Pygmalion

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

George Bernard Shaw was born in 1856, in Dublin. His father was a civil servant and his mother was a singer. He changed schools several times as he grew older, and developed a strong dislike of schools and formal education. When he was a teenager, his mother moved to London and he remained in Dublin with his father for some time. But in 1876, he moved to London to join his mother. There, he began writing, starting with novels (though he found no success as a novelist). He also became somewhat politically active, an ardent supporter of socialism. It was only in the 1880s that Shaw turned to drama. He finally found some writing success with his plays, which often involved social critiques. Shaw was a very prolific writer, writing over 50 plays in addition to articles, reviews, essays, and pamphlets. His popularity rose in the early 1900s and he started to become a famous, well-respected playwright. In 1925, he was recognized for his work with the Nobel Prize in Literature and he died 25 years later, at the age of 94.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play is set in the early 20th century, at the end of the Victorian period. During this time, London was the capital of the wide-reaching, powerful British Empire. Victorian society was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy, but as the 20th century began social change was on the horizon. Importantly, women had not yet gained many basic rights and privileges. Shaw's comedy of manners, which satirizes the customs and habits of the Victorian elite, plays with and critiques the social conventions of this historical moment.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shaw's play takes its title from the myth of Pygmalion, which is told in Ovid's epic Latin poem of mythological transformations, the *Metamorphoses*. In the myth, Pygmalion makes a sculpture of his ideal woman, named Galatea. He falls in love with his beautiful statue, which then comes to life. With his title, Shaw implies that Eliza is a kind of Galatea, molded by Pickering and Higgins into the ideal lady of Victorian society. *Pygmalion* is Shaw's most popular play and has spawned a number of adaptations (including a film version). Most famously, it is the inspiration for the Broadway musical and following movie *My Fair Lady*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Pygmalion*
- **When Written:** 1912
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1912
- **Literary Period:** Victorian period
- **Genre:** Drama, comedy, comedy of manners
- **Setting:** London
- **Climax:** In act four, after winning the bet concerning Eliza, Higgins says he has been bored with his experiment, and treats Eliza poorly. Infuriated, Eliza throws Higgins' slippers at him and argues and fights with him.
- **Antagonist:** While Eliza and Higgins argue with each other, they both cooperate in order to fool London's high society. The rigid hierarchy of social classes in Victorian England can be seen as the antagonist against which all the characters struggle, as they deal with issues of class and wealth.

EXTRA CREDIT

Double Threat. George Bernard Shaw is the only person to have ever won both the Nobel Prize in Literature and an Oscar. He won the Oscar for his work on a film adaptation of *Pygmalion*.

Thanks But No Thanks. At first, Shaw declined to accept the Nobel Prize. He later changed his mind, but still refused the prize money, wanting it instead to fund translations of Swedish literature into English.

PLOT SUMMARY

One rainy night in Covent Garden, London, a crowd of people from various social classes all seek shelter under the same church portico. A wealthy mother (later revealed to be Mrs. Eynsford Hill) waits exasperatedly with her daughter Clara for her son Freddy to find a taxi. Freddy enters, unable to find one, but his mother sends him back out into the rain to look again. Under the portico, a poor flower-girl (Eliza Doolittle) sells a flower to a gentleman (Colonel Pickering). A bystander tells Eliza to watch out for a strange man in the back of the crowd taking notes. Eliza thinks that the man is a policeman and that she is in trouble. The man, who turns out to be Henry Higgins, steps forward and guesses where everyone is from based on their manner of speech. Everyone is confused and annoyed by the meddlesome Higgins. Eliza thinks he is a policeman trying to get her in trouble and insists that she is "a good girl." Pickering asks Higgins how he can tell where everyone is from, and Higgins explains that he studies phonetics and teaches people how to speak in different accents. He says that he could teach the flower-girl Eliza to speak so well in just three months

that she could pass for a noble lady. Higgins and Pickering introduce themselves to each other, realizing that they are familiar with each other's work (Pickering is also a linguist). The rain stops and the crowd under the portico disperses. Higgins and Pickering leave to get dinner together, while Clara and her mother walk to a bus. Freddy finally returns with a cab, only to find that his family is no longer there.

The next morning, in Higgins' "laboratory" at his home, Higgins is showing all of his scientific instruments and tools for recording and studying speech to Pickering. Eliza arrives and offers to pay Higgins for speaking lessons, so that she can learn to "talk more genteel," and get a better job. Higgins doesn't think she can afford to pay him, and scoffs rudely at her. Pickering steps in and bets Higgins that he can't teach Eliza to speak so well that she passes as a wealthy lady at an ambassador's garden party in six months. He offers to pay for her lessons. Higgins likes the idea and tells his housekeeper Mrs. Pearce to wash Eliza and dress her in new clothes, though Eliza protests. Eliza refuses to participate in the bet, and Mrs. Pearce tells Higgins not to "walk over" Eliza. Higgins neglects Eliza's feelings, ordering her to live with him for six months and take speaking lessons. Mrs. Pearce takes Eliza away to talk to her in private. Meanwhile, Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, comes to Higgins' house. He says that he hasn't seen his daughter in months, but learned of her whereabouts from the taxi driver who brought her to the house. He asks Higgins for five pounds in return for letting Eliza stay with him. Higgins and Pickering are scandalized by Mr. Doolittle's willingness to "sell" his daughter, but Higgins eventually agrees to give him money. As Mr. Doolittle leaves, he runs into Eliza, who has washed and changed into new clothes. Mr. Doolittle calls her "miss" before recognizing her, getting into a fight with her, and leaving. Mrs. Pearce enters and tells Eliza that she has more clothes for her to try on. Eliza leaves eagerly, having seemingly accepted the offer to stay with Higgins.

It is a few months later, at the home of Henry Higgins' mother, Mrs. Higgins. Mrs. Higgins is ready to have some friends over and is annoyed when Higgins barges in. Higgins tells her about Eliza and says that he wants Eliza to sit with Mrs. Higgins and her friends and try to act like a lady. Before Higgins leaves, some of Mrs. Higgins' friends arrive: the Eynsford Hills. Higgins at first doesn't recognize them from the portico in Covent Garden. Eliza arrives, and the Eynsford Hills don't recognize her as the flower-girl. Everyone starts to make small talk about the weather, but Eliza makes the mistake of talking about the death of her aunt (in which she suspects foul play) and her father's drinking habit. Freddy seems amused by Eliza, though Mrs. Eynsford Hill is shocked by her conversation. After Eliza leaves, Clara tells her mother that Eliza's speech is a new, fashionable form of small talk. Clara says that manners are only a matter of habit, so there are no right or wrong ones. As the Eynsford Hills leave, Freddy says that he would like to meet Eliza again sometime. Higgins asks his mother whether Eliza was presentable, and she says that Eliza was not. She tells Higgins there is no hope for Eliza to pass as a lady. Mrs. Higgins then cautions her son about treating Eliza like a "live doll," but Pickering assures her that they take Eliza seriously. Higgins refers to Eliza as merely an experiment. Mrs. Higgins worries about what will happen to Eliza when the "experiment" is over.

Several months later, Eliza, Higgins, and Pickering return to Higgins' house at midnight, after a long day and night. They have gone to a garden party, followed by a dinner party, followed by the opera. Eliza successfully passed as a wealthy lady, and Higgins has won his bet. Higgins says he was not surprised by Eliza's success and has in fact long been bored with the wager. He thanks God that the experiment is over. Eliza is offended at how the two men are speaking of her and throws Higgins' slippers at him, calling him selfish and inconsiderate. Higgins thinks she is ungrateful. Eliza regains her composure and worries about what will happen to her now. Higgins suggests she marry someone wealthy, to ensure a comfortable life, but Eliza thinks of this as a kind of prostitution and rejects the idea. Higgins says Pickering can get her a job in a nice florist's shop. Eliza asks whether her clothes belong to her now, because she doesn't want to be accused of stealing them. Higgins is offended by the question and tells Eliza she has wounded him "to the heart."

The next day, Mrs. Higgins is sitting in her drawing room, when her parlor-maid tells her that Higgins and Pickering are downstairs calling the police. Mrs. Higgins tells the maid to go upstairs and inform Eliza, but not to have her come down. Higgins comes into the room and tells his mother that Eliza has run away. Mrs. Higgins tells him that Eliza has the right to leave his house whenever she wishes. Pickering enters and says that he has spoken with the police about Eliza. The maid announces that a gentleman named Mr. Doolittle is at the door. Higgins doesn't think that this can be Eliza's father, but it turns out to be him, dressed as a gentleman. Mr. Doolittle is upset because Higgins has mentioned his name to a wealthy American named Ezra Wannafeller, who has founded Moral Reform Societies across the world. Higgins joked to Wannafeller that Mr. Doolittle was England's "most original moralist," and Wannafeller left Doolittle money in his will. Mr. Doolittle is angry at having been turned into a somewhat wealthy gentleman. He says his new money has brought him nothing but worries and problems and tells Higgins that now he needs to be taught how to speak proper English. Mrs. Higgins tells Mr. Doolittle that he can care for Eliza now, but Higgins wants to keep Eliza at his house. Mrs. Higgins scolds Higgins and Pickering for how they have treated Eliza and reveals that Eliza is actually upstairs. Mrs. Higgins calls Eliza down. She is very polite to Pickering and Higgins. Pickering is nice to Eliza, but Higgins is angry and rude to her, ordering her to come back to his house. Eliza thanks Pickering for teaching her good manners

by example, and tells him that her transformation was really spurred on by when he called her Miss Doolittle once. Eliza says that she has completely forgotten her old ways of speaking and behaving. Higgins, though, thinks that she will return to her lower-class habits within weeks. Eliza finally sees her father and is shocked to hear that he is going to marry her stepmother. He asks Eliza to come to his wedding. Mrs. Higgins, Eliza, and Pickering all prepare to go to the wedding. Higgins and Eliza are left alone in the room. Eliza says that Higgins only wants her back to do chores and errands for him. Higgins says that he cannot change his rude manners toward her, because he cannot change his nature. He explains that he is rude to everyone, not jus her, just as Pickering is polite to everyone. He claims that it is not important to have good or bad manners, but simply to behave the same way toward everyone, regardless of class. Eliza is still reluctant to go back to Higgins' house. She says that she is a slave, despite her expensive clothes. Higgins offers to adopt Eliza or marry her to Pickering, but Eliza wants to marry Freddy Eynsford Hill, which irritates Higgins (he wants her to marry someone of a higher class). Eliza is still angry with Higgins and tells him that all she wants is some kindness from him. She then says that if she can't have kindness from him, she will have her independence. She tells Higgins that she will become a teacher of phonetics, stealing everything she has learned from him in order to take his clients. Higgins is suddenly impressed by Eliza's strength and confidence. Mrs. Higgins comes in to take Eliza to the wedding. As she leaves, Higgins tells Eliza to buy him some things, but Eliza tells him to do it himself. The play ends with Higgins alone in the room, confident that Eliza will do the errand as he asked.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Eliza Doolittle – First introduced as the flower-girl in Act One, and called variously Liza, Eliza, and Miss Doolittle, Eliza is the subject of Higgins and Pickering's experiment and bet. While not formally well-educated, she is quick-witted and is a strong character, generally unafraid to stand up for herself. She is a quick learner, and under the teaching of Pickering and Higgins she easily learns to act like a lady and pass as a member of the upper class. It is unclear to what degree she really transforms by doing this, and to what degree she merely learns to play a role. In Act Five, she insists that she really has changed and cannot go back to her old way of behaving or speaking, though Higgins thinks otherwise. Eliza desires independence but finds herself under the control of men like Pickering, Higgins, and her father. At the end of the play, she stands up to Higgins and leaves him, but he is confident that she will come back to him. The play thus leaves it somewhat ambiguous as to whether or not she ever really achieves some of the independence she wants.

