns it upside down?
9. What is Liza's reaction to the mirror in the bathroom at Henry's house? Explain how her reaction can be interpreted on a metaphorical level, as well as on a practical level. What might the mirror symbolize?
10. When Liza is introduced to Mrs. Higgins and the Eynsford Hills, she speaks with nearly perfect pronunciation and with "great beauty of tone." However, what is comical and inappropriate about her topics of conversation? What explanation does Henry fabricate to make her conversational topics seem chic and fashionable?
11. Throughout the play, Shaw uses satire to expose the absurdities of class pretensions. Explain why Clara Eynsford Hill, her mother, and the type of people they represent are objects of this type of satirical attack. Provide examples from the text to support your answer.

Pygmalion

PREFACE

VOCABULARY

abominably – terribly, dreadfully
allusion – an indirect reference
amenity – pleasantness; courtesy
aspirant – one who aspires to a higher position or seeks to achieve something
compliance – agreement
conciliatory – pleasant; appeasing
contempt – dislike, hatred
cryptograms – coded or secret writings
decipher – to interpret or decode
derisive – mocking, sarcastic
despise – to hate
didactic – morally instructive
exorbitant – excessive
hence – from now
inscrutable – difficult to understand; mysterious
libelous – insulting, slanderous
obscurity – the state of being hidden or vague; anonymity
phonetics – the study of spoken language and speech sounds
proficiency – skill, ability
renounce – to give up or abandon
repudiation – rejection, denial
satires – literary works that use humor to ridicule someone or something
syndicate – an agency that sells articles or writings for publication
vulgarly – crudely, tastelessly

1. In his Preface to *Pygmalion*, Shaw explains why he has made a scholar of phonetics the hero of his play. What are his reasons? How do they fit with his complaints about the English people and their language?

ACT II

VOCABULARY

audacity – boldness, nerve
balmies – [slang] crazy people
brusquely – in a harsh or abrupt way
callous – hardhearted, unfeeling, cold
deplorable – wretched, pathetic
diffident – modest
dogmatically – in a rigid or inflexible manner
elocutionary – pertaining to a refined manner of speaking
genteel – refined, proper
impetuous – impulsive, rash
incensed – angry, infuriated
laryngoscope – an instrument used to examine the vocal cords
magisterially – authoritatively
mezzotint – a method of engraving on copper or steel
navvy – [British] an unskilled laborer
pathos – a quality that arouses sympathy or pity
pauperize – to make poor; to impoverish
peremptorily – in a commanding manner
petulance – irritability
prudery – excessive modesty
remonstrance – protest, objection
rhetoric – the art of using language persuasively and effectively
scuttle – a small container for coal
slovenly – sloppy, untidy
zephyr – a gentle breeze

1. How does the playwright describe Higgins at the opening of Act II? Identify a simile that Shaw uses in his description of Higgins.

2. Why is Higgins disappointed when the visitor turns out to be the flower girl?

4. When Henry suggests that Liza can find a rich husband, what is her response?

5. What is your opinion of Henry at this point in the play? For example, is he a deliberately cruel person or is he simply naive and ignorant when it comes to other people's feelings? How do you feel about his treatment of Liza? Support your opinion with examples from the text.

6. Why does Liza take great pains to establish whether the clothes she has been wearing are hers or belong to Colonel Pickering, whose money financed all the expenses of the experiment?

7. On what note does this act end?
