

Bernard Shaw: Pygmalion

SUMMARY

Act I

A heavy late-night summer thunderstorm opens the play. Caught in the unexpected downpour, passersby from distinct strata of the London streets are forced to seek shelter together under the portico of St Paul's church in Covent Garden. The hapless Son is forced by his demanding sister and mother to go out into the rain to find a taxi even though there is none to be found. In his hurry, he knocks over the basket of a common Flower Girl, who says to him, "Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah." After Freddy leaves, the mother gives the Flower Girl money to ask how she knew her son's name, only to learn that "Freddy" is a common by-word the Flower Girl would have used to address anyone.

An elderly military Gentleman enters from the rain, and the Flower Girl tries to sell him a flower. He gives her some change, but a bystander tells her to be careful, for it looks like there is a police informer taking copious notes on her activities. This leads to hysterical protestations on her part, that she is only a poor girl who has done no wrong. The refugees from the rain crowd around her and the Note Taker, with considerable hostility towards the latter, whom they believe to be an undercover cop. However, each time someone speaks up, this mysterious man has the amusing ability to determine where the person came from, simply by listening to that person's speech, which turns him into something of a sideshow.

The rain clears, leaving few other people than the Flower Girl, the Note Taker, and the Gentleman. In response to a question from the Gentleman, the Note Taker answers that his talent comes from "simply phonetics...the science of speech." He goes on to brag that he can use phonetics to make a duchess out of the Flower Girl. Through further questioning, the Note Taker and the Gentleman reveal that they are Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering respectively, both scholars of dialects who have been wanting to visit with each other. They decide to go for a supper, but not until Higgins has been convinced by the Flower Girl to give her some change. He generously throws her a half-crown, some florins, and a half-sovereign. This allows the delighted girl to take a taxi home, the same taxi that Freddy has brought back, only to find that his impatient mother and sister have left without him.

Act II

The next day, Higgins and Pickering are just resting from a full morning of discussion when Eliza Doolittle shows up at the door, to the tremendous doubt of the discerning housekeeper Mrs. Pearce, and the surprise of the two gentlemen. Prompted by his careless brag about making her into a duchess the night before, she has come to take lessons from Higgins, so that she may sound genteel enough to work in a flower shop rather than sell at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. As the conversation progresses, Higgins alternates between making fun of the poor girl and threatening her with a broomstick beating, which only causes her to howl and holler, upsetting Higgins' civilized company to a considerable degree. Pickering is much kinder and considerate of her feelings, even going so far as to call her "Miss Doolittle" and to offer her a seat. Pickering is piqued by the prospect of helping Eliza, and bets Higgins that if Higgins is able to pass Eliza off as a duchess at the Ambassador's garden party, then he, Pickering, will cover the expenses of the experiment.

This act is made up mostly of a long and animated three-(sometimes four-)way argument over the character and the potential of the indignant Eliza. At one point, incensed by Higgins' heartless insults, she threatens to leave, but the clever professor lures her back by stuffing her mouth with a chocolate, half of which he eats too to prove to her that it is not poisoned. It is agreed upon that Eliza will live with Higgins for six months, and be schooled in the speech and manners of a lady of high class. Things get started when Mrs. Pearce takes her upstairs for a bath.

While Mrs. Pearce and Eliza are away, Pickering wants to be sure that Higgins' intentions towards the girl are honourable, to which Higgins replies that, to him, women "might as well be blocks of wood." Mrs. Pearce enters to warn Higgins that he should be more careful with his swearing and his forgetful table manners now that they have an impressionable young lady with them, revealing that Higgins's own gentlemanly ways are somewhat precarious. At this point, Alfred Doolittle, who has learned from a neighbour of Eliza's that she has come to the professor's place, comes a-knocking under the pretence of saving his daughter's honour. When Higgins readily agrees that he should take his daughter away with him, Doolittle reveals that he is really there to ask for five pounds, proudly claiming that he will spend that money on immediate gratification and put none of it to useless savings. Amused by his blustering rhetoric, Higgins gives him the money.

Eliza enters, clean and pretty in a blue kimono, and everyone is amazed by the difference. Even her father has failed to recognize her. Eliza is taken with her transformation and wants to go back to her old neighbourhood and show off, but she is warned against snobbery by Higgins. The act ends with the two of them agreeing that they have taken on a difficult task.

Act III

It is Mrs. Higgins' at-home day, and she is greatly displeased when Henry Higgins shows up suddenly, for she knows from experience that he is too eccentric to be presentable in front of the sort of respectable company she is expecting. He explains to her that he wants to bring the experiment subject on whom he has been working for some months to her at-home, and explains the bet that he has made with Pickering. Mrs. Higgins is not pleased about this unsolicited visit from a common flower girl, but she has no time to oppose before Mrs. and Miss Eynsford Hill (the mother and daughter from the first scene) are shown into the parlour by the parlour-maid. Colonel Pickering enters soon after, followed by Freddy Eynsford Hill, the hapless son from Covent Garden.

