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Shaw's *Pygmalion*

The Play's the Thing

JEAN REYNOLDS

ABSTRACT: Shaw, the larger-than-life playwright who called himself “a bit of an actor,” was often preoccupied with role-playing. In “Acting, by One Who Does Not Believe in It,” a paper delivered at a Fabian meeting in 1889, Shaw asserted that acting—often denounced as shamming—can actually be an avenue to “metaphysical self-realization.” Employing a metadramatic approach to *Pygmalion*, the following article finds connections between Shaw’s career as a dramatist and the mixed outcomes of Henry and Eliza’s journeys into “metaphysical self-realization.”

“I wish to boast,” wrote Shaw, “that *Pygmalion* has been an extremely successful play all over Europe and North America as well as at home.”¹ The rapturous reception in 1914 effectively refuted the charges that Shaw wasn’t really a dramatist and his plays weren’t really plays. Still popular more than a century later, *Pygmalion* has helped secure Shaw a permanent place in the Pantheon of great British playwrights. The passage of time has also deepened our understanding of the play. Recent interest in metadrama—“drama about drama,” as Richard Hornby explains²—has called attention to the role-playing and performance issues in *Pygmalion*.

Playwriting was not Shaw’s first career choice. After writing five novels and collecting piles of rejection slips, he decided to turn his talents to the theater instead—and soon became familiar with the problems inherent in what J. Ellen Gainor calls “the collaborative nature of dramatic production.”³ Instead of transmitting his words directly to the public via the printed page, Shaw had to depend on professional—often uncooperative—actors and directors. Attracting audiences was another problem—one that

Shaw solved in theatrical fashion by becoming “a bit of an actor” himself to generate publicity.⁴ The result was his creation of G.B.S., an entertaining persona who delighted the public but raised doubts about his artistic intentions. “The only reproach with which I became familiar,” he wrote, “was the everlasting ‘Why can you not be serious?’”⁵

These experiences helped shape *Pygmalion*, which Hornby calls “a play about theater.”⁶ While Shaw is presenting Eliza’s and Henry’s story, he is also providing a running commentary—often a contrapuntal one—about what’s happening on stage. The counterpoint begins as soon the curtain rises on Act I, where a play has just ended and theatergoers are heading for home. A sudden rainstorm sends them running into the portico of St. Paul’s Church (also known as the “actors’ church”). Shaw makes it clear that he is showing us the world *outside* the theater—people like ourselves dealing with real-life situations, such as finding shelter in a rainstorm, hailing a taxi when there are none to be had, and stretching a sixpence when money is short. We might wonder if those enraptured critics a hundred years ago were wrong about *Pygmalion*: it’s not a play at all.

And we might have a point. Viewed through the lens of metatheater, *Pygmalion* has more in common with *Hamlet*—another play that explores the differences between real life and the stage—than, say, *Arms and the Man*, although both are superb Shavian comedies. In Shakespeare’s tragedy, Hamlet keeps trying to transform himself into an avenging hero in a conventional Elizabethan revenge play, with increasingly disastrous results. Similarly, Eliza and Henry entangle themselves in a web of myth, fairy tale, and romantic theater. Eliza grows increasingly desperate as she realizes that she is supposed to portray a whole cast of characters in a play that Higgins has written for her: she is his “creation of a Duchess Eliza” (776) and “a consort battleship” (781), but she is also “a common idiot” (779), “a slut,” and “a fool” (781)—as well as his secretary and personal shopping service. In the last moments of the play Eliza turns down a shopping trip and awakens from her Cinderella story, but Higgins—despite his advantages of education and wealth—is still clinging to his illusions . . . unless, of course, he marries Eliza after all, fulfilling the wishes of audiences, actors, and directors during the past century—and defying Shaw’s repeated assertions to the contrary.

As Derek McGovern explains, “Shaw was embroiled in a perpetual struggle to control his conception of the play.”⁷ The problems began on the opening night of the London production: the two stars, Stella Campbell and Herbert Beerbohm Tree, “had improvised lines and stage business to imply to their opening-night London audience in 1914 that a romantic union between their two characters was inevitable.”⁸ Thus in 1916 Shaw

published a sequel arguing for an Eliza-Freddy wedding—to no avail: the public continued to demand that Eliza marry Higgins. Even worse, Shaw's sequel triggered doubts about his skill as a playwright. In Derridean terms, a *supplement* signifies an *absence* in the original creative work—opening the door to charges that Shaw was tacitly acknowledging a deficiency in his play.

