

# PYGMALION

## ANALYSIS

**CHARACTERS**

# Eliza Doolittle

*Pygmalion* is about the poor flower girl from the slums, the guttersnipe, the “squashed cabbage leaf” who turns into a fine lady.

At the beginning of the play, Eliza appears as a vulgar, low class girl, totally devoid of manners and who speaks a horrible form of English.

Eliza is a victim of society and family conditions; her father is not there for her during her lifetime and only shows up when he finds an opportunity to win some money, paying her to Higgins.

Higgins says that she "has no right to be anywhere - no right to live," and that she is "a disgrace to humanity." But Eliza is not totally without good qualities at that point; she prides herself on being "a good girl," who does not steal or sell herself in spite of her poverty. She is also ambitious and wants to improve herself. Her dream is to find a job in a flower shop. Understanding that education is the key, she goes to Higgins to teach her. She is very serious and ready to suffer Higgins' arrogance and harsh treatment in order to achieve her goal. But she remains sensitive to ill-treatment; she does have feelings, although Higgins does not understand this about her, which results in her final rebellion against him, when she throws the slippers in his face. Eliza is also very smart and fast-learner; Higgins' teaching abilities would not have worked that miraculous transformation if not for her readiness and intelligence.

Eliza changes gradually throughout the play, which makes her the main source of interest in the work. Her language changes because of Professor Higgins teaching of her, and her manners change, mainly through Colonel Pickering's treatment of her. Eliza says that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated." She adds that "I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will." The true difference between the upper and the lower class lies in the way in which they are treated by others, Eliza understands. She becomes a lady. More importantly, Eliza becomes stronger and more independent and self-assertive by the end of the play. She is no longer the submissive girl at the beginning. She defies Higgins and tells him that he has no right to treat her as a mere object.

But Eliza's change is never complete. Even when she says that she cannot return to her old accent even if she tries, we see that she does switch to it from time to time. But neither her older personality nor her new one is her real self. She has become a multi-layered character, the result of a rich experience. In other words, she becomes a complex and multi-dimensional person.

During the experiment, Eliza becomes devoted to her master, who remains emotionally aloof and free of any real feelings towards her. Her reaction is that she rejects him; she declares that she can live without him. She will be a teacher herself. Higgins and Eliza are worlds apart: While Higgins lives for himself and his intellectual interests, Eliza wants to have an ordinary home with someone who respects and loves her. She believes that Freddy can be that man. Although he is considered a trivial person, by Higgins' standards, he can give her what she wants: love and respect.

# Professor Higgins

Professor Higgins is a brilliant, educated and talented intellectual. He has great achievements in his field of study, phonetics.

However, Higgins is completely socially incompetent; his manners are so bad. He is rude to everybody, especially Eliza. He is insensitive to the feelings of others in general. He is like a bully. To accomplish his aims, he will trample on anyone's feelings.

Higgins is a confirmed bachelor. He is a woman-hater, who treats women like trash. He treats Eliza as an inhuman object, without feelings.

He is proud of his work; he calls Eliza garbage, baggage, guttersnipe and a “squashed cabbage leaf.” He refers to her as “his masterpiece.” He doesn’t acknowledge Eliza’s role in his success and fails to congratulate her for her performance during the party, which makes her very upset.

# THEMES



# Themes

## Language

One of the important themes in the play is that of language. Language is shown to be a major class marker, dividing people into the poor and the rich, flower girls and ladies. As such, language is both a means of communication and of lack of communication: dividing people, rather than getting them closer to each other.

Higgins experiment proves language to be a means of social mobility, helping Eliza bridge the gap between classes.

## Class

The social hierarchy is an unavoidable reality in Britain. Shaw includes members of all social classes from the lowest (Liza) to the servant class (Mrs. Pearce) to the middle class (Doolittle after his inheritance) to the genteel poor (the Eynsford Hills) to the upper class (Pickering and the Higginses). The general sense is that class structures are rigid and should not be tampered with, so the example of Liza's class mobility is most shocking. The issue of language is tied up in class quite closely; the fact that Higgins is able to identify where people were born by their accents is telling. British class and identity are very much tied up in their land and their birthplace, so it becomes hard to be socially mobile if your accent marks you as coming from a certain location. (<http://www.gradesaver.com/>)

# **SOURCES & AFFINITIES**

# The myth of Pygmalion

Shaw draws upon the Greek myth of Pygmalion, recounted by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*.

- The myth
- Shaw's version, similarities and differences.

## The Myth

## The Play

Pygmalion is a sculptor

Higgins is a scholar (professor of phonetics)

Pygmalion shuns women

Higgins is a confirmed bachelor

Pygmalion makes a statue of a beautiful woman

Higgins trains Eliza to talk

Pygmalion falls in love with his creation

Higgins admires his creation, considering it his masterpiece

The statue comes to life

Eliza becomes a real lady. She becomes independent of her teacher.

# Pygmalion and Cinderella

- The ball becomes the ambassador's reception.
- The coach is replaced by the taxi.
- The marriage at the end: Doolittle's marriage.
- The role of the godmother is replaced by that of Higgins
- Mrs Pearce, in place of the godmother, dresses and prepares Eliza.
- As Cinderella runs away and is found by the prince, Eliza runs away and is found by Higgins.