Higgins is about to really offend the company with a theory that they are all savages who know nothing about being civilized when Eliza is announced. She makes quite an impact on everyone with her studied grace and pedantic speech. Everything promises to go well until Mrs. Eynsford Hill brings up the subject of influenza, which causes Eliza to launch into the topic of her aunt, who supposedly died of influenza. In her excitement, her old accent, along with shocking facts such as her father's alcoholism, slip out. Freddy thinks that she is merely affecting "the new small talk," and is dazzled by how well she does it. He is obviously infatuated with her. When Eliza gets up to leave, he offers to walk her but she exclaims, "Walk! Not bloody likely. I am going in a taxi." The Mrs. Eynsford Hill leave immediately after. Clara, Miss Eynsford Hill, is taken with Eliza, and tries to imitate her speech.

After the guests leave, Mrs. Higgins chides Higgins. She says there is no way Eliza will become presentable as long as she lives with the constantly-swearing Higgins. She demands to know the precise conditions under which Eliza is living with the two old bachelors. She is prompted to say, "You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll," which is only the first of a series of such criticisms she makes of Higgins and Pickering. They assail

her simultaneously with accounts of Eliza's improvement until she must quiet them. She tries to explain to them that there will be a problem of what to do with Eliza once everything is over, but the two men pay no heed. They take their leave, and Mrs. Higgins is left exasperated by the "infinite stupidity" of "men! men!! men!!!"

Act IV

The trio return to Higgins' Wimpole Street laboratory, exhausted from the night's happenings. They talk about the evening and their great success, though Higgins seems rather bored, more concerned with his inability to find slippers. While he talks absentmindedly with Pickering, Eliza slips out, returns with his slippers, and lays them on the floor before him without a word. When he notices them, he thinks that they appeared out of nowhere. Higgins and Pickering begin to speak as if Eliza is not there with them, saying how happy they are that the entire experiment is over, agreeing that it had become rather boring in the last few months. The two of them then leave the room to go to bed. Eliza is clearly hurt ("Eliza's beauty turns murderous," say the stage directions), but Higgins and Pickering are oblivious to her. Higgins pops back in, once again mystified over what he has done with his slippers, and Eliza promptly flings them in his face. Eliza is mad enough to kill him; she thinks that she is no more important to him than his slippers. At Higgins' retort that she is presumptuous and ungrateful, she answers that no one has treated her badly, but that she is still left confused about what is to happen to her now that the bet has been won. Higgins says that she can always get married or open that flower shop (both of which she eventually does), but she replies by saying that she wishes she had been left where she was before. She goes on to ask whether her clothes belong to her, meaning what can she take away with her without being accused of thievery. Higgins is genuinely hurt, something that does not happen to him often. She returns him a ring he bought for her, but he throws it into the fireplace. After he leaves, she finds it again, but then leaves it on the dessert stand and departs.

Act V

Higgins and Pickering show up the next day at Mrs. Higgins' home in a state of distraction because Eliza has run away. They are interrupted by Alfred Doolittle, who enters resplendently dressed, as if he were the bridegroom of a very fashionable wedding. He has come to take issue with Henry Higgins for destroying his happiness. It turns out that Higgins wrote a letter to a millionaire jokingly recommending Doolittle as a most original moralist, so that in his will the millionaire left Doolittle a share in his trust, amounting to three thousand pounds a year, provided that he lectures for the Wannafeller Moral Reform World League. Newfound wealth has only brought him more pain than pleasure, as long-lost relatives emerge from the woodwork asking to be fed, not to mention that he is now no longer free to behave in his casual, slovenly, dustman ways. He has been damned by "middle class morality." The talk degenerates into a squabble over who owns Eliza, Higgins or her father (Higgins did give the latter five pounds for her after all). To stop them, Mrs. Higgins sends for Eliza, who has been upstairs all along. But first she tells Doolittle to step out on the balcony so that she will not be shocked by the story of his new fortune.

When she enters, Eliza takes care to behave very civilly. Pickering tells her she must not think of herself as an experiment, and she expresses her gratitude to him. She says that even though Higgins was the one who trained the flower girl to become a duchess, Pickering always treated her like a duchess, even when she was a flower girl. His treatment of her taught her not phonetics, but self-respect. Higgins is speaking incorrigibly harshly to her when her father

reappears, surprising her badly. He tells her that he is all dressed up because he is on his way to get married to his woman. Pickering and Mrs. Higgins are asked to come along. Higgins and Eliza are finally left alone while the rest go off to get ready.

They proceed to quarrel. Higgins claims that while he may treat her badly, he is at least fair in that he has never treated anyone else differently. He tells her she should come back with him just for the fun of it--he will adopt her as a daughter, or she can marry Pickering. She swings around and cries that she won't even marry Higgins if he asks. She mentions that Freddy has been writing her love letters, but Higgins immediately dismisses him as a fool. She says that she will marry Freddy, and that the two will support themselves by taking Higgins' phonetic methods to his chief rival. Higgins is outraged but cannot help wondering at her character--he finds this defiance much more appealing than the submissiveness of the slippers-fetcher. Mrs. Higgins comes in to tell Eliza it is time to leave. As she is about to exit, Higgins tells her offhandedly to fetch him some gloves, ties, ham, and cheese while she is out. She replies ambivalently and departs; we do not know if she will follow his orders. The play ends with Higgins's roaring laughter as he says to his mother, "She's going to marry Freddy. Ha ha! Freddy! Freddy!! Ha ha ha ha ha!!!!!"