

Pygmalion: Act 1

"I'm a respectable girl: so help me, I never spoke to him except to ask him to buy a flower."

On a church portico in London's theatre district, people shelter from the rain. Identified by titles rather than names, it's clear the weather has forced people of different social classes together. Among these people are a gentleman, a note-taker, and a flower-girl, who is jostled by a young man causing her to shout after him in a strong Cockney accent. She piques the note-taker's attention, and some confusion ensues when the crowd believe he is a police informer gathering evidence against her. To calm the crowd, the note-taker demonstrates his linguistic skills. For he is none other than Henry Higgins, linguist, and phonetician. He brags to the gentleman that he can pass someone like the Flower-girl off as a duchess at a high class gathering. Soon after, the weather clears and the crowd disperse.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. Outside which church is Act 1 set?

- (a) St Martin
- (b) St Paul
- (c) St Steven
- (d) St Vedast

2. How old is Freddy?

- (a) Sixteen
- (b) Eighteen
- (c) Twenty
- (d) Forty

3. Why does the flower girl know Freddy's name?

- (a) A lucky guess
- (b) They are old school friends
- (c) They are secretly dating
- (d) 'Freddy' is slang for any young man

4. How much does the gentleman give the flower girl?

- (a) Tuppence
- (b) Three hapence
- (c) A shilling
- (d) A crown

5. Where was the flower girl born?

- (a) Lisson Grove
- (b) Hammersmith
- (c) Buckingham Palace
- (d) Hoxton

6. What is 'phonetics'?

- (a) A type of geography study
- (b) A discipline in physics
- (c) A scientific approach to poetry
- (d) The science of speech

7. What does the note taker NOT call the flower girl?

- (a) A bilious pigeon
- (b) A squashed cabbage leaf
- (c) Almost pernicious woman
- (d) Incarnate insult to the English language

8. Where has the gentleman recently come from?

- (a) China
- (b) India
- (c) Argentina
- (d) Canada

9. Where does the flower girl really live?

- (a) Buckingham Palace
- (b) Wimpole Street
- (c) Park Lane
- (d) Angel Court

10. Which of these is NOT in the flower girl's home?

- (a) A cracked bathtub
- (b) An empty birdcage
- (c) An American alarm clock
- (d) Gas lamp

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Freddy, Clara, and their mother are an upper-class family. How does Shaw portray them? Does anything strike or surprise you about the way they speak and act?
2. Both the note-taker and Eliza are identified by their clothing. Can you find lines describing items of clothing and comment on why Shaw is drawing attention to the clothes people wear?
3. Look at the way various characters speak to (and about) the flower girl. Do these lines reveal any prejudices that the lower classes had to face?
4. What does the note-taker believe about language and class. In what way might the note-taker echo George Bernard Shaw's own beliefs?
5. What does the interaction between Liza and the taxi driver reveal about class? In what way is the taxi a symbol of class distinction?

Historical Context: A Society in Flux

“It’s aw rawt: e’s a gentleman: look at his be-oots.”

In *Pygmalion*, we observe a divided society, separated by language, education, and wealth. George Bernard Shaw wrote his play in 1913, a time when new political ideas and reforms were circulating throughout the world. For example, the push for suffrage (equal voting rights for women) and other equal rights for women was approaching its climax (in the United States, women were given the vote in 1921, in England this right was won in 1928). Shaw was also a prominent Fabian, a branch of socialism that he helped to found in 1884. The Fabian Society still exists in England today and continues to work for socialist principles such as the commitment to non-violent reform, equality for all, and the importance of political education in transforming society. As an articulate non-conformist thinker, Shaw believed in a facet of the human spirit he called the ‘Life Force’ that, if harnessed by individuals and collectively in society, would eventually help improve the world.

Industrialization throughout the nineteenth century had a tremendous impact on the organisation of British society, which was traditionally a class hierarchy; a pyramid of ranks and degrees of status built on historical land ownership. Industrialisation changed all this as it allowed for the growth of the middle class, elevating people who had money (not land). This mobility was unevenly distributed, however. The lower classes, many of whom came from agricultural settings to cities seeking jobs in new factories, were largely at the mercy of employers and inner-city poverty. Slum conditions, disease, low wages, limited workers’ rights were all facts of life for the working class. The poorest of the poor were often forced into workhouses, which differed from prisons only in name; these harsh places were degrading and unpleasant and the fear of ending up in the workhouse was real for the poorest members of society.

