 Year 12 English Standard

Pygmalion plot summary and commentary from [sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/pygmalion/)

Cornell notes

Act I

Summary

A heavy late-night summer thunderstorm opens the play. Caught in the unexpected downpour, passers-by 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.

Commentary

This act is carefully constructed to portray a representative slice of society, in which characters from vastly different strata of society who would normally keep apart are brought together by untoward weather. It is no coincidence that this happens at the end of a show at the theatre, drawing our attention to the fact that the ensuing plot will be highly theatrical, that its fantastic quality is gleaned from the illusionary magic of theatre. While the transformation of Eliza in the play focuses on speech, each one of her subsequent tests is also something highly theatrical, depending on the visual impact she makes, and how she moves. The highly visual, on top of aural (therefore, altogether theatrical), way in which the flower girl is made into a duchess is emphasised right from this opening act. Under these terms, it should help us to think about the comparison of the artificial makeover of Eliza Doolittle that the phonetics scientist can achieve, to the genuine increase in self-esteem that the considerate gentleman can bestow upon her.

The confusion of the thunderstorm foreshadows the social confusion that will ensue when Higgins decides to play god with the raw material that the unschooled flower girl presents to him. In this act, everyone is introduced in very categorised roles. In this scene, Shaw introduces almost all his major characters, but refers to them by role rather than name in his stage directions: Note-Taker, The Flower Girl, The Daughter, The Gentleman, and so on. Furthermore, his stage directions describing where characters stand with every line, particularly in relation to other characters, come across as more than fastidious in their detail. All this evokes a society whose members have rigid relations to one another. The odd, seemingly irrelevant episode when The Mother gives The Flower Girl money to find out how she knew her son's name shows the Mother's fear that her son might be associating with the wrong sort. The incident also conflates a real name with a common term that can apply to anyone; Freddy is for a moment both term and character. By the end of the act, The Note-Taker, The

Gentleman, and The Flower Girl have become Higgins, Pickering, and Eliza, respectively. This move will continue through the length of the play, where a less visible blooming of real persons out of mere social

positions occurs. If Higgins is one kind of Pygmalion who makes a flower girl a duchess, Shaw is a grander, more total Pygmalion who can and will transform mere titles into human names.

Remembering that Pygmalion is subtitled "A Romance in Five Acts," this act strikes us as a rather odd, unceremonious way of introducing the heroes of a romance. For starters, the heroine is described as being "not at all a romantic figure." The hero calls the heroine a "squashed cabbage leaf," while she can do no better than "Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo" back at him. The impression she makes on him is abstract (as an interesting phonetic subject) while that which he makes on her is monetary (he throws her some change), so that we get no indication at all that

any feelings of affection will eventually develop between these two. Indeed, we must see the play as a deliberate attempt by Shaw to undo the myth of Pygmalion, and, more importantly, the form of the romance itself. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to approach the rest of the play without a preconceived idea of how a romantic play should conclude, and to notice, as Shaw intends that there are more utilitarian than romantic aspects to the characters' relationships with one another.

Act II

Summary

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' civilised 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' 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 recognise 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.

Commentary

Even though Higgins is immediately obvious as the Pygmalion figure in this play, what this act reveals is that there is no way his phonetic magic could do a complete job of changing Eliza on its own. What we see here is that Mrs Pearce and Colonel Pickering are also informal Pygmalions, and with much less braggadocio (the alliteration of Pygmalion, Pearce, and Pickering would support this notion). Only with Mrs Pearce working on the girl's appearance and manners, and with Pickering working, albeit unknowingly, on her self-respect and dignity, will Eliza Doolittle become a whole duchess package, rather than just a rough-mannered common flower girl

who can parrot the speech of a duchess. We learn in this scene, quite significantly, that while Higgins may be a brilliant phonetician, Mrs Pearce finds fault with his constant swearing, forgetful manners, quarrelsome nature, and other unpleasant habits. His own hold on polite respectability is tenuous at best, and it is only his reputation, and his fundamental lack of malice that keeps him from being disliked by others. If Higgins cannot be a Pygmalion on his own, and is such an untidy, mannerless Pygmalion at that, then the obvious question posed to us is if Pygmalion, the transformer of others, can himself be transformed. Implicit in this question is another: whether it could be imperviousness to change, rather than superior knowledge, which differentiates Pygmalion from Galatea.