There were other conflicts. Fellow playwright Sir James Barrie thought that Shaw had made a mistake when he decided not to show the embassy reception onstage, and the missing scene was eventually added. In 1938, against Shaw's wishes, heartthrob Leslie Howard was chosen to portray Higgins in the Gabriel Pascal film (Shaw's choice had been Charles Laughton). Shaw was able to quash Franz Lehar's proposal to turn *Pygmalion* into an operetta, but after Shaw's death *My Fair Lady* came to Broadway in 1956, adding the songs and dances denied to Lehar, and again rejecting Shaw's original ending. Meanwhile, Shaw's stated purpose in writing *Pygmalion*—calling attention to the importance of phonetics—all but dropped out of sight. How many people have resolved to study phonetics after seeing a performance of *Pygmalion*?

So it seems appropriate to revisit the question of Shaw's purpose in writing the play—and his success (or failure) in carrying out that purpose. Did he intentionally fill *Pygmalion* with problems, ambiguities, and contradictions—or was he simply unable to control his dramatic material? J. Ellen Gainor is one critic who has tried to excuse the inconsistencies: "surely it is too much to expect complete coherence," she writes, "particularly if *Pygmalion* emerged from the depths of psychological and emotional conflict so many critics suggest."⁹ Others, however, have argued that Shaw knew exactly what he was doing. Martin Meisel declares, "Shaw took care to make the ending perfectly ambiguous on the stage," and the controversial sequel was necessary because actors kept "finding ways to resolve that ambiguity."¹⁰ Margery Morgan believes that Shaw consistently "offers a personal and meaningful dramatic form where convention-dimmed eyes see only chaos."¹¹ Lynda Mugglestone argues that *Pygmalion* is challenging us to reexamine what we know—or think we know—about "the nature of equality in itself."¹² Even Gainor concedes that the apparent confusion may have a hidden purpose—to have the audience "engage in a Fabian-like attempt to resolve similar struggles in the real world differently."¹³

A common thread uniting the disparate views of these critics is Shaw's determination to make his audiences *think*—a goal consistent with the sense "of unease, a dislocation of perception" that Hornby describes as a "metadramatic experience for the audience."¹⁴ *Pygmalion* unsettles

us by using familiar building blocks to present Eliza's story—and then unceremoniously toppling them. For example, Shaw took pains to ensure that audiences catch his allusions to Cinderella and Galatea—but then he denied us the pleasure of their fairy-tale endings. And although he famously shaped Eliza's quest for a husband around a standard romantic plot, he abruptly ended the play before Eliza nabbed her man. If Hornby is correct that *Pygmalion* is “a play about theater”—and I believe he is—then we can look to Shaw's unconventional treatment of his sources and dramatic materials for answers to two important questions: what was Shaw intending to do, and how well did he succeed?

Fortunately we have the writings of numerous theater-minded critics and scholars to guide us, including Meisel's indispensable *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre*. An additional resource comes from Shaw himself via Henry Higgins's “music-hall” performance in Act I, which hints at the complex ways in which audience and actors collude and collide with the playwright who brings them together.

Pleasant and Unpleasant

“I am, and have always been, and shall now always be, a revolutionary writer,” Shaw declared in the preface to *Major Barbara*.¹⁵ But he was also a commercially successful playwright who skillfully employed stagecraft from the nineteenth-century commercial theater to broaden his appeal to audiences. He based *Pygmalion* on a standard romantic plot that was already old before he was born: a chance meeting triggers a conflict between the two central characters. Soon romance is in the air, but seemingly intractable difficulties prevent the couple from marrying—until moments before the final curtain, when the difficulties unravel and a wedding is announced. It was a plot that Shaw had already used successfully in *Arms and the Man* (1894). So, for example, Captain Bluntschli breaks into Raina's bedroom early in the play and threatens to shoot her if she raises an alarm: at the end of the play they decide to marry. Similarly, *Pygmalion* begins with a conflict when Freddy Eynsford Hill (Eliza's future bridegroom) collides with her and spoils two bunches of flowers she is trying to sell. Both plays feature financial obstacles, a timely inheritance, and the promise of a wedding at the end of the play. As Peter Gahan explains, “Generically every comedy ends with marriage.”¹⁶

But *Arms and the Man* is so well constructed that George Orwell called it Shaw's “most flawless play,”¹⁷ while *Pygmalion* takes so many detours that critic Lisa S. Starks-Estes calls it “a parody of romance.”¹⁸ Nothing, it seems,

is as it should be: Eliza's intended, Freddy Eynsford Hill, is overshadowed by the anti-groom, Henry Higgins. The play's apparent climax—the embassy reception—is omitted in the original play, and there's no celebration after Eliza's dazzling success. A last-minute inheritance indeed clears the way for a wedding: Alfred Doolittle's, not his daughter's. Higgins tries to bestow a kiss just before the curtain comes down, but it's for his mother, not Eliza. It's as if we're watching two plays at the same time: a conventional romantic comedy that's stored in our heads, and an anti-romance being acted onstage.