Henry Higgins – Higgins is a brilliant linguist, who studies phonetics and documents different dialects and ways of speaking. He first appears in Act One as the suspicious man in the back of the crowd jotting down notes on everyone's manner of speech. Higgins is so focused on his academic interest that he lacks empathy and fails to consider other people's feelings or concerns. Instead, he sees people mainly as subjects of study. He views Eliza, for example, as an experiment and a "phonetic job." He doesn't so much invite Eliza to stay with him and learn to speak like a lady, but rather orders her to. Higgins is rude not only to Eliza, but generally to everyone he meets. He is impatient with class hierarchy and the Victorian obsession with manners. As he tells Eliza in Act Five, he treats everyone the same (that is, rudely) regardless of social class. Thus, while an inconsiderate character—and often a misogynist—Higgins at least sees through the hypocrisy and fallacies of the Victorian social hierarchy, and relishes the opportunity to beat high society at its own game by making Eliza pass as a lady.

Colonel Pickering – A gentleman, a colonel and an academic, who studies Indian dialects. While he shares Higgins' interest in linguistics, he is not as extreme in his devotion to his intellectual pursuits. While he gives Higgins the idea for the bet involving Eliza, he treats Eliza kindly and considers her feelings. (It is his calling her Miss Doolittle, we learn in Act Five, that actually encourages Eliza to really change.) At the end of the play, he apologizes to Eliza for treating her like the subject of an experiment, unlike the selfish Higgins who never apologizes.

Clara Eynsford Hill – From a rather wealthy family, Clara is fed up with all of the rules of proper manners for her class. In Act Three, she enjoys Eliza's inappropriate conversation (and tells her mother that it is a new, fashionable form of small talk). She comments that manners are simply a matter of habit, and that there is no such thing as right or wrong manners.

Freddy Eynsford Hill – Clara's brother, who becomes fond of Eliza in Act Three. In Act Five, we learn that he has been writing her love letters, and Eliza perhaps wants to marry him. He represents a way for Eliza to escape the control of Higgins, although by marrying him she would in a sense be entering into Freddy's control, rather than finding her own independence.

Alfred Doolittle – Eliza's father, who appears at Higgins' house in Act Two, asking for money (but not too much money) in return for allowing Eliza to stay with him. Eliza doesn't trust her father, and he doesn't seem to show very much fatherly love (although this changes to some degree at the end of the play, when he invites her to his wedding). After Higgins, as a joke, mentions Doolittle's name as Britain's most "original moralist" to a wealthy American named Ezra Wannafeller, Wannafeller leaves Doolittle a substantial amount of money. However, his newfound wealth and social standing irritate Mr. Doolittle, who thinks little of "middle class morality" or the responsibilities brought on by having any significant amount of money, though

at the same time he doesn't have the courage to give up his newfound money.

Mrs. Higgins – Henry Higgins' mother, who hosts the Eynsford Hills at her wealthy home in Act Three. She is initially upset by Eliza's intrusion into her polite company, but is kind to her. She tries to tell her son not to treat Eliza like an object or possession, but to instead to consider Eliza's feelings. While Higgins doesn't listen to her, she does her best to resolve things in Act Five, at least patching things up with Mr. Doolittle, Eliza, and Pickering. On stage only in her drawing room, she plays an important role and exerts some agency in the play even while constrained by the oppressive gender roles of Victorian society.

Ezra D. Wannafeller – The wealthy American who leaves money to Mr. Doolittle in his will. He stands in for the American idea of meritocratic social mobility—the belief that those who work hard can move up the social ladder—as opposed to Victorian ideas of natural social hierarchy which hold that people are born into the social position they deserve. The inheritance he leaves Mr. Doolittle allows Doolittle to become a gentleman, though ironically Mr. Doolittle hates his newfound wealth.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Eynsford Hill – A friend of Mrs. Higgins, Mrs. Hill first appears as the anonymous mother in Act One. Her family is wealthy, but not exceedingly upper-class. She is very concerned with social propriety, and is a bit scandalized in Act Three when Eliza talks inappropriately at Mrs. Higgins' house.

Mrs. Pearce – Higgins' housekeeper, who chastises him about how he treats Eliza and reminds him to mind his manners in front of her.

Bystander – A bystander who takes cover from the rain under the church portico in act one.

Mrs. Higgins' Parlor-Maid – Mrs. Higgins' maid, who announces various visitors to her house.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LANGUAGE AND SPEECH

Shaw's play explores aspects of language in a variety of ways. Higgins and Pickering study linguistics and phonetics, taking note of how people from different backgrounds speak differently. In Act Three, we see the importance of proper small talk in a social situation. And the play also reveals some of the powers of language: Eliza's transformation is spurred simply by Pickering calling her by the name Miss Doolittle, while Higgins' insults and coarse language, which severely hurt Eliza's feelings, show the potential violence of language. The play is most interested, though, in the connections between a person's speech and his or her identity. As we see in the beginning of the play, Higgins can easily guess where people are from based on their accent, dialect, and use of particular slang. How different people speak the same language thus reveals a surprising amount about their identity. However, Shaw also exposes how shallow and imprecise this conception of identity is, how it doesn't actually capture or represent the full person. After all, Eliza's way of speaking transforms over the course of the play. Eliza is able to change her identity simply by learning to talk differently.

In particular, ***Pygmalion*** continually displays the connections between language and social class. In the opening scene, we see people from different social strata speaking in vastly different dialects, and Mrs. Eysnford Hill is confused when Eliza calls her son Freddy, not realizing that this is merely a kind of lower-class slang. And most importantly, by changing her habits of speech, Eliza is able to fool people into thinking that she is from an upper-class background. Upper-class characters in the play lay claim to proper or correct English. Higgins, for example, shames Eliza for speaking a poor version of the language of the great writers Shakespeare and Milton. But is there anything inherently correct about one particular version of English? At Mrs. Higgins' home, Mrs. Eynsford Hill mistakenly believes that Eliza's lower-class slang is a new, fashionable form of small talk. There is thus nothing naturally wrong or improper about Eliza's original way of speaking. Rather, language, accents, and slang are all simply habits that people learn to associate with different backgrounds and social classes. The wealthier social classes simply claim that theirs is the right way to speak. While this oppresses and disadvantages lower-class people, the play shows how this system also opens up possibilities for those clever enough to exploit this connection between speech and class. Eliza, Pickering, and Higgins are, after all, able to use this to their advantage, fooling high society and successfully passing Eliza off as a noble lady.

APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY

Pygmalion explores how social identity is formed not only through patterns of speech, but also through one's general appearance. Much like speech, one's physical appearance signals social class. In the opening scene, as people from different walks of life are forced to take shelter under the same portico, characters' social class is discernible through their clothing: the poor flower-girl (later revealed to be Eliza) and the gentleman, for example, easily know each other's status through their different attire. As Pickering comments in Act Four, many noble people believe

that one's appearance displays one's natural identity and character, thinking that "style comes by nature to people in their position." Somewhat similarly, at the end of the play, Higgins tells Eliza that he cannot change his nature. But the importance of appearances in the play reveals that identity often is changeable, and does not come naturally so much as it is performed or put on like a costume. Eliza is the most obvious example of this. As she wins Higgins' bet for him, she fools people into assuming that she is from a noble background by changing her appearance. Even before her complete transformation, her own father fails to recognize her in act two only because she has changed clothes and bathed.

The precise extent to which Eliza really changes, though, is highly ambiguous. By the end of the play, it is unclear whether she has really changed her nature or whether she has merely learned to pretend to be someone else. As Eliza tells Higgins and Pickering in Act Five, she believes that she has entirely forgotten her original way of speaking and behaving: she thinks that she has really transformed and cannot return to her old life. Higgins, on the other hand, is skeptical of this. He is confident that Eliza will "relapse" into her old ways. The play thus raises (but doesn't completely answer) a number of questions about the stability of identity. Has Eliza really changed, or can she not escape the identity she was born into? Has she become noble, or is she naturally lower-class? Moreover, is there anything natural about class identity at all? Shaw's play takes its title from the myth of Pygmalion, famously told in Ovid's ***Metamorphoses.*** (In it, Pygmalion sculpts a beautiful statue that transforms into a real woman.) Ovid's work is a poem about numerous mythical metamorphoses. But Shaw's play of transformation asks: however much one changes one's appearance, can anyone really ever change?

SOCIAL CLASS AND MANNERS

Written in 1912, ***Pygmalion*** is set in the early 20th century, at the end of the Victorian period in England. Among other things, this period of history was characterized by a particularly rigid social hierarchy—but one that was beginning to decline as social mobility became increasingly possible. The wealthy, high-class characters of the play are thus especially concerned with maintaining class distinctions. This means more than a mere distinction between rich and poor. The Eynsford Hill family, for example, is wealthy, but (as Mrs. Eynsford Hill confesses to Mrs. Higgins) not wealthy enough to go to many parties. And Higgins wants Eliza to marry not Freddy, but someone of an even higher class. Perhaps the most important way in which these distinctions of social class are enforced is through manners, unwritten codes of proper behavior. Shaw's play displays the workings of this system of social hierarchy, but also exposes some of its problems.

For one, the play shows how the belief that one's social class and manners are natural is false. As Eliza's transformation shows, manners and nobility can be learned. One's class is formed through performance, learning to act in certain ways. And moreover, as Clara Eynsford Hill comments, there is nothing inherently better about one or another performance: "It's all a matter of habit. There's no right or wrong in it." Good and bad manners are just a matter of cultural habit. (This is also evidenced by the fact that different cultures have different notions of polite behavior.) Ironically, at several moments in the play, lower-class characters are better behaved than their supposedly well-mannered, upper-class counterparts. In Act Five, Pickering comments that Eliza played the part of a noble lady better than real noble ladies they encountered. And Higgins, while somewhat upper-class, is very rude. Mrs. Pearce must remind him to mind his manners in front of Eliza, and at the end of the play she has better manners than he does. There is thus no natural or inherent connection between social class and "correct" manners.

Despite the rigidities of social class in the world of the play, Eliza and her father show the possibility of social mobility. Not only is Eliza changed into a noble lady, but her father also inherits a sizable sum of money from the rich American Ezra Wannafeller. As a counterexample to Victorian England, Wannafeller stands in for the American ideal of social mobility—that one can rise up the social ladder through hard work. By giving money to Mr. Doolittle, he allows Doolittle to become middle class. However, Mr. Doolittle himself challenges the assumption that such a move up the social ladder is necessarily a good thing. He continually criticizes "middle class morality" and laments all the anxieties and troubles that his new wealth brings with it. By the end of the play, Eliza also misses her prior, simpler life as a flower-girl. Thus, Shaw's play questions not only the validity of a rigid social hierarchy, but even the desirability of a high social class.

EDUCATION AND INTELLIGENCE

Two of the play's main characters—Higgins and Pickering—are academics. Shaw in some sense pits their intellectual intelligence against the wits of others, like Eliza. Early in the play, Eliza is intimidated and confused by Higgins' academic language. However, while characters like Eliza, Mrs. Higgins, and Mr. Doolittle lack the kind of education that Higgins and Pickering have had, the play reveals them to be smart in their own ways. Eliza, for example, turns out to be a quick learner and a very good pupil, easily winning Higgins' bet for him. And although Mrs. Higgins is confined in the play to her own home, she displays a kind of social savvy in integrating Eliza with her other guests in Act Three and in helping to resolve things (to the extent that they can be resolved) at the play's conclusion. Finally, Higgins may scoff at the lowly Mr. Doolittle early in the play, but he is the only character who voices criticisms of "middle class morality"

and articulates some of the problems with the Victorian social hierarchy. Thus, while Higgins and Pickering might appear to be the play's two educated, intelligent characters, different characters exemplify different forms of intelligence and cleverness.

Moreover, the play shows some of the downsides of Higgins' overly intellectual learning. Higgins approaches other people with a kind of academic detachment. He sees everyone as subjects for his linguistic studies, rather than as people with feelings of their own. One sees this especially with how he treats Eliza: he hurtfully neglects her as a person and sees her merely as an experiment. Higgins lacks basic sympathy and empathy, what might be called emotional intelligence. The play's most intelligent character is thus, in another sense, its least learned.