This act shows Higgins as an incorrigible scientist. He is not only "violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject," but interested in them only as subjects of scientific study. For that reason, when "quite a common girl" is said to be at his door, Higgins thinks it is a lucky happenstance that will allow him to show Pickering the way he works. When he sees it is Eliza, he chases her away, for, having learned all he can about the Lisson Grove accent, he cannot see how she can be of any more use to him. Later, his mind seizes upon her as being "no use to anybody but me." And when Alfred Doolittle is announced, Higgins is not worried about the trouble, but looks forward instead to listening to this new accent. He displays such a dogged determination and exaggerated focus on his work that it is hard to tell if Shaw wants to make fun of this character or put it on a pedestal. In either case, there is no denying that Higgins makes an absolutely inept romantic hero. For him, if women do not inform his science in any way, "they might as well be blocks of wood." Eliza's criticism comes well-deserved – "Oh, you've no feeling heart in you: you don't care for nothing but yourself." Even Mrs Pearce chides him for treating people like objects – "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."

Alfred Doolittle is one of those delightful, quintessential characters that populate all of Shaw's plays. He makes the most iconoclastic, scandalous statements, but all with such wit and humour that we cannot help but find his ideas attractive. In this act, Doolittle performs the extra role of inspiring Higgins to break off in the middle of their conversation to analyse Doolittle's language and comment that "this chap has a certain natural gift of rhetoric." This unnatural break to the flow of talk forces us to pay a similar attention to all the rhetoric of the play.

There is a brief episode in this act in which Eliza threatens to leave because Higgins is being so rude to her, and he calls her an ingrate. She does not leave because he uses chocolates to tempt her back. This is in contrast to

the final act when Higgins again calls her an ingrate. However, in the last act, to his request that she return with him, she does indeed step out the door, leaving Higgins alone in the room.

Act III

Summary

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 civilised 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!!!"

Commentary

In this, Eliza's first debut and debacle, we are shown that just speaking correctly is not enough to pass a flower girl off as a duchess. As Higgins knows, "You see, I've got her pronunciation all right; but you have to consider not only how a girl pronounces, but what she pronounces." Mrs Higgins puts it succinctly with the line, "She's a triumph of your art and of her dressmaker's; but if you suppose for a moment that she doesn't give herself away in every sentence she utters, you must be perfectly cracked about her." In other words, there are aspects to a person that are susceptible to change or improvement, but these cannot override those aspects that are innate to that person, which will surface despite the best grooming. While it may seem that this is the act in which Eliza is exposed for what she is, just about all the other characters are shown up in the process. Pickering and Higgins are an example. After they have been shown to be the undoubted masters of their (phonetic) dominion, lording it over Eliza, here, in Mrs Higgins' feminine environment, they come across more like over-enthusiastic, ineffective little boys than mature men of science. Mrs Higgins repeatedly rebukes Higgins for his lack of manners, his surly behaviour towards her guests, and for his klutzy habit of stumbling into furniture, and is very reluctant to have him in front of company. This act also reveals middle class civility for what it really is--something dull and uninspiring. Mrs Higgins' at-home turns out to be an unexciting conversation determinedly choked full with "how do you do's" and "goodbye's," with barely anything interesting said in between. In fact, the only time something is said with any spirit is when Eliza forgets herself and slips back into her normal manner of speaking. Clara Eynsford Hill, for example, is shown to be a useless wannabe with no character of her own (quite in contrast to the feisty and opinionated Eliza). So unremarkable is the mother-son-daughter threesome of the Eynsford Hills that Higgins cannot recall where he has met them (at Covent Garden, in the first act) until halfway through this act. He can only tell that their voices are familiar, suggesting that all they have to recommend them is their accents, and nothing else. If staged well, this act can expose the clumsiness and vapidity of polite Victorian society, causing us to question if the making of a duchess out of a flower girl is really doing her a favour.

We get another indication in this act that Higgins is incapable of being the romantic hero of the play. We see that when he says to this mother, "My idea of a lovable woman is somebody as like you as possible. I shall

never get into the way of seriously liking young women: some habits lie too deep to be changed." The irony is that even though he has no doubt that he can transform Eliza, he takes it as a given that there are natural traits in himself that cannot be changed.

Act IV

Summary

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.