Meanwhile Eliza is having a completely different experience. She arrives at 27A Wimpole Street with no wedding expectations and no romantic comedy playing in her head. "Whod marry me?" she asks, bewildered, during her first visit to Higgins's laboratory (693). The play in Eliza's head is similar to *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, with Eliza fearful that she will be end up like Kitty's prostitutes. Although Eliza is often a comic character, Shaw insisted on a realistic portrayal of her desperate struggle for respectability. A letter he wrote to Stella Campbell just before the first performance describes the effect he was aiming for: "I give up in despair that note of terror in the first scene which collects the crowds and suddenly shows the audience that there is a play there and a human soul there, and a social problem there, and a formidable capacity for feeling in the trivial giggler of the comic passages."¹⁹

Audiences get their first glimpse of what Eliza is up against early in Act I, when she offhandedly addresses Freddy by his first name—"I called him Freddy or Charlie same as you might yourself if you was talking to a stranger and wished to be pleasant"—alarming his mother, who assumes that he has been consorting with a prostitute (672). Eliza repeatedly feels the need to protect her reputation, declaring that she is "a good girl" and "a respectable girl" in Act I, and repeating the "good girl" assertion six more times in Act II. In Act V she hints at the perilous life she knew before she came to Wimpole Street, telling Higgins, "I could have been a bad girl if I'd liked. I've seen more of some things than you, for all your learning" (778).

The repeated references to love for sale are a constant reminder of Eliza's harsh reality, with no one to look out for her. Her parents, she explains, "told me I was big enough to earn my own living and turned me out" (644). She refuses the chocolates that Higgins offers her on her first visit: "How do I know what might be in them?" she asks. "I've heard of girls being drugged by the like of you" (695). When her father arrives to rescue her, Eliza instantly knows that he has no real interest in her safety: "All he come here for was to touch you for some money to get drunk on" (715).

The police—who would seem to have a duty to protect young women—terrify Eliza. In Act I, mistaking Higgins for a policeman, she throws herself at Pickering and pleads, “Oh, sir, dont let him charge me. You dunno what it means to me. Theyll take away my character and drive me on the streets for speaking to gentlemen” (674). Immediately after the embassy reception, Eliza and Freddy begin a romantic late-night walk that is interrupted twice when they’re chased by constables. Freddy is surprised—“I had no idea the police were so devilishly prudish,” he says. But Eliza, speaking from experience, explains, “It’s their business to hunt girls off the streets” (755).

What drives Eliza into Freddy’s arms that night is, of course, Higgins’s brusque behavior after her success at the embassy reception—or perhaps there’s another explanation: in her moment of victory, she suddenly realizes that no Prince Charming has appeared. Higgins’s prediction that “the streets will be strewn with the bodies of men shooting themselves for your sake” has come to naught (693). A short time later Higgins predicted that she would “marry an officer in the Guards, with a beautiful moustache” (696). But no suitor makes an appearance, and the story seems to come to an abrupt halt. As Eric Bentley explains, “Eliza has triumphed. Higgins is satisfied, bored, and wondering what to do next. But there are two more acts!”²⁰ What remains to be done? The answer is a turning away from Henry’s and Eliza’s fantasies so that the story becomes, as Nigel Alexander explains, “a practical and possible one.”²¹

Once again *Arms and the Man* provides a useful contrast, with its “impractical” and “impossible” resolutions typical of romantic comedies. In the last moments of the play, Raina’s former suitor decides to marry the servant girl Louka, who conveniently decides to break up with her own suitor, Nicola. Raina is now free to marry Bluntschli, but there are two more obstacles: Bluntschli has little money, and Raina seems too young for him. Then a telegram unexpectedly arrives for Bluntschli with the news of a substantial inheritance, and Raina reveals that she is twenty-four, not seventeen.