FEMININITY AND GENDER ROLES

The title of Shaw's play is taken from the myth of Pygmalion. In this story, Pygmalion scorns all the women around him and makes a sculpture of his ideal woman. The sculpture is so beautiful that he falls in love with it and it comes to life. By titling his play after this story, Shaw calls attention to questions of femininity and gender. As Pygmalion sculpts his ideal woman, so Higgins and Pickering mold Eliza into an ideal lady. These two narratives show how unrealistic and even unnatural the expectations that society often has for women are. Pygmalion's perfect woman can only be attained with an artificial construct, a sculpture. Similarly, the ideal noble lady of British society in the world of Shaw's play is a kind of fake, only a role that Eliza must learn to play. *Pygmalion* can thus be seen as showing how oppressive unrealistic ideals of femininity can be: to attain these ideals, Eliza has to be coached, disciplined, and taught. She has to pretend to be someone other than who she really is.

The play further explores gender roles with its other female characters. As it is set in the early 20th century, before women gained many basic rights and privileges, the play's other female characters—Mrs. Pearce and Mrs. Higgins—are largely confined to their respective households. Nonetheless, they both play important roles. Mrs. Pearce ensures the functioning of Higgins' household and reminds him of his own manners. And Mrs. Higgins takes Eliza in when she leaves Higgins and Pickering, and helps resolve things at the play's conclusion. These two characters thus demonstrate how women might still exert some agency within an oppressive Victorian society. But despite any redeeming aspects to women's roles in the world of the play, they ultimately cannot escape the constraints of their sexist world. At the end of the play, Eliza must choose between living with Higgins, living with her father, or marrying Freddy. In any case, her future can only be under the control of a man of some sort. She tells Higgins that she desires independence, but—although she is a strong character—we never see her actually obtain her independence in the play. Eliza is greatly transformed over the course of the play, but it would take even greater transformations of society itself in the 20th century for women like Eliza to have real independence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CLOTHING

In *Pygmalion*, clothing is an important part (perhaps the most important part) of characters' appearances and how they display their identity and social standing. In the opening scene, the different people under the church portico are able to discern each other's social class particularly by their clothes. Pickering is easily recognizable as a gentleman, whereas Eliza is easily identifiable as a poor flower-girl. Because of this, clothing is naturally an important part of Eliza's transformation. In Act Two, after she changes clothes, her own father doesn't even recognize her at first—and this is before she even begins to act or talk differently. Mr. Doolittle's own social transformation is also symbolized by clothing. He arrives at Mrs. Higgins' house in Act Five dressed like a gentleman, and Higgins assumes that this cannot be Eliza's father, whom he met earlier. The importance of clothes in the formation of one's social identity suggests that such identity is rather shallow. Indeed, a central ambiguity in the play is whether one's identity can really be changed by learning to speak differently or putting on a different outfit, or whether this is merely a façade that covers up one's true, unchanging identity. This tension comes to the forefront in Act Four when Eliza asks Higgins whether her new, expensive clothes actually belong to her now. Behind the question of whether she is or isn't the owner of the clothes, Eliza also wants to know whether her new, upper-class identity is really hers, or whether it is just a role she is playing, a costume she is wearing but will have to give up eventually. Clothes thus symbolize the importance of appearances in establishing one's identity and class, while also questioning how deep this kind of social identity goes.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Pygmalion* published in 2000.

It's aw rawt: e's a genleman: look at his ba-oots.

Related Characters: Bystander (speaker), Henry Higgins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When a bystander notes to Eliza that there is a man writing down everything she is saying, she's immediately concerned that he is a policeman, and that she has unwittingly committed a crime. When the note-taker comes forward, however, a bystander notes that he is a gentleman, not a policeman, as is apparent by his manner of dress (his boots in particular).

In Victorian society, the way one looked and acted was meant to be indicative of their status in society. By this standard, it was generally believed that one who had manners and money had higher morals than those who were poor and unkempt (thus the way the word "gentleman" has come to mean someone with integrity and manners, whereas once it was only a marker of wealth and social rank). Because of this, the bystander (who's way of speaking itself identifies her as being of the lower class) immediately believes the man is to be trusted simply by the luxury he exudes by the shoes on his feet. Eliza, by contrast, is considered unclean and inferior because she is poor, does not speak like the upper class, and sells flowers on the street to earn a living. Side by side, Higgins is considered to be much more trustworthy simply based on the way he dresses.

> And how are all your people down at Selsey? Who told you my people come from Selsey?

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Bystander

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Higgins impresses everyone in the crowd by showing off his skills as a linguist, particularly in his recognition of English dialects. In this quote, he correctly identifies that a bystander is from Selsey, an English seaside town, just by hearing the way he talks.

In this instance, Higgins, an educated, wealthy, and supremely talented linguist uses his skills not only to qualify his reasoning for writing down Eliza's speech, but also to assert his superiority. Higgins believes that his education, wealth, and wit mean that he is intrinsically superior to the lower classes, and he is eager to cleverly assert his dominance over them any way he can. By catching people off guard by naming where they are from simply by their speech, he essentially tells these people that he knows who they are and what their entire background is without even an introduction. Higgins is supremely concerned with manners and appearance, and he prides himself by being able to tell a person's background and to essentially see through any facades or airs that the person might put on to appear more high-class. It is this belief that makes the challenge of fooling others with Eliza's false upper-class exterior particularly delightful to him.

> A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Eliza becomes angry with Higgins and tells him to mind his own business. Higgins becomes angry with Eliza in return, retorting that her walking around and speaking the way she does is *exactly* his business. In this quote, he goes so far as to say that a woman who speaks the way Eliza does has "no right to live."

Higgins represents an extreme of Victorian society, which associated wealth and high status with high morality, and associated the lower classes with dirtiness and a lack of morals. In this instance, without knowing Eliza at all, Higgins decides that she is not worthy of a life because she is a lower class than he and speaks in a dialect that is associated with the lower classes. While he tells her that she is a scourge upon a language that produced great works of literature (although, of course, the Bible—one of Higgins' examples—wasn't originally written in English), he fails to comprehend that her lower status means that she has not had access to the same education he has had the privilege of

receiving. To Higgins, appearance is everything, closely followed by birth. Eliza has neither a classy appearance nor notable birth; to him, she might as well be dead.

> You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

After astonishing the crowd by telling everyone that he knows where they are from, Higgins contends that he is so skilled in teaching dialects that he could teach the flower girl how to speak like a duchess in three months.

Higgins' ego as an educated and wealthy man means that while he believes Eliza could *pass* as a noblewoman, she will never actually *be* one. In tracing everyone's accents, and taking great pride in doing so, Higgins shows that he believes class is inborn and intrinsic. He takes great delight in teaching other people how to speak nobly, though with his excellent ear, he alone can likely tell that their accents and mannerisms are not completely genuine. While Higgins believes accent and success are intrinsically linked, he holds the Victorian notion that class is something one is born with, not something you can learn or earn. From this idea comes Higgins' delight in the challenge of fooling the upper crust into thinking a lowly flower girl is one of them. Though Higgins is wealthy, he is not noble, and is excited at the notion of using his skill and wit to beat the nobility at their own game.

> A young woman! What does she want?
> Well, sir, she says you'll be glad to see her when you know what she's come about. She's quite a common girl, sir. Very common indeed.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins, Mrs. Pearce (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

The next day, Henry Higgins shows Colonel Pickering around his linguistic laboratory. As the tour completes, Mrs. Pearce, Higgins' housekeeper, comes to tell him that a "common" young woman is at the door and would like to see him. Immediately, the reader/audience knows that it is Eliza.

This quote is telling of how Higgins' prejudice against "common" people is indicative of all of Victorian society, though it is rather extreme in his case. Mrs. Pearce, though lower class than her employer, is still of a higher class than Eliza, and she, too, looks down upon the "common" girl. This shows a hierarchy of classes where all that one requires to look down upon others is to be at least one social rung above. However, it is also telling that Mrs. Pearce will not refer to her as "lower class," but rather, as "common," suggesting that *most* of society is of this lower class, and to be *un*common is to be part of a special, unique sector of society.

> You know, Pickering, if you consider a shilling, not as a simple shilling, but as a percentage of this girl's income, it works out as fully equivalent to sixty or seventy guineas from a millionaire.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Colonel Pickering, Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

When Eliza asks Higgins to give her elocution lessons, she offers to pay him a shilling per lesson, which she believes to be his going rate (as Higgins is a very wealthy man, it is likely much, much higher).In this quote, Higgins addresses Pickering as if Eliza is not present. This further exemplifies his rudeness towards her: he does not consider her to be of the same intelligence of himself and Pickering, and therefore does not even think to include her in the conversation.

Here, Higgins reasons that as a ratio of Eliza's income, a shilling is comparable to "sixty or seventy guineas from a millionaire." Rather than feeling touched that Eliza would be willing to part with such a large part of her income in order for his expertise, Higgins' merely calculates this ratio for his

own amusement. Higgins' interest in Eliza is purely for entertainment, not because he has an investment in bettering her future by "fixing" her speech to a standard that society perceives to be higher class. Comparing Eliza to a millionaire also reveals how Higgins' mind works--he is constantly determining class distinctions in his mind about the people he interacts with. Eliza does not exist as simply who she is, rags and all, but rather within the context of how she stacks up--or doesn't--to the rest of Victorian society.

> Well, the matter is, sir, that you can't take a girl up like that as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach.

Related Characters: Mrs. Pearce (speaker), Henry Higgins, Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

When Higgins orders Mrs. Pearce to burn Eliza's clothes and fetch her new ones, the housekeeper stands up for the young girl and tells Higgins he can't casually "take a girl up" as if he "were picking up a pebble on the beach."

Mrs. Pearce, though class-conscious like the rest of Victorian London, is more sympathetic to Eliza's plight than her employer. As Higgins' housekeeper, she knows his habits and prejudices, and worries that his passing interest in Eliza as a hobby or "project" will result in her danger or harm. Higgins does not think of Eliza as a human, or at least one with similar intelligence to him, but rather as some kind of "creature." Mrs. Pearce can tell he's interested in her as an oddity or curiosity, not in her future, regardless of his protests to the contrary. Mrs. Pearce is crucial as Eliza's only advocate in this situation, and the first person to express concern over Higgins' intentions and Eliza's physical and emotional safety.

Mrs. Pearce's interest in Eliza is also evidence of the gender divide in Victorian England--she, as a woman, feels that she must protect a vulnerable younger woman from the misogyny of Higgins' patriarchal position and views.

> I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance. I find that the moment I let myself make friends with a woman, I become selfish and tyrannical. Women upset everything.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Pearce takes Eliza away to for a bath and new clothing, Pickering asks Higgins about his relationships with women. In this quote, Higgins replies that he does not like to be friends with women for a variety of misogynistic reasons. Though Victorian society was notoriously sexist, with strict gender roles for men and women, Higgins is particularly rude when it comes to his ideas about women. Here, he complains that women whom he is friends with inevitably become infatuated with him, thus forcing him to become "selfish and tyrannical."

Of course, Higgins' rudeness and generally unpleasant demeanor are nobody's fault except his own. Though Higgins utters this statement to prove that his relationship with Eliza will remain purely pedagogical (that of teacher and student), it further reveals his sexist views and helps to explain why he is rudest, in particular, to a young lower-class woman like Eliza.

> Then might I ask you not to come down to breakfast in your dressing-gown, or at any rate not to use it as a napkin to the extent you do, sir. And if you would be so good as not to eat everything off the same plate, and to remember not to put the porridge saucepan out of your hand on the clean tablecloth, it would be a better example to the girl.

Related Characters: Mrs. Pearce (speaker), Henry Higgins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

After taking Eliza away to wash up and change, Mrs. Pearce comes back into Higgins' study to ask him to promise not to practice some of his bad habits in Eliza's presence.

