

## ***Pygmalion: Act 2***

*"I want to be a lady in a flower shop... But they won't take me unless I can talk more genteel."*

The next morning, Liza goes to Higgins' house on Wimpole Street to solicit his help in learning to speak like a proper lady so she can get a job working in a flower shop. While he initially refuses, Higgins is persuaded by Pickering that this could be an opportunity to show off his own phonetic skills. Pickering even offers to pay all the costs of the 'experiment' if Higgins can successfully pass Liza off as a duchess at an upcoming social engagement. Mrs Pearce, the housekeeper, takes Liza away to be cleaned and properly dressed. Meanwhile, Liza's dissolute and absentee father arrives and demands the return of his daughter. To his surprise, Higgins agrees – forcing him to reveal his real scheme to get money from Higgins. He employs unusual but effective rhetoric to charm Higgins, who pays him his due. Liza returns, bathed and dressed in a kimono. All the men fail to recognise her!

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### **Knowledge Check**

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. Which of these is NOT an item of equipment in Higgins' laboratory?**

- (a) Laryngoscope
- (b) Phonograph
- (c) Magnetic imager
- (d) Lamp chimneys

**2. The works of which famous engraver does Higgins display on the walls?**

- (a) Piranesi
- (b) Durer
- (c) Escher
- (d) Pygmalion

**3. How many vowel sounds can Higgins reproduce?**

- (a) 24
- (b) 57
- (c) 88
- (d) 130

**4. What does Eliza ask of Henry at the start of the scene?**

- (a) To be taught better English
- (b) To be dressed as a duchess
- (c) For help with her IAs
- (d) To be given a job in a flower shop

**5. What does Eliza receive as a gift from Higgins?**

- (a) A new purse
- (b) A hat
- (c) New shoes
- (d) A handkerchief

**6. What is Liza afraid of in the bathroom?**

- (a) Immersing herself in water
- (b) Removing her clothes
- (c) Seeing herself naked in the mirror
- (d) All of the above

**7. What is Liza's father's name?**

- (a) Terrence
- (b) Alan
- (c) Gilbert
- (d) Alfred

**8. How much does he ask for Liza to participate in the experiment?**

- (a) 5 pounds
- (b) 10 pounds
- (c) 15 pounds
- (d) 20 pounds

**9. Where did Eliza often sell her flowers?**

- (a) Drury Lane
- (b) Tottenham Court Road
- (c) Changshu Street
- (d) Oxford Avenue

**10. Which phrase is Liza initially unable to say in her first lesson?**

- (a) Slice of toast
- (b) Glass of juice
- (c) Cup of tea
- (d) Wash the cat

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## Understanding and Interpretation

1. What do the stage directions at the beginning of Act 2 reveal about Higgins' character and how do they contribute to the emerging themes of the play?
2. When Eliza comes in, what is she wearing and what does she ask for? How does her manner of entry, and the way she phrases her request, reveal insight into her character?
3. What are some of Mrs Pearce and Pickering's objections to Higgins' proposal to teach Eliza to speak like a duchess?
4. What does Eliza's father want? How does he justify his claim? Why does Higgins say he cannot help but feel a kind of 'rough justice' in what Doolittle says?
5. The 'bathroom scene' is broadly funny – but what serious ideas does this scene contain?

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## Important Theme: *Women in Society*

*“I want to know on what terms the girl is to be here? Is she to have any wages?”*

Pygmalion is a play full of female characters who give us a chance to explore gender roles at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While this was an era of huge social change, women in England had yet to gain many rights and privileges, such as winning the right to vote (some women over 21 were allowed to vote after 1918; women over the age of 18 had to wait until 1928 to be given this right). In this scene we meet Mrs Pearce, Henry's housekeeper. She plays an important role in Wimpole Street, ensuring the smooth functioning of the household and reminding Higgins of his obligations and manners. Moreover, it is Mrs Pearce – not Henry – who begins Liza's transformation by taking her up to bathe and giving her new clothes and a makeover. Indeed, her work is so thorough that Liza's own father doesn't recognise her when she reappears at the end of the scene! Later in the play, Mrs Higgins plays an important role in sheltering Liza and helping guide her towards the play's resolution. These two characters demonstrate how women are able to exert some control over their lives even in a society as repressive as Victorian England.

However, this must be tempered with a dose of reality. Mrs Pearce holds the role of domestic servant; no matter how esteemed her position in Higgins' household it is still *within* the house. Mrs Higgins too, while something of an iconoclast in her youth, is still obligated to 'do the rounds' of Victorian society, matchmaking for her friends and peers. In the following activity, you should ask to what extent other female characters, such as Clara and Liza, are able to break the conventions of the time in relation to their gender.

### Activity

Look closely at the female characters in the play, no matter how far you have read to this point. What positions do they hold? How are they treated? How do the male characters relate to them? If you have read to the end of the play, consider what options they are left with by Shaw?

Character	Role / observations / analysis
Mrs Pearce	

Liza

Clara

Mrs Higgins

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## Discussion Point: *Middle Class Morality*

*“I want my daughter, that’s what I want.”*



Stanley Holloway as Alfred Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, 1958

Alfred Doolittle is Liza's absentee father, a poor, venal, drink-sodden man who occasionally works as a dustman – though his name (Doolittle) is a more accurate description of what he prefers to do: as little work as possible. He appears at Wimpole Street under the pretext of being a virtuous father rescuing his daughter from disgrace. However, once his hidden motivations are revealed he switches tactic and openly tries to sell Liza to Higgins. His honesty and command of language charms Higgins, and he offers Doolittle some money.

While Doolittle is presented as a comic figure, Shaw uses his character to deliver some of his own beliefs about 'middle class morality.' His satire reveals the hypocrisy of those who hide behind words of Christian virtue to justify their own actions.

Reread Doolittle's monologues in Act Two and explain to each other his moral philosophy regarding the 'deserving and undeserving poor', why he prefers to remain unmarried, his own take on issues such as 'equality', and 'morality'.

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## Bernard Shaw on... *Socialism*

*“The Fabian Society seeks to establish equality as the universal relation between citizens without distinction of sex, colour, occupation, age, heredity or what not...”*

When he wrote *Pygmalion*, Shaw was associated with Fabian Socialism and argued for a collective responsibility in solving social, cultural and political problems. He did not believe in violent overthrow of institutions (such as the royal family) but argued for a gradual and steady change which would eventually result in equality. *Pygmalion* reflects Shaw's socialist beliefs: he uses satire to advocate for social mobility and poke fun at middle-class morality, revealing the hypocrisy in social judgments cast upon the lower classes. Higgins and Doolittle are the characters who most often verbalize Shaw's own beliefs. For example, Higgins claims to treat everybody equally regardless of social status. Likewise, Alfred Doolittle draws attention to the plight of the poorer classes and shows up the rigidity of Victorian social hierarchy. His and his daughter's social mobility reflects Shaw's desire for a society where people can succeed according to their potential, and where people from different backgrounds help each other to advance.

### Activity

Which 5 lines from the play so far do you feel represent Shaw's own beliefs about class, education, equality, and society? Present these lines and compare your choices to other people's.