Eliza’s future is decided in less tidy fashion. She is strong and independent enough to walk away from Higgins and into the arms of the only truly conventionally romantic character in *Pygmalion*: Freddy Eynsford Hill. When Eliza storms out of Higgins’s house after the embassy reception, a lovelorn Freddy is sitting on the steps thinking about her. “It’s the only place where I’m happy,” he tells her. “You are the loveliest . . .” (754). And so her future is sealed: “I’ll marry Freddy, I will,” she declares, “as soon as I’m able to support him” (780)—a line that always evokes laughter from the audience. But Shaw’s point is clear: Eliza is making practical

decisions based on economics as well as love. Perhaps Shaw's mission in *Pygmalion* was not merely to awaken us from our social illusions: he also sought to awaken us from our illusions about the romantic theater, where problems magically resolve themselves in the wink of an eye, and love overcomes every obstacle.

"You Shall Go to Buckingham Palace in a Carriage"

When Eliza and Freddy decide to marry, they are following a long theater tradition of romantic pairings that break through class barriers. Martin Meisel notes that those romantic plays often featured "a Cinderella-Galatea motif of transformation or testing."²² Following this tradition, Shaw presents the first signs of Eliza's transformation in Act II, when her father fails to recognize her after her bath: "Garn! Dont you know your own daughter?" (713). Eliza undergoes testing at Mrs. Higgins's at-home and again at the embassy reception, an event that also evokes some of the glamour of the royal ball in the Cinderella story. When Higgins first explains the phonetics experiment to Eliza in Act II, we hear more echoes of the Cinderella story: "If youre naughty and idle you will sleep in the back kitchen among the black beetles, and be walloped by Mrs. Pearce with a broomstick. At the end of six months you shall go to Buckingham Palace in a carriage, beautifully dressed" (697). The Cinderella theme appears once again in Act IV with a pair of slippers, a hearth, and a lonely young woman facing a bleak future. Charles Berst describes Eliza as "a defunct Cinderella symbolically among the cinders" as she looks for the ring that Higgins had thrown there.²³

By contrast, the Pygmalion myth is present even before the first act begins, thanks to Shaw's choice of a title for his play—generating widespread expectations for a marriage between Pygmalion and Galatea. All the elements of the ancient Pygmalion story seem to be there: a sculptor creates a beautiful work of art and is transformed himself; as Higgins awkwardly expresses in Act V, "I shall miss you, Eliza. . . . I have learnt something from your idiotic notions: I confess that and gratefully. And I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance. I like them, rather" (775). There is even a Venus figure to bless the two lovers: Mrs. Higgins, who never gives up hope that her bachelor son will fall in love and marry. The only missing element is a wedding. It would seem, then, that audiences, actors, and directors can hardly be blamed for expecting Eliza and Henry to marry: Cinderella must have her Prince Charming, and Pygmalion his Galatea.

But Shaw giveth, and he taketh away. Offsetting the fairy-tale elements in his play are two archetypes that prevent their marriage. As an exchange

in Act II demonstrates, Higgins is both a teacher and father figure to her, and therefore cannot marry her:

HIGGINS: Somebody is going to touch you, with a broomstick, if you dont stop snivelling. Sit down.

LIZA: [obeying slowly] Ah—ah—ah—ow—oo—o! One would think you was my father.

HIGGINS: If I decide to teach you, I'll be worse than two fathers to you. (690)

In Act V Eliza reinforces the father-daughter relationship when she tells Higgins, "Well, I am a child in your country" (770). And in a private conversation with Pickering, Higgins acknowledges the boundary that prevents teachers from falling in love with their students. Pickering has just told Higgins that he must not take advantage of Eliza's position in their household:

HIGGINS: What! That thing! Sacred, I assure you. [*Rising to explain*] You see, she'll be a pupil; and teaching would be impossible unless pupils were sacred. Ive taught scores of American millionairesses how to speak English: the best looking women in the world. I'm seasoned. They might as well be blocks of wood. *I* might as well be a block of wood. (702)

Higgins is right—and he demonstrates admirable integrity in refusing to take advantage of the women who come to him for instruction. According to Pamela Cooper-White, a counselor and author with a special interest in violence against women, "there can be no authentic consent in a relationship involving unequal power."²⁴ Clearly Higgins holds a position of authority in his dealings with his students and therefore cannot fall in love with them.