Higgins, a "confirmed old bachelor," has lived along with just Mrs. Pearce for years, and as a result, has acquired a number of habits, such as walking around in his pajamas and cursing, that the housekeeper does not believe are suitable

for a young woman (particularly one to whom Higgins is supposedly going to give elocution and etiquette lessons). Given Higgins' classist and sexist views, it is ironic that his housekeeper, a woman and a member of a lower class, is reprimanding him for his manners. Here Mrs. Pearce acts as a foil to Higgins' ego--though he talks a big game, he requires Mrs. Pearce's care to live his day-to-day life, and he often acts immaturely, despite his supposedly upper class etiquette. Mrs. Pearce reveals his true habits when no one is looking, thus confirming them as his hypocrisies.

This sentiment is similar to Higgins' hope to *pass* Eliza off as a noblewoman, not actually make her into a genuine member of the upper class: class is all about how one hopes to be perceived, not how they truly are as a human being. For all of her faults, Eliza is true to herself, whereas Higgins' pretension is almost entirely an act.

> Is this reasonable? Is it fairity to take advantage of a man like this? The girl belongs to me.

Related Characters: Alfred Doolittle (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father, storms into Higgins' house, demanding to know where his daughter is. He claims to have not seen her for two months, and accuses Higgins of taking his daughter away from him. However, when Higgins dismisses his claims and says he can take Eliza back, Doolittle is shocked at his passivity. In this quote, he presses on, insisting that Higgins is being entirely unreasonable by keeping Eliza away from him.

This quote is further evidence of Eliza's situation as a girl who is now to be "kept" by Higgins, and who has previously "belonged" to her father. Both men see her as a kind of property, one to be traded and bartered and used as a kind of commodity. Here, neither Higgins nor Doolittle treat Eliza as an actual human being with feelings. Their lack of empathy for Eliza is indicative of Victorian misogyny, and the treatment of women by men and patriarchal structures in general. Higgins' treatment of Eliza is, sadly, less appalling when the reader sees how her father treats her--she is used to being ordered around by an older man. Though she is between a rock and a hard place in terms of male guardians, at least remaining in Higgins' care will allow her a glimmer of hope for a better life.

Act 3 Quotes

> I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women: some habits lie too deep to be changed. [*Rising abruptly and walking about, jingling his money and his keys in his trouser pockets*] Besides, they're all idiots.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Henry visits his mother on a day she is scheduled to entertain other visitors. He asks that she allow Eliza to join in on the visit, to test how she interacts in a group of strangers. Hearing about a girl, Mrs. Higgins suddenly becomes interested, and she asks her son if this young woman is a romantic interest of his.

In this quote, Higgins immediately dismisses any idea that Eliza is a potential romantic partner. He, according to his mother, never falls in love with anyone under "forty-five," likely because he has an intense disdain for immaturity and naivety. Ironically, he claims that "some habits lie too deep to be changed," although changing habits is exactly at the root of his experiment with Eliza. Higgins believes that he is a singular creature, immune to all of the fallacy of human beings, particularly those that he believes "afflict" women. His prejudices therefore maintain his status as a bachelor.

> Liza: They all thought she was dead; but my father he kept ladling gin down her throat til she came to so sudden that she bit the bowl off the spoon.
> Mrs Eynsford Hill: Dear me!
> Liza: What call would a woman with that strength in her have to die of influenza? What become of her new straw hat that should have come to me? Somebody pinched it; and what I say is, them as pinched it done her in.
> Mrs Eynsford Hill: What does doing her in mean?
> Higgins: Oh, that's the new small talk. To do a person in means to kill them.

Related Characters: Eliza Doolittle, Mrs. Eynsford Hill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

When Eliza is brought before Mrs. Higgins' company, Higgins instructs her to speak about only two topics: the weather and health. Eliza, whose dialect is now upper class but whose small talk is not yet groomed, takes this to mean she can speak about the "barometrical situation" and her theory as to who "done in" her aunt.

In this quote, Eliza shocks and amuses the crowd with a story about her dead aunt, who curiously survived influenza (thanks to Mr. Doolittle, who ladled "gin down her throat til she came to") but then suddenly died, her hat going missing as well. Eliza was hoping to inherit the hat, and believes that whoever took the hat likely killed her aunt. This decidedly indecorous cocktail conversation shocks and amuses the audience, proving to Higgins that he has a lot more work to do before he can pass her off as a noblewoman at a garden party.

Though her appearance and speech are well-groomed, the content of Eliza's conversations are not. This shows that in the intervening months, Higgins has tackled how Eliza sounds and looks, but has not paid attention to the fact that she is actually a person who thinks and reasons. He has not though to coach her, specifically, on what Victorian culture is, because he has not thought of her as an equal human with emotions and complex thought. This sitting room test is a rude awakening to what Eliza is--a human--and what she is capable of. A human, Higgins begins to slowly realize, is much more than what one hears and sees on the outside.

> The new small talk. You do it so awfully well.

Related Characters: Freddy Eynsford Hill (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

When Eliza enters the sitting room, Freddy is immediately enamored of her. He assures Eliza that she has not said anything incorrect (despite the inappropriate content of her "small talk") and compliments her for tackling new Victorian social norms.

In this quote, Freddy praises Eliza for taking on "the new small talk...so awfully well." When Eliza speaks of inappropriate topics, like unsolved murder and alcoholism, in the midst of upper-crust company, Freddy and Clara are delighted to have an amusing conversation for a change rather the same old "Victorian prudery," as Clara puts it. Saving her feelings, they decide on the fly that she is an advanced practitioner of the "new small talk," which challenges boring Victorian social norms and makes fun, daring topics appropriate for sitting rooms.

This thinking completely defies Higgins' experiment: He wants Eliza to fit in to existing Victorian society, not become a radical within it. Having an older generation, represented by Mrs. Higgins and Mrs. Eynsford Hill, contrasted by the young Clara and Freddy, shows that social norms are highly variable from person to person and even sitting room to sitting room. From Higgins' mold Eliza may be a hit in a garden party but bomb in another situation. This further raises the question of what will happen to Eliza after the experiment is over: the skills to charm a garden party may win Higgins' bet, but they won't satisfy all of Eliza's life goals and desires. This scene shows that Higgins' experiment, though rooted in the "real world," will, to Higgins, only ultimately succeed or fail in the context of his closed laboratory.

> It's all a matter of habit. There's no right or wrong in it.

Related Characters: Clara Eynsford Hill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

After Eliza is hurriedly ushered out of the room, Mrs. Eynsford Hill expresses her horror at Eliza's choice of language. She asks Colonel Pickering what he thinks of her manners. He, having been in India for several years, replies that his manners are somewhat outdated and he cannot say whether she is bawdy or merely of the times.

In this quote, Clara pipes up and says there is no right or wrong way to act in a social setting: it's merely the person's matter of habit that governs how they act. As a young woman, she has her ear to the ground moreso than her mother on what is new fashion and what is old taste. Her mother is shocked by Eliza's words because she has not been used to it, and it is her *habit* to act more prudishly in

public; her daughter, younger and therefore more flexible to the changing times, perceptively states that what is acceptable and not acceptable is not black and white. Rather, each person's personal habits govern whether they perceive something to be acceptable or not for a social setting.

Clara's reasoning throws a wrench into the philosophy behind Higgins' and Pickering's project: If social norms are variable, then in which direction or for what audience are they grooming Eliza? Clara and Freddy's delight over Eliza's injection of life into an otherwise dull sitting-room conversation shows that Higgins' philosophy and prejudices, though upper class in nature, cater to a very small subset of a rapidly aging-out society.

> You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll.

Related Characters: Mrs. Higgins (speaker), Henry Higgins, Colonel Pickering

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

After the guests leave, Mrs. Higgins grills Pickering and her son as to their true intentions for Eliza. When they explain their project and bet, Mrs. Higgins is horrified and points out the fallacies in their experimental design: Eliza is a human, and she will continue to live a life after the project is over.

In this quote, Mrs. Higgins points out that the two men are acting like children delighting over the intricacies of their "live doll." When children play with a doll, they manipulate its movements and perhaps make up what it says, but they don't actually believe that the doll has a mind of its own. This is how Pickering and Higgins approach Eliza: as a toy for their amusement, without consulting her on her own beliefs and thoughts, because it has never occurred to them that she has any. Their project, though supposedly intended for real-world application, ultimately lives in the world of academia, especially since they have not thought of what to do with Eliza when she succeeds, or doesn't, at the garden party. This lack of foresight is what truly makes their experiment and actions immature.

Act 4 Quotes

> Well, I feel a bit tired. It's been a long day. The garden party, a dinner party, and the opera! Rather too much of a good thing. But you've won your bet, Higgins. Eliza did the trick, and something to spare, eh?
> Thank God it's over!

Related Characters: Colonel Pickering, Henry Higgins (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

The garden party is a success, and Eliza "fools" all of the noblemen into believing she is a duchess. After returning from the party, Pickering and Higgins congratulate themselves on a job well-done, and completely ignore Eliza's presence. In this quote, Pickering and Higgins are smugly satisfied with their work on Eliza, completely ignoring the fact that it was she who was the actual success at the party, not just them. Higgins' comment about being grateful it is over is particularly hurtful to Eliza--it is further confirmation that they were really interested in their fun and games, and not her feelings or future, in initiating this project. She as a "success" story matters very little to them--they are only interested in using their wit and wealth to mold her and amuse themselves. Now, they can move on to whatever else will entertain them, and have little regard for what happens to Eliza now that she has been molded into a semblance of a noblewoman, and cannot return to the "gutter." This quote is evidence of the crass and blasé nature that the two men inspire in each other, in particular the insensitive remarks that Higgins frequently doles out without regard to Eliza's feelings or literal presence in the room.

> It was interesting enough at first, while we were at the phonetics; but after that I got deadly sick of it. If I hadn't backed myself to do it I should have chucked the whole thing up two months ago. It was a silly notion: the whole thing has been a bore.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Completely ignoring Eliza's presence in the room, Higgins complains that the experiment had become a bore, and that he would have given up months ago had there not been a bet at stake. In this quote, Higgins speaks incredibly rudely about Eliza in a manner that is particularly unacceptable given that she can hear everything he is saying. His statement that he was only interested in the phonetics aspect of the experiment is further evidence that he only regarded Eliza as an academic curiosity, not as a human--he became "bored," as he claims, of the whole matter once he learned that he actually had to attend to her as a whole human being, not just as a speaking machine, in order to mold her into an entirely new member of Victorian high society. This statement is a new low, even for Higgins: it shows a blatant disregard not just for Eliza as a lower-class woman, but for a human life and mind that he has lived and worked with intimately for six months. Higgins respects Pickering because he believes him to be his moral and intellectual equal; anyone he perceives as inferior and subject to his whims, such as Eliza, might as well not have a mind at all.

> I was quite frightened once or twice because Eliza was doing it so well. You see, lots of the real people can't do it at all: they're such fools that they think style comes by nature to people in their position; and so they never learn.

Related Characters: Colonel Pickering (speaker), Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

With Eliza still in the room, Higgins and Pickering continue to speak about her as if she was not present. In this quote, Pickering muses that Eliza learned more effectively than he could have ever imagined, to an extent that he was "frightened" as to how well she performed at the event.

This comment, though on the surface a compliment, is really an insult to Eliza's intelligence: after six months of intensive study, she of course performed well, since she is an intelligent human being capable of learning. Of course, as wealthy, classist, misogynistic men, both Pickering and Higgins drastically underestimated her abilities. Pickering comments that she acted even better than the wealthy partygoers, since as born and bred members of the upper crust, they never actually had to learn manners, but rather believed that all of their actions were worthy of class distinction. Though Pickering typically has been more sympathetic to Eliza's plight than Higgins, this comment shows that both of them fail to comprehend Eliza as a whole human being, not just the superficial product of their amusing endeavors.

> I'd like to kill you, you selfish brute. Why didn't you leave me where you picked me out of—in the gutter? You thank God it's all over, and that now you can throw me back again there, do you?

