

## UNDERGRADUATE B. A. Honours

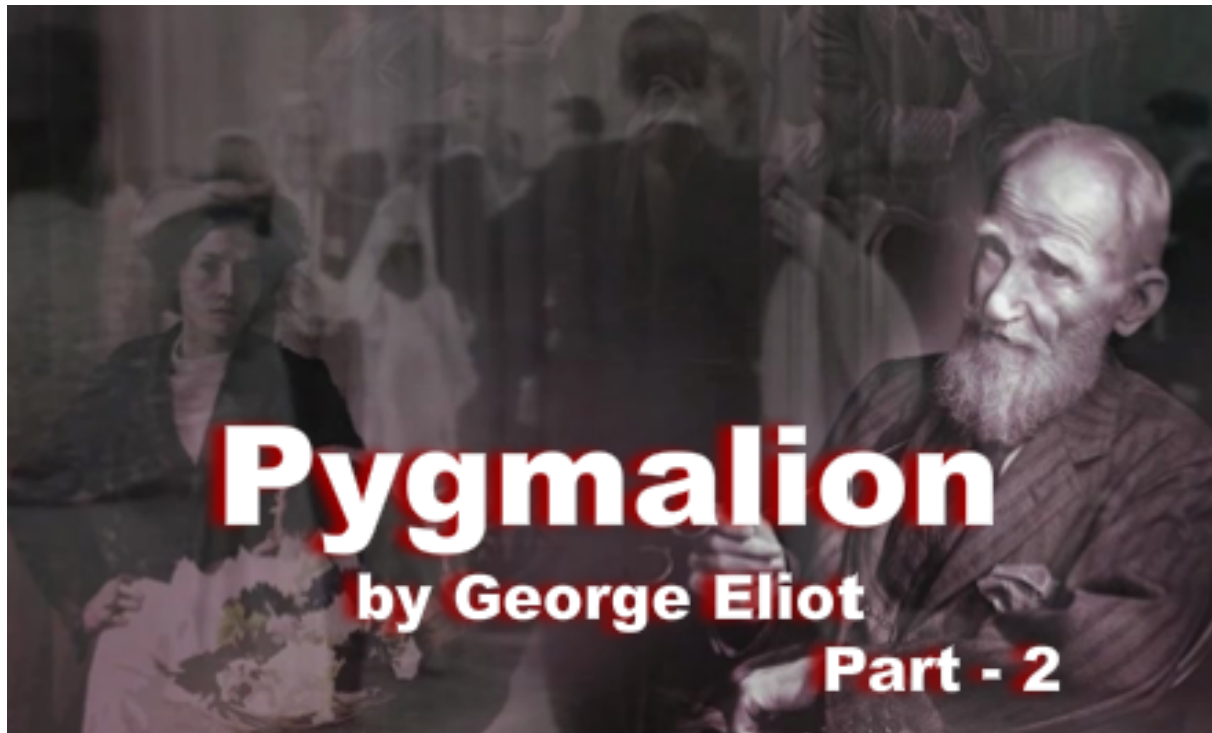
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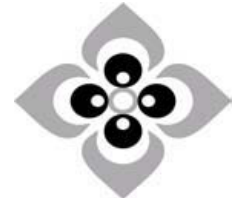
**SUBJECT:** English Language & Prose

**TOPIC:** *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw

**LESSON MAP:** 4. 4. 2. C2

**Duration:** 23: 28





## *Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw Part-2*

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### **Pygmalion as a problem play**

A problem play is a play in which a number of problems are presented by the dramatist. Such a play serves as a great irritant for thought, as the playwright does not provide solutions for these problems. Thus, they are thought-provoking.

Pygmalion is also a problem play. At least three problems are incorporated into the play—the problem of education, (a world problem), the problem of identity crisis, faced by Eliza and Alfred Doolittle, and finally, the phonetic problem. (England's problem)

The most important problem in the play is Eliza's education in phonetics, which Higgins overtakes. Her education creates problems for Eliza, as it has made her into a lady, and she cannot get back to selling flowers. Eliza is thus confronted with the problem of loss of identity.

The problem is like the world problem of education. To educate is to offer a new life to those who receive the education that produces discontent with existing circumstances and creates the desire for a different kind of world.

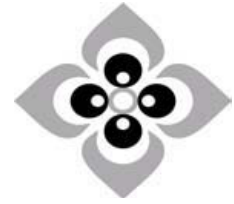
This world-problem is presented through the medium of a lesser theme, which is a national one confined to the English, who, according to Shaw, "have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it." Shaw was disgusted by the harsh and slovenly speech of many people in England that can be resolved by phonetic means, thereby also erasing class distinctions. But class distinctions remain and Eliza is left anchorless by Higgins. Marriage with Higgins would have been a solution, but as this does not happen, her problem remains.