On closer inspection, however, this tidy list of marital pros and cons—Galatea and Cinderella versus the father and teacher archetypes—begins to unravel. "Father" and "husband" do not have to be mutually exclusive categories: in Victorian England, women expected to be transferred from their father's care and protection to the guardianship of their husband. In *David Copperfield*, for example, Annie Strong exclaims, "Oh my father and husband!" when she begs her husband, Dr. Strong, for his affection and forgiveness.²⁵

Another difficulty is that the Cinderella and Pygmalion stories, which seem to point to a wedding, end up clashing with each other. As Arthur

Ganz explains, “a considerable difficulty arose if the Fairy Godfather was to be identical with the Handsome Prince.”²⁶ In the Cinderella story, the Fairy Godmother engineers the transformation, so that the Prince sees—and falls in love with—only the finished product. Pygmalion, on the other hand, does the transforming himself, and he is no Prince Charming. Ovid describes him as a man appalled by the shortcomings of real flesh-and-blood women: he prefers his lifeless marble statue.

The transformations themselves differ in the two stories. When Cinderella goes to the ball, she needs help with only the trappings of noble birth: a gown, glass slippers, a pair of horses, and a carriage. She was born an aristocrat, and her rags and filth are the result of mistreatment, not of an impoverished family history. At the royal ball she has no difficulty mixing with the other guests and attracting the Prince’s attention and admiration. In the Pygmalion story, on the other hand, the statue of Galatea requires a magical transformation, from stone to flesh, and so does the statue’s creator. As Errol Durbach explains, “There is a crucial turning away from life in the Pygmalion myth, an impossible demand for perfection as the precondition for any human attachment, and a definition of sexual love as that which seeks satisfaction in imperishable and therefore dead forms.”²⁷ When Venus brings Galatea to life, she also infuses the misogynistic Pygmalion with a heart and a soul—a vital part of the story that is missing in the Shavian retelling.

Gainor’s earlier observation about the play’s “psychological and emotional conflicts” is especially apt here. If we agree that *Pygmalion* evokes real life, rather than a stagey version of human experience, we are justified in analyzing Higgins from the vantage point of depth psychology. Shaw describes him as a “man of about forty or thereabouts”—the age when men begin trying to assimilate the latent feminine qualities within themselves. Psychologist James Hillman explains, “How does one come to terms with this feminine side; how does one cultivate it? . . . The simplest answer, the way which is most general and happens most often, is: with and through women, intimacy and intercourse with women.”²⁸ But this is precisely what Higgins cannot do—in part because, as noted earlier, the father and teacher archetypes prohibit greater intimacy with Eliza.

Yet here again Shaw frustrates us, for Higgins repeatedly behaves as if he were trying to move past his comfortable role as Eliza’s teacher and father figure. In Act III he tells his mother that Eliza fascinates him—“She regularly fills our lives up; doesn’t she, Pick?” (735). Both “blocks of wood”—Henry and Eliza—are moving their relationship to a different level, and the fortifications that Higgins constructed so carefully are beginning to disintegrate. Perhaps Venus will bless Pygmalion after all!

But as the play progresses toward the final curtain, we see that the changes in Higgins do not portend a rose-petal wedding: his long-standing bachelor habits will not allow him to move forward. Instead of driving Higgins in the direction of genuine love, his crumbling fortifications threaten to destroy the boundaries that protect Eliza from him. It is inconceivable, for example, that Higgins would have asked any of his "millionair-esses" to act as his personal assistant: "She knows where my things are, and remembers my appointments and so forth" (734). Pamela Cooper-White explains that relationships founded on "an imbalance of power" are "reinforced by societally conditioned expectations that women will function as a nurturing, sexual servant class."²⁹ We should not be surprised that the awakening Eliza "disdainfully" dismisses Higgins's shopping list at the end of the play: "Buy them yourself" (782).

But by then the archetypes have begun to fade away, as Eliza herself points out. When Higgins "gently" corrects her grammar one last time, she responds with a telling retort: "I'll talk as I like. *You're not my teacher now*" (777, italics mine). Whether Higgins acknowledges what has happened or not, Eliza has decided that the teacher/father archetype no longer defines their relationship—so that they are now free to relate to each other in new ways. As the play comes to an end, it seems that the only remaining obstacle is Henry's affection for his mother: "My idea of a loveable woman," he tells her, "is something 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. . . . Besides, they're all idiots" (722).

But as the play draws to a close, Higgins has discovered that Eliza is emphatically *not* an idiot—she has absorbed enough of his "methods" and "discoveries" to serve as a competent assistant to a rival teacher. Perhaps, then, despite Shaw's sequel, we can't be so certain that Eliza chose Freddy over Higgins. (The lack of a proposal from Henry need not be an obstacle: no one doubts, for example, that Jack Tanner will marry Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman*, despite his fierce resistance to her advances.)