Related Characters: Eliza Doolittle (speaker), Henry Higgins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Incensed about Higgins' and Pickering's statements, Eliza throws Higgins' slippers at him in a rage. In this quote, she acknowledges that she has heard everything he has said, and expresses her fury at his sentiments.

Throughout the last six months, Eliza has taken Pickering and Higgins' emotional abuse for the sake of learning how to be a genteel woman so that she might have a better shot at her future than she did before they met. However, all of her rage at their condescension comes to a head after she performs admirably at the garden party, and they pat *each other* on the back rather than praising her for her excellent work over the past few months.

Eliza accuses Higgins of being selfish--his statements about being grateful that the experiment was over show that he had no interest in her beyond the amusement she provided. Once the amusement was gone, he has no use for her. Just like Mrs. Higgins warned, neither man considered what would become of Eliza once the project was over. Here, Eliza shows that she, too, is concerned about her life--now that she has been shown what a life of leisure and luxury is, she has the choice of continuing to live with a man who considers her less than human, or returning to the "gutter" in a life of poverty and squalor. In the intervening months, the two men failed to realize that Eliza's beliefs and goals--not just her appearance and speech--had evolved to be greater than one expects of a flower girl.

Do my clothes belong to me or to Colonel Pickering?

Related Characters: Eliza Doolittle (speaker), Colonel Pickering, Henry Higgins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

After fighting with Higgins, Eliza declares that she has no choice but to leave Wimpole Street. In this quote, before she leaves, she asks Higgins if the clothes she is wearing belong to her, or to Pickering, since he was the one who technically paid for her entire transformation.

As the two men's "doll," Eliza is unsure what is now hers--tangibly, or emotionally--and what is property of Pickering and Higgins. This comment deeply wounds Higgins, since he genuinely did not realize that she felt this complexly about anything, let alone that she was smart enough to realize the sarcasm and condescension entrenched in his treatment towards her. Higgins considers himself charitable for having taken Eliza in, given her fancy things and an upper-crust attitude. By asking whether her clothing is her own or if she must return it to Pickering--presumably, for their next experiment with a girl they find on the street--hurts him, since he feels that she has not been grateful or understood the act of charity.

Who asked him to make a gentleman of me? I was happy. I was free. I touched pretty nigh everybody for money when I wanted it, same as I touched you, Henry Higgins. Now I am worrited; tied neck and heels; and everybody touches me for money. It's a fine thing for you, says my solicitor. Is it? says I. ...A year ago I hadn't a relative in the world except two or three that wouldn't speak to me. Now I've fifty, and not a decent week's wages among the lot of them. I have to live for others and not for myself: that's middle class morality.

Related Characters: Alfred Doolittle (speaker), Ezra D. Wannafeller

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Alfred Doolittle is bequeathed an entire fortune from a wealthy American businessman, and suddenly finds himself rising in the ranks of Victorian society due to his money. In this quote, he laments to Higgins that the windfall has ruined his life.

Eliza and her father provide an interesting comparison for the ways in which "class" is often associated with both good manners and a big bank account, though in this case, Eliza has the manners but no money, and her father has the money but no manners. In both situations, suddenly being thrust into a new life without the full package makes their lives very stressful. Eliza is capable of social mobility but has no idea how to begin, while her father has the means but feels burdened by the amount of people in his life who want to use him.

Shaw here uses the two characters to provide evidence for the old adage that money can't buy happiness--and neither can an upper class accent. Just because one can join the upper crust does not mean it is a happier level of society--just one with more garden parties and "visiting days." Both Eliza and Doolittle rue the day that Higgins interfered in their lives--just because he is a professor, it does not mean he knows how to live anymore than someone from the gutter does. He expects the Doolittles to be grateful to him for their "good luck," but all they want is to go back to the days in which all they knew was what they had. Thanks to Higgins, all they now know is dissatisfaction.

Nonsense! He can't provide for her. He shan't provide for her. She doesn't belong to him. I paid him five pounds for her.

Related Characters: Henry Higgins (speaker), Alfred Doolittle, Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing of Doolittle's newfound wealth, Mrs. Higgins suggests that he can now support Eliza. In this quote, Higgins replies that this is nonsense, since he technically "bought" Eliza for five pounds at the beginning of the experiment.

Despite Eliza's protests, and Mrs. Higgins' reprimands, Higgins still believes that Eliza, as an entity, is entirely indebted to his expertise and generosity. He has never worried about what will happen to her because he simply

expected her to continue existing alongside him: he never states that he is fond of her, but merely that he has "grown accustomed" to her presence in his life. Like his different phonetics equipments and academic books, Higgins hopes to "collect" Eliza and keep her alongside him, as evidence of his success and brilliance. He continues to fail to comprehend that she is a separate human being with her own wants and desires, and flippantly expects her to truly remain on Wimpole Street because he gave her food and clothing, and paid her father five pounds. Higgins, as Shaw comments, is "incorrigible" and stubbornly believes that what he thinks is pure truth, and will never accept that he is less than the smartest person in the room, despite loud cries towards the contrary.

> She had become attached to you both. She worked very hard for you, Henry! I don't think you quite realize what anything in the nature of brain work means to a girl like that. Well, it seems that when the great day of trial came, and she did this wonderful thing for you without making a single mistake, you two sat there and never said a word to her, but talked together of how glad you were that it was all over and how you had been bored with the whole thing. And then you were surprised because she threw your slippers at you!

Related Characters: Mrs. Higgins (speaker), Henry Higgins, Colonel Pickering, Eliza Doolittle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

After storming out of Higgins' house, Eliza goes to Mrs. Higgins to spend the night and relate her woes from Wimpole Street. In this quote, Mrs. Higgins explains to her son all the ways he has failed his protégé.

Higgins' views of wealth and class meant that he felt that his work on Eliza was very generous, and that it was *he* who succeeded at the garden party, not her--similar to the way he would have been proud of himself for publishing an academic paper, not for the paper due to its personal achievements. Eliza, however, is a human being, and feels that her own achievements have been completely ignored. Everyone besides Pickering, it appears, sees very clearly how poorly Higgins has treated Eliza, including his own mother. Higgins' disdain for young women meant that though he worked with Eliza, he never truly got to know her, since he didn't feel like she was worth it. Yet when she became angry at him, he felt very hurt, since he had assumed she felt fondly for him and grateful for his "service." Higgins can *almost,* but not quite, be forgiven for his behavior, since he is completely ignorant of how his actions and words affect others. However, his refusal to believe other people when they tell him he has misbehaved qualifies Shaw's statement that the character he has created is utterly "incorrigible."

> But do you know what began my real education?
> What?

Your calling me Miss Doolittle that day when I first came to Wimpole Street. That was the beginning of self-respect for me.

Related Characters: Eliza Doolittle, Colonel Pickering (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Amidst the fight in Mrs. Higgins' house, Eliza turns to Pickering and expresses her affection towards him. Compared to Higgins, he was highly respectful towards her throughout the experiment (if exceedingly immature in intentions), and in this quote, she notes that her "real education" towards becoming a lady began when he called her Miss Doolittle, rather than Eliza or a flower-girl.

Here, Eliza reveals that it is not phonetics or etiquette lessons that ultimately led to her transformation, but rather the respect that acting in socially acceptable ways earned her. Though Higgins did not believe that he could do anything more than *pass* her off as a duchess, the respect that Eliza felt from society went deeper than appearances, and allowed her to finally realize that she could have higher goals beyond selling flowers. In this aspect, Higgins' experiment both help and hurt: it gave her the means to dream higher than she ever had before, and to experience self-respect and self-standards, though Higgins' crass attitude towards her emotions and intelligence severely dampened her self-esteem and spirits. Thus, it appears to have been Pickering whose kindness pushed Eliza through the experiment, and inspired her to take a stand against Higgins when he acted so rudely upon its completion.

Liza: Freddy loves me: that makes him king enough for me. I don't want him to work: he wasn't brought up to it as I was. I'll go and be a teacher.
Higgins: What'll you teach, in heaven's name?
Liza: What you taught me. I'll teach phonetics.

Related Characters: Eliza Doolittle, Henry Higgins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Eliza and Higgins continue to bicker about their mutual woes regarding their time together, and Eliza argues that she's not so dependent on Higgins as to be stuck with him, and reveals her plan to marry Freddy and teach to support him.Higgins scoffs at the notion, mocking both the idea that Eliza would work at all and the idea that she might have any knowledge that she could teach to others.

Eliza has at least learned one good thing beyond proper phonetics: she has learned that she deserves better than what she has received from Higgins. To try and make her own way in the world, she decides, is worth the struggle, rather than remaining in the lap of luxury and guarded by a pretentious man who does not respect her intelligence and emotions. Ultimately, Eliza is successful in the experiment beyond Higgins' imagination – she has both presented herself as, and become, a superior moral being than when she first arrived at Wimpole Street. Yet Higgins' own intellectual, moral, and emotional shortcomings (and his own failure to develop them even as Eliza has developed hers) failed to foresee that this transformation would come along with greater goals and expectations for Eliza and the people around her. Thus, Eliza leaves both Higgins and her old life behind her, in the hopes of finding someone who loves and respects her for who she is, inside and out, and to teach others phonetics, though with far more kindness than she received from her own instructor.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

Late one rainy night in Covent Garden, London, a variety of pedestrians seek shelter under the portico of a church, including a wealthy woman and her daughter, Clara. The mother and daughter are waiting impatiently for Freddy, Clara's brother, to get a taxi. A bystander informs them that there probably won't be any taxis available. Freddy suddenly rushes under the portico and tells the two women that he can't find a single cab.

The rain forces people from a variety of different social classes, who normally don't interact with each other, to come together under the portico. Freddy is fulfilling the role of the chivalrous gentleman, going out into the rain to find a taxi for his sister and mother.

Freddy says he has looked all over for a taxi, but the mother and daughter are insensitive to his efforts and tell him to go look again and not come back until he has found a cab. Freddy protests but then finally goes. As he leaves, he bumps into a flower girl, who calls him Freddy. The mother asks the lower-class flower girl how she knows her son's name.

Here the gender roles are pushed to comedic effect, where Freddy is forced by his mother and sister to be chivalrous even though doing so is pointless: there are no cabs. Freddy's mother is surprised and confused when the lower-class flower girl apparently knows who her (upper-class) son is.

The flower-girl says that she'll tell the mother in exchange for some money. The mother agrees and gives her six-pence. The flower-girl says that she just called the man Freddy because that is how she would refer to any random person she doesn't know. Clara is exasperated at the waste of money. An elderly gentleman comes under the portico for shelter.

The mother's misunderstanding arises from her lack of knowledge of the flower girl's lower-class slang. The gentleman's social standing is instantly identifiable by his dress and appearance.

The flower-girl asks the gentleman to buy a flower, but he says he doesn't have any change. He rummages in his pockets and finally finds some small coins, which he gives to her. A bystander tells the girl to be sure to give the gentleman a flower for the money, because there's someone standing at the back of the portico watching and taking notes.

The interaction between the gentleman and the flower girl makes their positions in the social hierarchy very clear, as she must beg for whatever change he can spare.

The flower-girl worries that she is in trouble but the man taking notes steps forward and asks what the matter is. A bystander tells him the flower-girl thought he was a "copper's nark," (a police informant). The man doesn't understand the slang. He reads his notes, which copy down exactly what the girl said previously in her lower-class dialect.

The bystander misinterprets the note-taking man's appearance, thinking that he is a policeman. Again lack of knowledge about another social group's slang causes confusion. The man is interested in the bystander's and the flower girl's accents and slang.

Some of the bystanders think the man is a policeman and tell him not to worry about the flower-girl. One bystander says the man isn't a cop, but rather a "blooming busybody," and the man asks him how his people at Selsey are. The bystander is shocked that the man knows where he's from. The man then guesses correctly where the flower-girl is from. Still thinking she is in trouble, the flower-girl insists that she is "a good girl."

The bystanders continue to think (wrongly) that the man is a policeman, based on his appearance and behavior. The man is able to guess where everyone is from by their speech, though these guesses smack of a certain condescension, as if by knowing where they are from he thinks he knows who they are. The flower girl insists on what she is: a good girl.