Alfred Doolittle's problem is a problem of middle-class morality. His sudden wealth makes him into a middle-class gentleman, and his carefree life is gone. Due to now belonging to the middle-class, he must marry his mistress, who will, therefore, become more demanding. As he cannot reject his wealth, he tries to adapt to his life and becomes unhappy.

Thus, Pygmalion, like most Shaw' plays is a problem-play, but it is a problem, that is 'as old as the mountains', and thus, the play is enduring.

### **Wit and humor**

Pygmalion is based on a dry subject like phonetics. Yet, it is full of wit and humour. The humour exhibited by the master of paradox, Shaw, is evident in the very title. Unlike the mythical character of Pygmalion, who marries Galathea, his statue that he falls in love with, Higgins has no emotional attachment with Eliza, whom he transforms. Shaw also calls his play a 'romance', something that is



testimony to the irony of Shaw. Pygmalion is no romance, as the lead characters do not marry. It is also a remarkable piece of irony that the person with no morals at all, i.e. Alfred Doolittle, receives a grant for being a moralist.

Alfred Doolittle's misery, after becoming rich, gives rise to a few laughs. He cannot go back to his old life, as that would mean work. But the 'moralist' himself resists efforts to become moral; he bemoans having to marry his sixth mistress; he is nervous about marriage and asks the bachelors Higgins and Pickering for moral support.

Higgins' dedication to his passion of phonetics gives rise to humour. The first scene is one such example where Higgins tells the people of their origins, by analysing the speech and the people, in turn, are scared, as if subject to magic. Higgins' very act of noting down accents in a crowd seems absurd, and therefore, humorous. The scene where he unconsciously swears in reply to Mrs. Pearce asking him not to is also funny. Higgins' frankness is refreshing and funny. His negative reactions to the uncultured Eliza seem to have no restraint; this gives rise to humour.

Pygmalion is a comedy of manners, and therefore Shaw makes fun of the slovenly habits of the English, when Eliza exaggerates about the dangers of taking a bath.

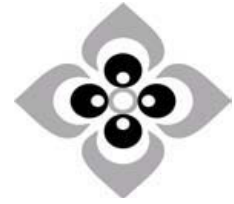
Pygmalion, like most of Shaw's plays, is full of wit and repartee. The characters are engaged in a constant war of wit. The fourth act, where Higgins and Eliza try to outdo each other, is an example of this.

### **Comedy of Manners**

Shaw's play is not just about the manners of people throughout the ages. In the play, he also speaks about and ridicules the manners of the class-conscious people of his time and age. Such a play comes under the genre of 'Comedy of Manners'.

Pygmalion is a typical example of Comedy of Manners as it provides a clear idea of the speech and manner of the upper middle class and the poor class of Britain. Shaw is of the opinion that class superiority is not a hereditary thing. It is a result of the person's wealth, as it enables him/her to go to good schools and learn the correct way of pronouncing words, along with social manners. Poor people, who have no means of learning the same, speak incorrectly, with their own regional accents. With proper training, they too can speak and act like the upper class, as shown in the example of Eliza, who becomes a duchess, from a flower-girl.

Colonel Pickering represents the upper-class behaviour in the play. The upper class is courteous and polite. They are chivalrous. They take off their hats when



they enter a room and do not speak with their hands in their pockets. They do not swear or use unbecoming language. Mrs. Higgins represents the cultural aspects of the upper class. Her drawing room has paintings of Burne Jones and Cecil Lawson. The wall papers are in the Morris style. The room has a Chippendale chair and an Elizabethan chair. All these are upper-class possessions.

The poor people, on the other hand, do not have many clothes and so do not change them while sleeping. Taking a bath is a luxury that they cannot indulge in; this makes them detest a bath.

The Capitalistic system is criticised where an 'undeserving poor' man like Alfred Doolittle becomes the undeserving rich, by a freak of fortune.

Peculiar manners of the time, such as whistling for a cab, are also shown in the play.

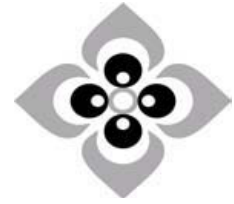
By all these means, Pygmalion is a Comedy of Manners.

### **Anti-romantic play**

Romanticism is that strain of thought, where the story ends in a manner that is ideal. This end would be something expected by the readers/audience, and one that would please them. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte is romantic, as, even with trials and tribulations, the lead couple get together at the end. Similar stories where protagonists are happy after achieving their goals are romantic tales.