The long reign of Queen Victoria had given British society a stability and coherence through a set of values now called ‘Victorianism’. They revolved around high minded ideals such as charity, national service, domesticity (for women and children, at least, who should stay at home and be ‘seen but not heard’). However, her death in 1901 coincided with peak industrialisation to challenge many of these traditional values. The Great War that began in 1914 – the year of *Pygmalion*’s London premiere – constituted the most intense physical and psychological assault on Britain’s sense of national identity and symbolised the most dramatic break with Victorian values. The play suggests the deterioration of many pre-industrial values and depicts a rapidly-changing society in flux so we can better understand the problems that occur in this ‘age of upstarts’.

You can research some of these issues online or by reading the articles on the class blog in the section for Act One:

- The Industrial Revolution
- Women’s rights and suffrage
- The British Class System
- Victorianism
- The Fabian Society

Activity

One of Shaw's intentions at the opening of his play was to depict this 'society in flux'. Characters from different social classes, backgrounds, and walks of life rub shoulders with one another, and even characters from the same class are divided in outlook and opinion. How does the opening scene help Shaw achieve this depiction of a fragmented society? Complete this table with ideas from the play, and short explanations:

Example / Methodology	Explanation / Analysis
<p>The flower girl's dialect:</p> <p><i>"Ow, eez ye-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' de-ooty bawnz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn then ran awy athaht pyin. "</i></p>	<p>Shaw writes the flower girl's voice phonetically. He even uses a back-to-front letter e (called a schwa) to represent a short vowel sound. He runs several words together, such as 'better than' (beturn) and 'by as him' (bawmz). Through this type of non-standard language, Shaw represents the flower girl's lower-class upbringing. However, he no doubt want us to hear the irony that she comments on the poor behaviour of the upper-class – Freddy acts without manners even though he's meant to be a gentleman!</p>

Discussion Point: *Language and Dialect*

“A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live.”



Wendy Hiller plays Liza Doolittle in the 1938 film adaptation of *Pygmalion*

A dialect is a particular version of a language spoken by people in a particular place or social group. Some dialects use nonstandard grammar and widely varying pronunciation. The cosmopolitan nature of the London setting is difficult to miss in Act One. Characters speak in a variety of different ways, revealing a complex and multi-layered society. Shaw is scrupulous in the way he encourages actors playing the main and supporting characters in this scene to speak in a particular way. He wants their words and use of language to reveal something about their identities, social status, attitudes, and political opinions.

How are dialects presented in the play? Is Liza's Cockney dialect presented as something desirable or undesirable? What does Higgins think of her dialect? What do you think Shaw believes? Should dialects be valued as important features of a person's (or community's) culture? Or should people learn how to speak in standard English?

Bernard Shaw on... *Language*

“In the dialogue an e upside down indicates the indefinite vowel, sometimes called obscure or neutral, for which, though it is one of the commonest sounds in English speech, our wretched alphabet has no letter.”

Throughout his life, Shaw tried to change the spelling system of the English language. English is supposed to be a phonetic language, but often the spelling of words does not represent the way they are pronounced. He famously gave the example of the word 'fish' which can be spelled 'ghoti'" GH from the word 'laugh', O from 'women' and TI from the word 'nation.' He spent much of his own money promoting a phonetic alphabet and alternative spelling system to solve these problems. In his will, Shaw left money to a society for the development of a new spelling system containing forty-two letters. At the beginning of *Pygmalion*, he briefly uses this system to write the words of Liza Doolittle and eagle-eyed readers will already have noticed that his script contains few apostrophes, which he finds redundant and unnecessary.

Activity

Read the Preface to *Pygmalion* to further understand Shaw's ideas about language, spelling, and the art of the theatre. Can you summarise Shaw's beliefs about these things in three simple sentences?