The note-taking man continues to guess where everyone is from, to all the bystanders' surprise. The rain begins to stop and Clara and her mother wonder where Freddy is. The man guesses where both of them are from. He then offers to whistle for a taxi. Clara tells him not to speak to her. As people notice that the rain has stopped, the crowd under the portico disperses.

The man is able to deduce a surprising amount of information about various bystanders based only on their manner of speaking. Clara does not want to speak to him perhaps because she is not sure of his social class (and finds him a bit rude).

The gentleman asks the note-taker how he knows where everyone is from, and he answers that he studies phonetics. The flower-girl tells the man to mind his own business, and the man gets angry with her, telling her that someone who speaks with "such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live."

The man is an educated academic, who studies phonetics. While he studies all sorts of accents and dialects, he shows a shockingly extreme prejudice against the flower girl's lower-class speech.

The note-taking man then says to the gentleman that the flower-girl's accent and dialect will keep her in the lower class, but that he could teach her to speak so well in three months that she would pass for a noble lady. He explains that this is his main job, teaching people to speak well.

Note that the man insists not that he could make the girl into a noble lady, but that he could teach her to pass as a noble lady. He both insists on the power of speech to affect how one is perceived, but at the same time thinks that the flower girl would always still be a flower girl besides this change in other people's perceptions of her.

The gentleman says that he himself is "a student of Indian dialects." He introduces himself as Colonel Pickering, and the note-taker introduces himself as Henry Higgins. The two are already familiar with each other's work in linguistics.

Pickering and Higgins' friendship is built upon their mutual admiration and respect for each other's academic work. Higgins never shows the same respect for Eliza because she is a woman.

Higgins and Pickering leave to get dinner together. Higgins reluctantly gives the flower-girl some money. Freddy finally returns with a cab, only to find that his mother and sister have left him to walk to a bus. The flower-girl takes the cab he has brought, leaving Freddy alone.

In a minor, humorous reversal of expectations, it is the lowly flower girl, not the well-off Freddy, who ends up taking the taxi. All of Freddy's chivalrous searching for the cab, meanwhile, gets him nothing but abandoned.

ACT 2

The next morning, Higgins and Pickering are at Higgins' "laboratory," a huge room filled with various tools and devices for Higgins' work, including tuning forks, recording devices, and diagrams of the human vocal system. Higgins finishes showing Pickering all of his things, and Pickering marvels at Higgins' ability to hear 130 distinct vowel sounds.

Pickering is impressed with Higgins' laboratory and his dedication to his study of speech. Both characters are highly educated, though Higgins is even more accomplished than Pickering in the realm of phonetics.

Higgins' housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, comes in and announces that a young woman is here to see Higgins. She says it is a common girl with a "dreadful" accent. Higgins tells Pickering that he will note down what the girl says and exactly what her accent is. The girl enters and Higgins recognizes her as the flower-girl from the previous night.

Mrs. Pearce identifies the flower girl as a commoner from her accent and appearance, and describes such characteristics as "dreadful". The wealthy see the ways in which the poor differ from them as being bad or shameful. Higgins is interested in her only as a subject of his academic study, not in any way as a person.

Higgins is frustrated because he has already recorded her accent, and tells her to leave. But the flower-girl says that she has come for another reason. She offers to pay for speaking lessons. Higgins is shocked and insults her. The flower-girl cries, saying she wants to learn how to "talk more genteel," so she can get a job in a nice flower shop.

The flower girl hopes that by learning to speak differently, she can change her life and identity, finding a better job and moving up the social ladder.

The flower-girl says her name is Eliza Doolittle, and offers to pay a shilling for lessons. Higgins reflects aloud that this sum of money is a sizable percentage of what she makes, comparable to a wealthy person paying many pounds. Eliza is confused and begins to cry. Higgins offers her a handkerchief and tells her not to wipe her eyes with her sleeve.

Eliza is confused and worried by Higgins' reasoning about her proposed fee, which she doesn't understand. Higgins tells her not to wipe her eyes with her sleeve, because this would be neither ladylike nor in accordance with good manners.

Amused by Eliza, Pickering offers to pay for her lessons and bets Higgins that he can't teach Eliza to speak so well that she passes as a noble at an ambassador's garden party coming up. Higgins says the offer is irresistible and calls Eliza "so deliciously low—so horribly dirty." He says he will "make a duchess of this draggle-tailed guttersnipe."

Higgins agrees to help Eliza only for his own enjoyment and study, not because he feels any compassion for her. He and Pickering plan to fool the upper class by changing only Eliza's speech and outward appearance. They don't think of whether such exterior changes might involve actually changing who Eliza really is.

Higgins tells Mrs. Pearce to wash Eliza, throw out her dirty clothes, and get new ones. Eliza protests and Mrs. Pearce tells Higgins that he cannot "walk over everybody," Higgins apologizes and says that he wants to help Eliza better her life. Mrs. Pearce tells him he can't "take a girl up like that as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach."

Higgins is so concerned with his own experiment that he doesn't stop to consider Eliza's own thoughts or feelings. His willingness to "walk over" Eliza has to do both with her lower-class status and her gender. Mrs. Pearce, who was willing to describe Eliza's accent as "dreadful" does see her as a person, and insists that as such she has a dignity and worth that Higgins must acknowledge in his treatment of her.

Higgins says that when he is done teaching her, Eliza will have countless men courting her. Eliza thinks Higgins is mad and says she won't accept any new clothes from him. Higgins calls her ungrateful, but Mrs. Pearce tells him that he is wicked. She tells Eliza to return to her parents, but she says that she has no family.

Higgins does not consider Eliza's own willingness or unwillingness to participate in his experiment. He assumes that all she could want is to have men courting her, and he sees her unwillingness to be in debt to him (by accepting clothes) as simple ungratefulness. Again, he treats her as a lesser being, not someone worthy of having pride or integrity.

Higgins says that Eliza is "no use to anybody but me," and tells Mrs. Pearce that she can treat Eliza like a daughter. Pickering asks Higgins if it has ever occurred to him that Eliza has feelings of her own. Higgins responds that she has no feelings "that we need bother about." Eliza says, "I got my feelings same as anyone else."

Since Eliza is an uneducated, lower-class woman, Higgins, unlike Pickering, thinks of her only in terms of whether she can be of use to him. But Eliza shows her dignity and strength of will by asserting that not only does she have feelings but that they are the equal of anyone else's feelings. She asserts a level of commonality and equality between people that Higgins doesn't seem to recognize. It's worth noting that Higgins is far more extreme in his views than the other wealthy characters; even so, in being more extreme he makes explicit what other rich characters in the play seem to implicitly believe.

Eliza is upset and prepares to leave, but Higgins gives her a chocolate and promises her boxes and barrels of them if she stays. He tells Eliza that when she learns to speak better, she will ride taxis all around town. He tries to tempt her with thoughts of a wealthy life, over Mrs. Pearce's protestations. Pickering objects, as well, calling Eliza "Miss Doolittle."

Higgins tries to tempt Eliza with thoughts of a wealthy, comfortable life, acting as if he can "buy" her interest with trifles like chocolate. In objecting to Higgins, Pickering calls Eliza "Miss Doolittle," a convention usually reserved for high-class ladies. It seems almost as if Higgins extreme rudeness in treating Eliza like a non-person—almost like a pet—pushes Pickering (unconsciously) to admit that Eliza is a person and in being so has a nobility by calling her by the address of a lady.

Higgins tells Eliza that she will live with him for six months, learning how to speak like a wealthy lady. He says that she will then be taken to Buckingham Palace and if the king discovers that she is not a noble lady, she will be taken to prison and executed, but if she passes as a lady she will be given money. Mrs. Pearce takes Eliza away to talk it over with her in private.

Higgins continues to order Eliza around, revealing his lack of empathy. He is excited by the prospect of fooling members of the upper class by merely changing Eliza's appearance and speech, while also displaying his own cleverness as a linguist and a teacher.

Eliza protests as she leaves, saying she hasn't asked for any of this. Once she is gone, Pickering asks Higgins if he is "a man of good character where women are concerned." Higgins says that he has only had bad experiences when he has let women become his friends and that "women upset everything."

Higgins is revealed to be somewhat of a misogynist, thinking that women ruin everything. This partially explains his rudeness toward Eliza (his general rudeness toward everyone explains the rest).

Pickering tells Higgins that if he is involved with teaching Eliza, he will feel responsible for her. Higgins assures him that he considers his student "sacred." Mrs. Pearce enters and asks Higgins to be careful of what he says in Eliza's presence. She tells him not to curse. Higgins claims he never swears, but then agrees.

Higgins claims that he cares about Eliza, though he seems only to care about her as a student, as the subject of his own academic study. Yet while he is upper-class, it is his housekeeper who must remind him of proper manners.

Mrs. Pearce asks Higgins to behave with good manners while Eliza is around—for example, not to come to breakfast in his dressing-gown and use it as a napkin. Flustered, Higgins says that he doesn't do such things habitually but agrees to be "particularly careful before the girl."

Mrs. Pearce has to remind the rude Higgins to set a good example for Eliza if she is to learn to act like a well-behaved lady. The play is constantly poking holes in the idea of the upper class and their own self-conception as naturally having good manners because they are upper class.

Mrs. Pearce leaves but returns quickly, saying that a man is at the door claiming to be Eliza's father. Higgins has her bring the man up, eager to learn about his accent. Alfred Doolittle enters and says he wants his daughter back. Higgins immediately identifies where he is from.

Whenever Higgins meets a new person, his first thought is to use the person for his own academic learning. He is easily able to identify where Doolittle is from based on his accent.

Mr. Doolittle says that he hasn't seen his daughter in two months, but learned of her whereabouts from the cab driver who brought her to Higgins' place. Higgins comments on his accent, saying his Welsh origins account for his "mendacity and dishonesty."

Higgins moves from just identifying where Doolittle is from to asserting that Doolittle's origins determine his character. Higgins believes he can change people's appearance by changing their speech, but he also believes that people can't actually change their deeper selves.

Mr. Doolittle has brought some of Eliza's things to the house. Higgins calls Mrs. Pearce and tells her that Mr. Doolittle has come to take Eliza away, even though Mr. Doolittle denies this. Mrs. Pearce says that Eliza can't leave until her new clothes arrive, since she has burned her old clothes.

Higgins rudely disregards what Mr. Doolittle actually says. The destruction of Eliza's old clothes symbolizes the loss of her old identity. As her new clothes are not ready yet, she is caught between identities, not fully transformed yet.

Mrs. Pearce leaves and Mr. Doolittle asks for five pounds in return for letting Eliza stay with Higgins. Pickering and Higgins are shocked at his willingness to sell his own daughter and think giving him money would be immoral. Mr. Doolittle says he is needy and says that "middle class morality" is "just an excuse for never giving me anything."

Higgins and Pickering are shocked by Mr. Doolittle's willingness to sell his daughter, but to Mr. Doolittle such moralizing is a luxury for those who don't have to worry about money. And Higgins has no compunction about trying to "buy" Eliza with promises of chocolate and clothes.

Higgins proposes to take Mr. Doolittle in along with Eliza and teach him to speak nobly, but Mr. Doolittle says that he wants to stay in his station in life, since regardless of one's class "it's a dog's life anyway you look at it." Higgins finally agrees to give Doolittle ten pounds, but Mr. Doolittle declines and asks only for five.

From the beginning Mr. Doolittle criticizes the Victorian social hierarchy, not only for not letting lower-class people move up the hierarchy, but also for the assumption that being upper-class is necessarily better than being lower-class.

On his way out, Mr. Doolittle runs into Eliza, who is clean and dressed in an elegant kimono. He doesn't recognize her and says, "Beg pardon, miss." Everyone is amazed at Eliza's transformation, and she says that it is easy to clean up when one has all the luxury's of a well-furnished bathroom.

Even before Eliza has really transformed, the simple change of her appearance and clothing is enough to make her at first unrecognizable to her own father.