And now, before we cast around for more evidence, it may be time to notice what has happened: we are discussing *Pygmalion* as if it were a conventional romance that "generically" must end with a marriage, as Gahan explained earlier—exactly what audiences and theater professionals have been doing since the first performance more than a century ago. Surely Eliza has other possibilities, even in the constrained world of Edwardian England: her own shop, a teaching position, other potential mates. Both Pickering and Eliza's father have financial resources that they can put at her disposal.

Once again a comparison with *Arms and the Man* may prove useful. No one doubts that Raina is destined for a traditional marriage; the only question is which groom will stand beside her at the wedding ceremony. In *Pygmalion*, by contrast, Shaw raises profound questions about identity issues, social class, language, economics, and education. Why, then, do we feel so strongly that *Pygmalion* must end with a mate for Eliza? Depth psychology provides a possible answer: the act of creation inevitably arouses forces that resist the creator's intentions. Is that why the conventions of romantic comedy keep trying to find their way back into *Pygmalion*?

The Show Must Go On

At the beginning of Act V, Higgins and Pickering order the police to find and return the missing Eliza, as if, Mrs. Higgins says, she were "a lost umbrella" (758).³⁰ A number of critics have suggested that Higgins's struggle to hold on to Eliza has an archetypal dimension that goes beyond managing his shopping and appointments. Ganz, for example, sees a connection with the creative conflicts in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.³¹ Is there a parallel to Shaw's archetypal struggle to maintain control of his play? A brief but significant bit of show business in Act I suggests that the answer is *yes*.

As the post-theater crowd in the portico of St. Paul's Church waits for the rain to stop, Higgins entertains them by using phonetics to guess the bystanders' origins. The show is brief, lasting less than a minute in the 1938 film, and critics have had little to say about it. Gainor, claiming that Shaw uses the play-within-a-play device only once, in *Fanny's First Play*, doesn't mention Higgins's performance at all.³² Bentley thinks that Act I of *Pygmalion* is a prologue to the play, with the "action proper" beginning in Act II.³³ Berst offers a useful discussion of Higgins's performance as a "sideshow artist" but limits himself to didactic and expository issues.³⁴ Even metadrama critic Hornby makes only a brief mention of "Higgins's cataloguing the bystanders' speech in the first act."³⁵ From a metadramatic point of view, however, Higgins's show is hugely important, for it introduces the themes of role-playing, performance, and control that recur throughout the play.

"I Can Place Any Man within Six Miles"

Higgins's show begins with a question for one of the bystanders: "And how are all your people down in Selsey?" (675) It's an ordinary enough conversational gambit—except that the puzzled bystander is sure he has never met Higgins before. Only Higgins knows that a show has begun, with the

unsuspecting bystanders cast as performers and audience. (Similarly at the embassy reception, only three people—Higgins, Pickering, and Eliza—know that the other guests have been assigned the roles of judges in a phonetics and deportment contest.)

Higgins's phonetics performance is an undisputed tour de force. "May I ask, sir, do you do this for your living at a music hall?" (677), says impressed bystander Pickering, who later becomes one of Eliza's teachers. But the "sideshow" also has the unintended effect of exposing Higgins's difficulties with everyday role-playing—the polite obligation most of us feel to feign interest when a conversation turns boring, to overlook remarks that annoy us, and to simulate appreciation about things we secretly dislike.

Although Higgins's stage patter starts off well, it soon begins to fall apart. Shaw's stage directions note that the bystander from Selsey responds "suspiciously" to Higgins's affable inquiry about his relatives: "Who told you my people come from Selsey?" Higgins's response is abrupt: "Never you mind. They did" (675). The difficulties are compounded when Higgins correctly guesses that Eliza was born in Lisson Grove. Instead of applauding Higgins's seemingly magical powers, Eliza reacts with weepy defensiveness: "Oh, what harm is there in my leaving Lisson Grove? It wasnt fit for a pig to live in; and I had to pay four-and-six a week" (675). Once again Higgins abruptly drops his stage patter: "Live where you like; but stop that noise" (675), prompting a sarcastic response from another bystander: "Park Lane, for instance. I'd like to go into the Housing Question with you, I would" (676). Moments into the show, Higgins has already lost control of both his audience and his magician's persona.

