

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Pygmalion

by George Bernard Shaw

written by Lisa Burris

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Pygmalion

Pre-Reading

1. George Bernard Shaw was a political activist. He was born in 1856, and lived to be almost 100 years old. He was a vegetarian who felt that it was wrong to use animals for food. Shaw was a feminist during a time when it was unthinkable that women should be educated, let alone be able to vote in elections. He was also a dedicated socialist.

Although his political viewpoints were controversial, people did not hold them against Shaw because they loved his plays so much. Do you think that celebrities' political views are as important as their work? Would you stop supporting someone's plays, books, movies, music, etc. just because that person has different political views from your own?

Write an email to the head of the Screen Actors Guild, an organization of television and movie actors, telling him or her whether an actor's personal political viewpoints would prevent you from watching that actor's work. Make sure you use plenty of examples to support your opinion.

2. The play *Pygmalion* is based on a Greek myth about a sculptor named Pygmalion who created a statue of a beautiful woman. Pygmalion named the statue, which was his ideal of the female form, Galatea. After he created his masterpiece, Pygmalion prayed to the goddess of love, Aphrodite, to bring his sculpture to life. When Aphrodite granted his wish, Pygmalion and Galatea married.

As you read *Pygmalion*, make a list of ways in which Shaw's version of *Pygmalion* is similar to and different from the Greek myth.

Preface

3. In the play's preface, Shaw says that "the English have no respect for their language." He goes on to point out that the English can't spell properly or speak properly. Do you think that the fact that people can't spell or that they use slang shows a lack of "respect" for their language? Do you think, instead, that slang is created just to make a language more colorful, and it has nothing to do with denigrating it?

Write a preface of your own, telling readers whether you think that people purposely abuse the English language and explaining why you feel that way.

4. Shaw writes extensively in his preface about Pitman, which is a type of shorthand. Shorthand is a method of writing in which whole words or phrases are represented by symbols, thus shortening the word or phrase, while still conveying meaning.

Shorthand is not practiced very much anymore, though well into the late part of the 20th century, it was still used in business, where secretaries would take notes in meetings and then type them up later. Eventually, it fell out of fashion. Why do you think this happened? Write an article for Business Week magazine, in which you give your opinion about why shorthand is no longer used.

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Act I

5. The play opens with a scene in which Freddy, The Daughter, and The Mother are out on a rainy evening. Freddy has been walking for blocks, trying unsuccessfully to hail a cab. Although Freddy has tried his best, and is soaked and exasperated, The Daughter becomes angry with him for failing. Considering the situation, The Daughter's angry response is unreasonable and inappropriate.

As an anger management specialist who witnesses this scene, write a note to give to The Daughter, advising her to calm down, explaining why her anger is not justified, and offering her suggestions about how to better deal with the situation.

6. When Freddy, in his haste, runs into The Flower Girl, there is a blinding flash of light and a huge peal of thunder. These effects are intended to draw attention to the encounter. Consider the reasons why Shaw wanted to highlight this moment in such a dramatic way.

After drawing your conclusion, write a letter to Shaw in which you explain your theory.

7. The Flower Girl speaks so poorly that it is difficult to understand what she's saying. For example, when Freddy bumps into her, she says, "Te-oo banches of voylets trod into the mad." At first glance, it is hard to decipher the words, but they mimic a British cockney accent. What the Flower Girl is saying is, "Two bunches of violets [were] trod into the mud."

Likewise, her response to The Mother, when The Mother indicates that Freddy is her son is "Ow, eez ye-ooa san is e? Wal fewd dan y' de-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awy athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them?"

Write a section for a study guide for Pygmalion, translating The Flower Girl's response above into clear and easy-to-understand English and explaining why Shaw might have chosen to write The Flower Girl's responses phonetically when the other characters' lines are not written that way.

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8. When a gentleman, a “military type,” arrives under the shelter to get out of the rain, he buys a flower from The Flower Girl. Another man under the shelter gives the “military type” change so he can purchase the flower. The second man, the crowd has discovered, has been taking notes the whole time they’ve been talking. The Flower Girl thinks The Note Taker is there to cause trouble, and she starts to scream. A bystander tells her not to worry because it’s clear that The Note Taker is a gentleman because he has nice boots.

It is strange to assume that one can tell a person’s character just by looking at his or her footwear. As an executive for a shoe company, write a humorous piece for your company’s newsletter, telling readers how they can judge character just by looking at someone’s shoes and listing what different types of shoes can tell an observer about the person who wears them.

9. The Note Taker has the ability to discern where The Flower Girl and The Bystander grew up, just by listening to them talk. This is disconcerting to The Flower Girl and The Bystander. It’s as if The Note Taker can read their minds. To The Flower Girl and The Bystander, The Note Taker’s ability is creepy and off-putting.

Most people know that certain accents are associated with specific geographical locations (e.g., a British accent). It’s possible to get a general idea of where someone is from by the person’s accent.

Imagine that you are a social scientist. Choose three American dialects or accents, and write a brief scientific study describing the characteristics of each type of accent and the geographic location associated with it. Then, for each accent, list at least three well-known people (actors, writers, politicians, athletes, etc.) who speak with that accent.

10. The Note Taker continues, to the crowd’s chagrin, to identify where people are from by listening to them speak. When he overhears The Mother talking to her daughter, he concludes that The Mother is from Epsom. The Mother says that, yes, she grew up in Largelady Park, a community near the town of Epsom. This is a play on words, since The Mother is a “large lady.”

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Based on Shaw's play on words with *The Mother and Largelady Park*, make a list of amusing fictional places and then write an explanation of why each name is funny. For example:

Place Name	Funny Because
Largelady Park	The woman who is from that area is overweight.
Little Big Town	A town can't be little and big at the same time.

11. When *The Gentleman* approaches *The Note Taker* about his uncanny ability, *The Note Taker* tells him that there is no magic involved; he is simply a phonetician, someone who studies the science of speech. Apparently, *The Note Taker* enjoys this work because he says that, not only is it his job, it is also his hobby. He says, "Happy is the man who can make a living by his hobby!"

As a high school guidance counselor, write the wording for a flyer for high school seniors, giving them advice on choosing a job that they will enjoy as much as *The Note Taker* enjoys his and explaining how they can turn their hobbies into employment opportunities.

12. *The Note Taker*, who we now know is Henry Higgins, makes a lot of money by teaching people how to speak properly. He can take a businessman from the country, for example, and teach him how to speak so that people will think he was born and raised in the city of London. Although Higgins has many clients, one wonders if anyone can really accomplish this. Do you think it's possible to change who you are or who people think you are, just by changing the way you speak? Can you really make people think you are from another place or economic background just by changing how you present yourself?

Write a section for a training manual for the FBI, telling new employees how suspects may attempt to change their appearance and speech and how to identify someone who has changed his or her identity.