Eliza and her father get into an argument as she says he has only come to get money from Higgins for his drinking habit. Mr. Doolittle prepares to leave. Higgins asks him to come visit Eliza regularly, as part of his fatherly duty. He agrees and leaves, but Eliza tells Higgins not to believe her father. Eliza is eager to go back to her part of the city and show off her new look to her old friends. Higgins tells her not to be snobbish toward her old friends now that she has "risen in the world."

Eliza is excited by her new appearance and wants to show off to her old friends, though Higgins tells her that this kind of snobbishness would be ill-mannered. His claim that she has "risen in the world," suggests that Eliza is undergoing a real transformation, not just putting on a costume, though it is worth noting that having "risen" is a state dependent on how others see you, not any internal changes.

Mrs. Pearce enters and tells Eliza that she has more clothes for her to try on. She leaves eagerly, saying "Ah-ow-oo-ooh!" Higgins and Pickering reflect on the difficult task ahead of them in making Eliza pass for a noble lady.

Moments after Higgins comments on how Eliza has "risen" based purely on her change in appearance, Eliza's decidedly un-classy exclamation indicates her lower-class upbringing, showing how far she has to go to transform into a noble lady.

ACT 3

Higgins barges into his mother's home one afternoon. Mrs. Higgins is surprised to see her son and tells him to leave, as she is expecting friends to come visit. Higgins tells her he has found a woman, and she thinks he means romantically. He corrects her and tells her that he needs her help for "a phonetic job."

Mrs. Higgins hopes that her son has found a romantic partner, but he is so consumed by his studies that he is only interested in women (and indeed people in general) as possible "phonetic job[s]."

Higgins tells his mother about Eliza and says that she is to sit with Mrs. Higgins and her friends today and speak like a lady. Just as Higgins is preparing to leave, two of Mrs. Higgins' friends arrive: Mrs. and Miss Eynsford Hill, who turn out to be the mother and daughter from the first act. Higgins thinks he recognizes Clara, but doesn't remember from where. Colonel Pickering arrives.

This is Eliza's first test, as she must converse with proper, ladylike manners among wealthy friends. Since the Eynsford Hills have seen her before (in Act One), it will be particularly telling to see if they can recognize the same flower girl underneath her new appearance.

Freddy Eynsford Hill enters, and Higgins again thinks he looks familiar but can't remember why. He wonders what everyone will talk about until Eliza arrives, and Clara agrees that she hates small talk. She says she wishes people would say what they really think. Higgins disagrees and says that if he said what he really thought, "it wouldn't be decent."

Clara is somewhat fed up with the manners and customs of high society, such as small talk. Higgins goes even further than her, implying that small talk and manners exist to cover up the indecent things that people really think.

Higgins goes on to say that all people are really "savages, more or less," even though they're supposed to be civilized. Mrs. Higgins tells him to mind his manners, and just then Eliza arrives. Eliza behaves elegantly and politely, as she meets everyone. Mrs. Eynsford Hill thinks Eliza looks familiar.

Again, Higgins thinks that manners cover up peoples' essentially savage nature. Mrs. Higgins criticism of Higgins shows that even saying such a thing is bad manners, but the tension between whether manners are just a way to look like a good person or actually are traits of a good person remains unresolved. So far, Eliza passes as an upper-class lady.

Higgins finally realizes where he knows the Eynsford Hills from. Everyone discusses the weather and Eliza begins to slip back into her lower-class speech habits. She makes the mistake of talking at length about her aunt's death, supposedly from influenza (though she suspects someone "done the old woman in.").

At this point, Eliza's lower-class identity still shows through her upper-class appearance, revealed both through her speech (as in "done the old woman in") and lack of proper manners in talking about death at a party.

To the shock of the other guests, Eliza describes her father's drinking habit. Not only is it an inappropriate topic of conversation, but she also slips back into her lower-class speech habits (including incorrect grammar). Freddy begins to laugh, seemingly fond of her, and Eliza asks if she has said anything she shouldn't have. Mrs. Higgins assures her she hasn't. She begins to speak again, but Higgins interrupts her, signaling that it is time for her to leave.

Eliza does not yet fit in with Mrs. Higgins' upper-class guests, as shown by her lack of manners in speaking of inappropriate subjects and her unpolished language. And so Higgins cuts short this experiment, once again treating her like a subject rather than a person.

After Eliza leaves, Mrs. Eynsford Hill is distressed over Eliza's manner of speaking, which Clara tells her is merely the new fashion. Mrs. Eynsford Hill still doesn't like it, and asks Pickering what he thinks. He says that he's been away in India, so is not up to date with correct manners. Clara says, "It's all a matter of habit. There's no right or wrong in it."

The fact that Mrs. Eynsford Hill can believe that Eliza's way of speaking is the new fashion shows how artificial ideas of proper manners or ways of speaking are. As Clara perceptively says, such things are simply matters of habit, and not inherently right or wrong, proper or improper. Though contrast this with Higgins comments in Act One, when he says that Eliza's way of speaking is so ugly that she doesn't even deserve to live.

The Eynsford Hills prepare to leave, and Higgins encourages Clara to try out the new fashion of speaking (Eliza's). Clara calls the Victorian obsession with manners "bloody nonsense," which shocks her mother. The Eynsford Hills leave, and Freddy says that he would like to meet Eliza again sometime.

Clara is again fed up with the importance of proper manners. Freddy seems to like Eliza regardless of her social class or manners.

As she leaves, Mrs. Eynsford Hill laments to Pickering that Clara is annoyed when she is not up to date with "the latest slang." Higgins asks his mother if Eliza was presentable, and Mrs. Higgins says she isn't. She says there is no hope of Eliza speaking properly if she is learning from Higgins, which mildly offends him.

At this point, Eliza cannot yet pass for a wealthy lady. Mrs. Higgins hints that she won't be able to learn because Higgins himself has bad manners, again complicating whether manners are something that arise from social class or some kind of inner goodness or politeness.

Mrs. Higgins asks about the state of Higgins' home, and learns that Higgins, Pickering, and Eliza are all living together now with Mrs. Pearce. Mrs. Higgins tells the two men that they are playing with a "live doll," but Higgins insists that he is doing a difficult job, transforming Eliza into "a quite different human being."

Mrs. Higgins worries that her son is treating Eliza, a vulnerable young woman, like a plaything for his academic enjoyment. He now insists that his project is to entirely transform Eliza, not just to help her pretend to be someone she's not.

Pickering assures Mrs. Higgins that they take Eliza very seriously, and Higgins calls her "the most absorbing experiment I ever tackled." The two talk about how quickly Eliza is picking up all of the things they are teaching her. Mrs. Higgins calls their attention to the problem of what to do with Eliza after their experiment.

While Higgins and Pickering insist that they are treating Eliza well, Higgins refers to her merely as an "absorbing experiment." Only Mrs. Higgins thinks about Eliza's own feelings or issues when the experiment is finished.

Mrs. Higgins says that Eliza will have all "the manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living," without the money to support such a lifestyle. But Pickering and Higgins aren't worried, and say they'll find her a job. They leave, laughing. Mrs. Higgins is upset, and exclaims, "Oh, men! men!! men!!!"

Mrs. Higgins is smart enough, and compassionate enough, to realize the predicament that Eliza will find herself in post-experiment, caught between social classes. She is exasperated at the arrogance of Higgins and Pickering, who, as men, think that they know better than she does, but only cause problems.

ACT 4

It is midnight at Higgins' house. Eliza, Higgins, and Pickering all enter, tired and dressed formally. Eliza is quiet, as Higgins and Pickering recount their day: a garden party, followed by a dinner party, followed by the opera. Pickering says that Higgins has won his bet, as "Eliza did the trick."

A far cry from her behavior in Act Three, Eliza successfully passed as a noble lady at the garden party, dinner party, and opera, winning Higgins' bet for him. Though its worth noting that in winning the bet for him, Eliza's success in transforming becomes smaller than Higgins' success in transforming her.

Higgins says he knew Eliza would be fine, and tells Pickering that he has long been bored with the experiment, after its early phase. Having to go to high society events with Eliza has been irritating for him. He thanks God the experiment is over. Pickering says that Eliza was acting better than some actual noble people, who assumed that "style comes by nature to people in their position," and so didn't bother learning proper behavior.

Eliza apparently easily fooled people into thinking she was upper-class. Higgins is insensitive to Eliza's feelings, saying that he has been bored with "the experiment"—he doesn't even think of her as a person. Pickering notes that many noble people assume that they innately have proper manners, when in reality they don't because such manners must be learned (as Eliza has learned them).

Preparing for bed, Higgins tells Eliza to turn out the lights. Eliza is becoming increasingly upset. Higgins can't find his slippers and Eliza picks them up and throws them at him. She says, "I've won your bet for you, haven't I? That's enough for you. I don't matter, I suppose." Higgins is angry and says that he won his own bet.

Eliza has finally had enough of being treated like an experiment and stands up to Higgins. Despite his academic intelligence, Higgins lacks the emotional or social intelligence to consider Eliza's own feelings. He doesn't see her hard work in having won the bet, only his own.

Eliza calls Higgins a "selfish brute," and says that now she will be thrown back "in the gutter," where she came from. Higgins refers to her as "the creature," and Eliza lunges at him with her nails. He stops her, calling her a cat, and throws her down into a chair. Eliza says she knows Higgins doesn't care about her at all. Higgins says that no one has ever treated her badly at his house, and says that Eliza must simply be tired after a long day.

Higgins continues to treat Eliza poorly, because she comes from "the gutter." While at times he has no patience for the Victorian social hierarchy, Higgins is still prejudiced against the lower class. As he calls her a creature and a cat, his misogyny is also a factor in his rudeness toward her.

Eliza regains her composure, but is still upset. She wonders what will happen to her now. Higgins tells her she will be alright, and suggests she marries someone. He offers for his mother to find her someone. Eliza thinks of this as prostitution and says she was above this even in her lower-class life.

The only way for Eliza to get out of her predicament, according to Higgins, is to marry someone wealthy. Yet Eliza is resistant to the traditional female roles of Victorian society, seeing this kind of marriage motivated by money as prostitution.

Higgins is annoyed by Eliza's comment, and tells her she doesn't have to marry. He says Pickering can set her up in a florist's shop. He starts to leave to go to bed, and Eliza asks him whether her clothes belong to her or Pickering now. She doesn't want to be accused of stealing anything.

Eliza's question about her clothing symbolizes her uncertainty regarding her identity: is she actually a new person now, or are the clothes merely a temporary costume covering her same lower-class identity?

Higgins is offended at the question, but Eliza says that she has to be mindful of such things, because she is a commoner. She says to Higgins, "There can't be any feelings between the like of you and the like of me." Higgins calls her ungrateful and tells her she has wounded him "to the heart." He leaves angrily and Eliza looks satisfied at having upset him.

Despite her apparent transformation, Eliza now says that she is fundamentally different from Higgins because of their different social classes. The unemotional, academic Higgins finally appears here to have feelings, as well.

ACT 5

Mrs. Higgins is sitting in her drawing room. Her parlor-maid announces that Higgins and Pickering are downstairs, telephoning the police. Mrs. Higgins tells the maid to go upstairs and tell Eliza that Higgins and Pickering are here. Higgins bursts in and tells his mother that Eliza has run away.

Higgins and Pickering are frantically trying to find Eliza, as if she were a lost pet. Mrs. Higgins wisely keeps Eliza upstairs so that she can try to resolve the situation.

Mrs. Higgins tells her son to calm down and says that Eliza has the right to leave his house when she wants. Pickering enters, having spoken with the police. Mrs. Higgins asks what right they have to go to the police as if Eliza were "a lost umbrella."

Mrs. Higgins stands up for Eliza, whom Pickering and Higgins are treating as if she is an object that they own.

The parlor-maid enters and announces that a gentleman named Mr. Doolittle has arrived at the house. Higgins assumes that it is a relative of Eliza's she never told him about, but it actually turns out to be her father. Mr. Doolittle enters, dressed like a gentleman, angry at Higgins.