Order is soon restored, however, and Higgins wins back the crowd by triumphantly guessing Pickering's background—"Cheltenham, Harrow, Cambridge, and India." Shaw's stage directions describe the bystanders' hearty approval: "*Great laughter. Reaction in the note taker's favor. Exclamations of He knows all about it. Told him proper. Hear him tell the toff where he come from? etc.*" (676). The "sideshow" has fulfilled its expository purpose, proving that Higgins is indeed a phonetics expert. And it has also served an important dramatic purpose by planting the seeds of doubt about Higgins's ability to win his bet at the embassy reception later in the play. If he cannot control the "sideshow," what will happen at a formal gathering of "the real people" (746) who circulate in the highest levels of society?

Role-Playing, Performance, and the "Social Routine"

The difficulty, as Pickering observes later, is that Higgins has "never been properly broken in to the social routine" (746). The problem is so severe that

Higgins has been banned from his mother's at-homes—another hint that the embassy reception may not go well. Higgins is well aware of his social deficiencies: “I know I have no small talk,” he tells his mother (721). Even worse, he sees no need to apologize for his rudeness. Conventional politeness, in Higgins's view, is a waste of time—as we discover after the reception, when he sees no need to congratulate Eliza on her dazzling success. “But she knew all about that” is his bewildered response when his mother chides him for his insensitivity (765).

What outrages Higgins most about “the social routine” is its artificiality. Priding himself on his integrity, and impatient with etiquette, he condemns the guests at the reception as “silly people” who “dont know their own silly business” (746–47). In Act V he heaps scorn on Eliza for the same reason: She is only a “thing” fashioned from “squashed cabbage leaves” who “pretends to play the fine lady” (767). And Higgins has a point, for role-playing can easily turn into manipulation. In Act II, for example, Alfred Doolittle acts the part of an outraged father in order to coax money for liquor from Pickering and Higgins. Although Eliza disapproves, she has picked up some of her father's manipulative tendencies herself. In Act I she coaxes Pickering to “Buy a flower off a poor girl” (673) in a wheedling voice that conceals the truth: Despite her youth, she has earned enough money to move away from Lisson Grove to more desirable lodgings in Angel Court. Moments later we watch her again overplay her poverty for profit:

THE FLOWER GIRL: [*to Pickering, as he passes her*] Buy a flower, kind gentleman. I'm short for my lodging.

PICKERING: I really havnt any change. I'm sorry [*he goes away*].

HIGGINS: [*shocked at girl's mendacity*] Liar. You said you could change half-a-crown. (680–81)

But Higgins himself is an inveterate role-player, for we later discover that his passion for straight talk is another pose. In his mother's drawing room we hear this exchange between Higgins and the Eynsford Hills:

MISS EYNSFORD HILL: [*who considers Higgins quite eligible matrimonially*] I sympathize. I havent any small talk. If people would only be frank and say what they really think!

HIGGINS: [*relapsing into gloom*] Lord forbid!

MRS. EYNSFORD HILL: [*taking up her daughter's cue*] But why?

HIGGINS: What they think they ought to think is bad enough, Lord knows; but what they really think would break up the whole show.

Do you suppose it would be really agreeable if I were to come out now with what I really think?

MISS EYNSFORD HILL: [*gaily*] Is it so very cynical?

HIGGINS: Cynical! Who the dickens said it was cynical? I mean it wouldnt be decent. (726)

And despite his protestations, Higgins—like Doolittle and Eliza—is not averse to turning on his charm to get what he wants. In Act I, with “*his eyes suddenly beginning to twinkle with mischief*” (according to the stage directions), he shares a chocolate with Eliza as a “Pledge of good faith” (695). In a coaxing voice he tells her, “You shall have boxes of them, barrels of them, every day. You shall live on them. Eh?” (696). In Act IV he tries to distract Eliza from her post-reception despair with a polite “Will you have a glass of champagne?” (749). In Act V we learn that Eliza hasn’t been the only target for Higgins’s charm when she tells him: “Oh, you ARE a devil. You can twist the heart in a girl as easy as some could twist her arms to hurt her. Mrs. Pearce warned me. Time and again she has wanted to leave you; and you always got round her at the last minute. And you dont care a bit for her” (775).

We also learn that Higgins—despite his protest that he has “no small talk” (721)—has a whole repertoire of conversational gambits. Although Eliza claims to have learned her social skills from Pickering, it’s clear that Higgins has been an effective teacher as well. When Eliza and Higgins have their confrontation in his mother’s drawing room, we witness this exchange:

LIZA: How do you do, Professor Higgins? Are you quite well?

HIGGINS: [*choking*] Am I— [*He can say no more*].