But Shaw was an anti-romantic. He did not want to give the readers what they expected. He displayed his supreme powers of irony when he subtitled the play as a 'Romance'. Pygmalion is anything but romantic. One might argue that the transformation of Eliza is romantic. But the transformation does not result in a happier Eliza. If anything, it gives rise to a troubled and disgruntled Eliza. The change, which blots out her future, is not a dream, but a nightmare for Eliza. Her true transformation occurs when she realises that Higgins considers her a machine and that she has to live independently.

The standard romantic procedure would have been to marry Higgins and Eliza off. The romantic playwright would have ended the ego clashes of Higgins and Eliza by making them marry each other. The audience would have lapped this ending up. However, Shaw does not do this. He ends the play by establishing that Higgins still treats Eliza as an accomplishment rather than a living woman. Eliza too refuses to live in the shadow of Higgins' achievements and moves out. The original play ended in this way, with uncertainty about the future of the protagonists. Then, realising that readers had started to imagine the marriage of Higgins and Eliza, Shaw wrote a sequel to make his point. This prose sequel tells the reader that the



fiery and intelligent Eliza marries Freddy Hill, who is portrayed throughout the play as a weak and dull character. The marriage of these two might seem inappropriate, but Shaw tells us that marriage of two different personalities is an ideal one. In this way, *Pygmalion* is a vehicle for Shaw's anti-romanticism.

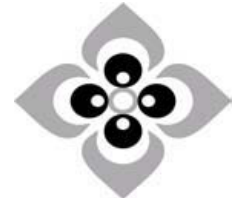
### **Play of socialist propaganda**

Socialism is a theory that believes in the equality of classes. According to this theory, conscious efforts should be made to reduce the gap between the haves and the have-nots. The presence of two socially disparate classes is considered to be a harmful thing by socialists. Heavy taxation on the rich is one of the many measures suggested by socialists to make them equal with the poor.

George Bernard Shaw owns the play to be a didactic one right in the preface of the play. Shaw speaks of socialism in the play. Shaw, who was an advocate of Socialism, thinks of a different solution than that of taxation. He believes that the difference between the rich and the poor is not just economic, but also in terms of language. The rich speak English in a polished and refined manner, in the way it is supposed to be spoken, while the poor speak it in a faulty manner, with their regional accents hindering their speech. This difference is a result of education. People high up in the social ladder can afford to study in schools that train them to write and speak properly. Poor people, on the other hand cannot learn English in a proper educational institution, and so, cannot speak properly. Shaw suggests that by educating the poor, the rich and poor can be rendered alike, by putting forward the example of Eliza Doolittle. Eliza is a poor dustman's daughter whose exclamations consist of an animal-like shout. Prof. Higgins teaches her the right way to pronounce, which also leads to the right etiquette. This makes her a princess, with upper class people such as Freddy Hill enamoured by her. Shaw believed that if the English spelling were reformed and taught in schools all over Britain, many people like Eliza would benefit from this and bridge the gap between rich and poor. The dustman and the poor grocer would all be able to speak like the rich, and the upper class would no longer ridicule the lower class for their lack of proper speaking skills.

### **Relevance in modern context**

The fact that *Pygmalion* is a Comedy of Manners that satirises the England of Shaw's times does not make it any less relevant to present-day society. Only this fact explains why the play about English pronunciation has been translated into and acted in many languages. *Pygmalion* is a problem play, and many of the problems highlighted in the play can be seen in society even to this day. Everywhere in the world, the problem of education, which is highlighted in Shaw's play, continues to exist today. Class divisions, that have not yet been abolished, make it impossible for people of the lower class to get educated in the same way as people of the upper class do. This results in disparity in the way the two classes



express themselves, in any language. Shaw's solution of educating the poor to bring them up to the level of the upper class is a feasible one. Examples of people who become cultured due to their education and not their upbringing are plenty in society. That is, there are many present-day Elizas.

The problem of identity too, is not restricted to Shaw's time. The kind of identity crisis that Eliza faces due to her peculiar circumstances is common today. People who rise up the social ladder, ridiculed as 'social upstarts' have an identity crisis. Much like Eliza, they have left their old world behind, but do not have the confidence to plunge into their new world.

The phonetic problem is gaining importance today. With phonetics being introduced in educational institutions, there is confusion whether the language is to be spoken exactly as phonetics tells one to, or it is alright to have a neutral accent. Also, people are under the impression that only accent of a certain kind can get them jobs and status in society. This leads to them straining themselves to learn language in a certain way.

In this way, Pygmalion is relevant today.

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