Because of Mr. Doolittle's new appearance, the maid introduces him as a gentleman and Higgins assumes that it cannot be the same Mr. Doolittle he met earlier.

Mr. Doolittle is not aware that Eliza is missing, though, and so Higgins is confused as to why he is mad at him. Doolittle says that Higgins mentioned him to a wealthy American named Ezra D. Wannafeller, who founded Moral Reform Societies across the world. Higgins had joked that Mr. Doolittle was "the most original moralist," in England, and Mr. Wannafeller left Mr. Doolittle money in his will, on the condition that Mr. Doolittle speak at Wannafeller's Moral Reform World League.

Higgins' joke—making fun of Mr. Doolittle's rejection of Victorian morals as luxuries unaffordable by the poor; which really was a rather unique moral position in Victorian England—unintentionally brought Mr. Doolittle a fortune. Like his daughter Eliza, Mr. Doolittle has now also undergone a transformation, rising in the social hierarchy. The luck involved in Mr. Doolittle's rise implicitly criticizes the common Victorian notion that the wealthy deserve to be wealthy because of some inner worth. More likely it was just luck that lifted up their ancestors, and then they themselves were rich simply because they were rich.


Mr. Doolittle is upset at being turned into a wealthy gentleman. He says that he used to be free, but is now worried, has people asking him for money all the time, and has to see doctors. He says that family members have suddenly turned up to ask him for money, and scoffs at "middle class morality."

Mr. Doolittle exposes all of the problems that come with moving up the social ladder. He thus critiques the assumption that gaining wealth and becoming more upper-class is necessarily desirable.


Mr. Doolittle says that now he has to learn proper English from Higgins, and suspects this was Higgins' plan all along. Mrs. Higgins tells him that he can reject the inheritance, but Mr. Doolittle says that he doesn't have "the nerve" to say no to the money, as he is poor. He says he faces a choice between "the Skilly of the workhouse and the Char Bydis of the middle class."

Mr. Doolittle presents his inability to reject the money as a lack of nerve to reject the comforts provided by money. He also feels as if, now that he has money, that he must appear like he has money, in dress and speech. In his uneducated, lower-class speech, he compares this dilemma to being stuck between Scylla and Charybdis (another expression for being stuck between a rock and a hard place)—stuck between the discomfort of being poor if he rejects the money and all the responsibilities of being wealthy if he keeps it.



Mrs. Higgins says that Mr. Doolittle can take care of Eliza now that he has money. Higgins protests, saying that Eliza belongs to him, since he paid for her. Mrs. Higgins tells her son not to be absurd, and then reveals Eliza is actually upstairs. She tells Pickering and Higgins that she has learned of how horribly they treated Eliza, though both insist they treated her well.

Higgins squabbles over Eliza like a possession or pet, wanting her because he has paid for her, not because he is fond of her as a person. Mrs. Higgins is frustrated by her son thinking that he owns a woman—it is telling that neither Pickering nor Higgins can even understand what she is criticizing them for.

Mrs. Higgins scolds them for having talked about how glad they were that their experiment was over, when Eliza had become attached to them and had worked hard for them. Pickering concedes that he and Higgins were maybe inconsiderate to Eliza. Mrs. Higgins says she will bring Eliza down if Higgins will behave. He sulks, but agrees. Mrs. Higgins has Mr. Doolittle leave the room while she sends for Eliza.

Mrs. Higgins scolds Pickering and Higgins for seeing Eliza merely as an experiment, not as a person. She again has to remind Higgins of his manners, even though he is the one who supposedly taught Eliza how to behave well. Pickering begins to see the truth of it, but the stubborn Higgins refuses.

Eliza enters and is very polite, which is baffling to Higgins. He tells her to "get up and come home." He says she doesn't have an idea or word in her head that he didn't put there himself. He continues to insult Eliza, who ignores him and talks politely to Pickering.

Ironically, Eliza now has better manners than Higgins, despite the fact that he claims to have basically created this present version of him. Either she has really changed, or she is simply very good at pretending to be noble and polite—but is there really any difference? At what point does pretending to be noble and polite become actually being noble and polite? And remember all the noble people who acted less polite than Eliza did at the party. Are they still more noble than she is simply because they have money? The play questions such attitudes, without coming to any definitive answer.

Eliza tells Pickering that she is grateful to him for teaching her proper manners, unlike Higgins, who set a bad example for her. She says that she grew up behaving just like Higgins, with a short temper and foul language. This infuriates Higgins, but Eliza keeps talking to Pickering, telling him that her real education began when he called her Miss Doolittle.

Despite his high-class upbringing, Higgins lacks proper manners, and actually set a bad example for the pupil he was supposedly teaching how to behave properly. Eliza reveals the power of language as she tells Pickering that his calling her Miss Doolittle—his verbal recognition that she could be someone who could be called Miss Doolittle—was what really spurred her realization that she could change and deserved the same respect a wealthy person takes for granted.

Eliza thanks Pickering for always treating her well, concluding that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated." Eliza says that she would like Higgins to call her Miss Doolittle, and Higgins curses.

Eliza's comment asserts that there is no inherent difference between the wealthy and the poor—the only difference is in whether other people grant them the respect they deserve. When formulated this way, a change in appearance (clothes and speech) does not change a person so much as give them access to the respect that should have already been granted to them, and perhaps to realize that they should be granted that respect. She demands this respect from Higgins. His curse is a rebuttal, but one can see this rebuttal not as a statement that Eliza doesn't deserve respect but that no one does given Higgins basic rudeness and misanthropy throughout the play.

Pickering tells Eliza to curse back at Higgins, but she says she cannot now. She says that she has forgotten her old way of speaking, like a child who is brought to a foreign country who forgets its native language when it learns a new one. This greatly upsets Higgins, who says that Eliza will return to her old way of life within weeks. Pickering asks her to forgive Higgins and come back to Higgins' home.

Higgins and Eliza disagree over whether she has really transformed her identity, or whether she has merely changed her speech and appearance and will return to her old ways. Pickering sides with her, but also wants her to forgive Higgins for not believing that she could have changed.

Mr. Doolittle sneaks up behind Eliza and surprises her. She cries out, "A-a-a-a-a-ah-ow-ooh!" just as she used to, and Higgins is delighted that she has relapsed into one of her old speech habits. Mr. Doolittle tells Eliza that he is marrying her stepmother, having been intimidated into it by middle class morality. He asks Eliza to come to the ceremony.

Moments after claiming she is a changed person unable to go back to speaking as she used to, the shock of seeing her father makes Eliza exclaim in the same kind of unladylike way she did before her transformation. This seems to support Higgins position that people don't change. Meanwhile, Mr. Doolittle is annoyed at being forced into a respectable marriage by the social norms and expectations of his new class.

Pickering encourages Eliza to go to the wedding. Eliza reluctantly agrees and leaves to get ready for the event. After Eliza has stepped out, Mr. Doolittle tells Pickering that he is nervous, because he has never been married before. He didn't marry Eliza's mother, because marriage isn't natural, but merely "the middle class way." Mrs. Higgins asks if she can come to the wedding, as well, and then leaves to get a carriage.

Mr. Doolittle continues to criticize Victorian social customs, claiming that he has been basically forced into marriage because of middle class expectations, and yet he finds himself unable to resist those norms. He is changed by them.

Eliza returns and Mr. Doolittle leaves to get to his wedding. Pickering asks Eliza to forgive Higgins and come back to live at Higgins' place, before following after Mr. Doolittle. When Eliza and Higgins are alone, he tells her to come back to him. She replies that he only wants her back so that she will pick up his things and do errands for him. Higgins says that if she comes back, he will not change his manners, as he can't change his nature.

Higgins stubbornly claims that he will not change his rude behavior because he cannot change his nature—even though he has spent most of the play changing Eliza's behavior.

Higgins explains to Eliza that he is rude to everyone, regardless of social class, whereas Pickering is polite to everyone, regardless of class. He tells her that it is important not to have good or bad manners, but to have the same manners toward all people. Eliza believes him, but still says that she can do without him.

Higgins finally offers an explanation for his rude behavior. He takes care to behave the same to everyone, regardless of class. This doesn't seem to be completely accurate though, when one considers how he behaved differently in the beginning of the play toward Eliza and Pickering.

Higgins says that he will miss Eliza if she leaves. He says he has grown fond of her. He tells her to come back to his home "for the sake of good fellowship." He says he never asked her to behave like his servant. Eliza says that he doesn't notice her.

Higgins finally shows some fondness for Eliza, rather than treating her as a lab rat. He claims that she took on the role of servant. But Eliza responds that it was his treatment of her—his lack of notice of her as a person—which pushed her into that position.

Higgins says that if she comes back, he will throw her out if she doesn't do everything he wants, but that she may leave and live with her father if he doesn't do everything she wants him to do. Eliza wishes that she were a simple flower-girl again, under the control of neither Higgins nor her father. She says, "I am a slave now, for all my fine clothes."

Higgins' odd proposal to Eliza indicates his idea of an equal relationship, in which two people do exactly as the other wants—two people in complete control of each other. In response, Eliza wishes she could go back to her simpler life as a flower girl and, like her father, is able to see that entering high society is not necessarily good and, especially for a woman, can be its own form of slavery.

Higgins offers to adopt Eliza, or marry her to Pickering. Eliza says she doesn't want this, as Pickering is too old and Freddy Eysnford Hill has been writing love letters to her anyway. She says that she has "a right to be loved," but Higgins asks whether Freddy can "make anything" of Eliza.

Higgins gives Eliza two options, both of which place her under the control of a man. Whereas she thinks of love when considering who she might marry, Higgins is only interested in what a potential husband can "make" of Eliza. He does not see her as capable of "making" anything of herself.

Eliza says she is not interested in anyone making anything of someone else, whereas that is all Higgins cares about. Higgins asks if Eliza wants him to care about her like Freddy does, but she says all she wants is some kindness from him, insisting to him that she is not "dirt under your feet."

Eliza demands to be treated as who she is, not as someone who needs to be made into anything else at all. Higgins wonders if she wants his love; she responds that she wants his kindness and his respect.

Higgins tells Eliza that if she can't deal with his coldness, she can leave and return to her "life of the gutter." Eliza calls him cruel and a bully. She says that she will marry Freddy. Higgins says that she will marry an ambassador or someone similar and says he doesn't want his "masterpiece thrown away on Freddy."

Higgins again asserts that without him she would go back to being a poor person. When she responds that she won't, that she'll marry Freddy, Higgins again manages to claim ownership of and credit for Eliza by saying Freddy isn't good enough for his "masterpiece."

Eliza responds that if she can't have kindness from Higgins, she'll have independence. She says she could become a teacher of phonetics, advertising that she could help others transform themselves just as she did. Higgins is suddenly impressed with Eliza's strength.

Eliza is fed up with being under the control of men, whether Higgins and Pickering, her father, or a potential husband. In saying she could become a teacher of phonetics she is making a claim for self-control based on her own knowledge, she is claiming what she has been taught as her own, of creating herself. Higgins is finally impressed with her cleverness and willingness to stand up to him and demand independence.

Just then, Mrs. Higgins returns and tells Eliza a carriage is ready to take them to her father's wedding. Mrs. Higgins says that Higgins is not coming to the wedding, because he can't behave himself in church. As Eliza leaves, he asks her to pick him up some groceries and clothes. She tells him to buy them himself. Eliza and Mrs. Higgins leave, and Higgins is confident that Eliza will buy the things for him, as he ordered.

Again, it is Eliza who has better manners than Higgins. But the truth is she has had better manners—in the sense of treating others with kindness and respect—than Higgins even before he began to train her. The play leaves Eliza's final status very ambiguous: has she finally broken free and become an independent woman or will she go back to Higgins? Has she truly transformed, will she relapse into her lower-class customs, or will she remain Higgins possession? The play questions the meaning and possibility of transformation without ever resolving the tensions it brings to the fore, just as it does not resolve Eliza's own situation.

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