Commentary

If we consider the conventional structure of a romance or fairy tale, the story has really already reached its climax by this point, because Cinderella has been turned into a princess, and the challenge has been met. Then why does the play carry on for another two acts? This would appear completely counterproductive, only if one thinks that this play is only about changing appearances. The fact that the play carries on indicates that there are more transformations in Eliza to be witnessed: this act shows the birth of an independent spirit in the face of Higgins' bullying superiority. The loosely set-up dichotomy between people and objects (such as whether Higgins treats people like people or objects) is brought to a head when Eliza flings his slippers in his face, and complains that she means no more to him than his slippers – "You don't care. I know you don't care. You wouldn't care if I was dead. I'm nothing to you – not so much as them slippers." Not only does she object to being treated like an object, she goes on to assert herself by saying that she would never sell herself, like Higgins suggests when he tells her she can go get married. This climactic move forces Higgins to reconsider what a woman can be, and, as he confesses in the final act, marks the beginning of his considering Eliza to be an equal rather than a burden.

One thing to consider in this act is why Shaw has chosen not to portray the climax at the ambassador's party where Eliza can prove how well she has been instructed by Higgins (although his movie screenplay does allow for a scene at the embassy). One reason is that most theatrical productions do not have the capacity to stage an opulent, luxurious ball just for a short scene. But another reason is that Shaw's intention is to rob the story of its romance. We are spared the actual training of Eliza as well as her moment of glory (that is, both the science and the magic); instead, all we get is scenes of her pre- and post- the dramatic climax.

Act V

Summary

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 lecture 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 the 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!!!!!".

Commentary

This final act brings together many of the themes that we have examined in the other acts, such as what constitutes the determinants of social standing, the fault of taking people too literally, or for granted, the emptiness of higher English society, and so on. With regard to the first of these themes, Eliza makes the impressively astute observation that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated." The line packs double meaning by stating clearly that what is needed is not just one's affectation of nobility, while her delivery is proof of the statement itself as she has grown enough to make such an intelligent claim. Quite contrary to the dresses, the vowels, the consonants, the jewellery (significantly, only hired) that she learned to put on; probably the greatest thing she has gained from this experience is the self-respect that Pickering endowed her with from the first time he called her "Miss Doolittle." In contrast to the "self-respect" that Eliza has learned is the "respectability" that Doolittle and his woman have gained, a respectability that has "broke all the spirit out of her." While respectability can be learned, and is what Higgins has taught Eliza, self-respect is something far more authentic, and helps rather than hinders the growth of an independent spirit. Alfred Doolittle makes the unmitigated claim that acquiring the wealth to enter this society has "ruined me. Destroyed my happiness. Tied me up and delivered me into the hands of middle class morality." Higgins' haughty proclamation – "You will jolly soon see whether she has an idea that I haven't put into her head or a word that I haven't put into her mouth." – mistakes the external for the internal, and betrays too much unfounded pride, which is the ultimate cause of his misunderstanding with Eliza.

The greatest problem that people have with Pygmalion is its highly ambivalent conclusion, in which the audience is left frustrated if it wants to see the typical consummation of the hero and heroine one expects in a romance – which is what the play advertises itself to be after all. Most people like to believe that Eliza's talk about Freddy and leaving for good is only womanly pride speaking, but that she will ultimately return to Higgins. The first screenplay of the movie, written without Shaw's approval, has Eliza buy Higgins a necktie. In the London premier of the play, Higgins tosses Eliza a bouquet before she departs. A contemporary tour of the play in America had Eliza return to ask, "What size?" Other films of the play either show Higgins pleading with Eliza to stay with him, or Higgins following her to church. Doubtless, everyone wanted to romanticise the play to a degree greater than that which the playwright presented it. All this makes us question why Shaw is so insistent and abrupt in his conclusion.

However, in an epilogue that Shaw wrote after too many directors tried to adapt the conclusion into something more romantic, he writes, "The rest of the story need not be shown in action, and indeed, would hardly need

telling if our imaginations were not so enfeebled by their lazy dependence on the ready-mades and reach-me-downs of the rag shop in which Romance keeps its stock of 'happy endings to misfit all stories." He goes on to deliver a detailed and considered argument for why Higgins would never marry Eliza, and vice versa. For one, Higgins has too much admiration for his mother to find any other woman even halfway comparable, and even "had Mrs Higgins died, there would still have been Milton and the Universal Alphabet." To Shaw's mind, if Eliza marries anyone at all, it must be Freddy – "And that is just what Eliza did." The epilogue goes on to give a dreary account of their married life and faltering career as the owners of a flower and vegetable shop (an ironic treatment of the typical "happily ever after" nonsense) in which Freddy and Eliza must take accounting and penmanship classes to really become useful members of society. One can see this whole play as an intentional deconstruction of the genre of Romance, and of the myth of Pygmalion as well.