LIZA: But of course you are: you are never ill. So glad to see you again, Colonel Pickering. [*He rises hastily; and they shake hands*]. Quite chilly this morning, isnt it? [*She sits down on his left. He sits beside her*].

HIGGINS: Dont you dare try this game on me. I taught it to you; and it doesnt take me in. (767)

Moments later, with a lack of self-awareness so typical of him, Higgins says, “I cant change my nature; and I dont intend to change my manners” (773). The problem isn’t his nature, however: it’s his scornful dismissal of the “game” of role-playing. In Higgins’s mindset, people are incapable of making profound changes in themselves. It’s a convenient worldview, justifying both his bad manners and his arrogant disregard for someone like Eliza

who is desperate to better herself. Eliza inadvertently confirms his scornful attitude in the following exchange, when Pickering has just asked Eliza for assurance that she will hold fast to what she has learned at Wimpole Street:

PICKERING: You wont relapse, will you?

LIZA: No: Not now. Never again. I have learnt my lesson. I dont believe I could utter one of the old sounds if I tried. [*Doolittle touches her on her left shoulder. She drops her work, losing her self-possession utterly at the spectacle of her father's splendor*] A—a—a—a—a—ah—ow—ooh! (770)

In Higgins's eyes, Eliza has just confirmed what he suspected all along: The transformation wrought in his Wimpole Street laboratory is superficial and cosmetic. It was all just a game.

Shaw, by contrast, took the "game" seriously. At an 1889 Church and Stage Guild meeting, he delivered a paper titled "Acting, by One Who Does Not Believe in It" that begins with an observation that could have come from Higgins: "In English, acting means shamming." Shaw goes on to explain that acting can also be a pathway to "metaphysical self-realization." In his view, "the world behind the footlights was a real world, peopled with men and women, instead of with despicable puppets." A challenging play makes "higher and higher demands on the players' powers of self-development and realization." Such transformations, according to Shaw, are "constantly sought and sometimes realized in ordinary life" as well. The example in his 1889 paper is "a woman making a very bad wife whilst her husband was poor, and becoming a very good one when he grew rich and supplied her with the means of self-realization."³⁶ Years later, in *Pygmalion*, his example would be a dirty flower girl who becomes an elegant lady.

The "real or shamming?" question is, in Shaw's view, a false choice. What we should really be looking for is "self-realization": acting as an avenue toward developing undiscovered human potential. Viewed from this perspective, Eliza emerges as the victor in her philosophical debate with Higgins. He repeatedly demonstrates that he too has the potential for "self-realization," but he chooses not to explore it. As the relationship between Eliza and Higgins evolves, he takes her to concerts and to Brighton, buys her a ring, puts her in charge of his appointment book, and—reluctantly—makes her part of his life: "I hadnt quite realized that you were going away," he says when she talks about leaving Wimpole Street after the embassy reception (750). Later he clumsily expresses his feelings for her: "I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way and been built into my house" (775). Sadly, though, that is as far as he can go.

Or perhaps that is as far as he has willed himself to go, for there is evidence in *Pygmalion* that Higgins has had some movement toward “self-realization.” In Act I, during his phonetics show, Higgins’s easy conversation with the bystanders in Covent Garden demonstrates that he is a master of small talk—when he wants to be. For example, he offers an elegant apology to Mrs. Eynsford Hill after she hears him mutter “Earlscourt”: “Did I say that out loud?” he asks, humbly. “I didnt mean to. I beg your pardon. Your mother’s Epsom, unmistakably” (677). And he simulates a warm interest in Eliza’s life history: “How do you come to be up so far east? You were born in Lisson Grove” (675). It is precisely that question that summarizes Eliza’s dilemma—and Henry’s: Through sheer determination she has managed to “come to be up so far,” but he chooses to remain stuck in his embedded habits.

Higgins’s impromptu phonetics performance holds the key to his philosophy: birthplace is destiny. People do not change, in his view—even though he earns a “quite a fat” living helping his students do exactly that (679). He can’t grasp the truth that Eliza has surpassed him: “I can be civil and kind to people, which is more than you can,” she says just before she walks away from him (780). And yet Eliza is not entirely correct about him. Steeped in “the language of Shakespear” (679), Higgins is well aware that all the world’s a stage, and he is one of the actors. Sadly, although he is quite capable of taking center stage—even being “civil and kind to people” when the mood strikes him—he prefers to sit in the audience as a critic. What if Higgins decided to keep refining his acting skills after the rain stopped, the “side-show” ended, and all the theatergoers headed for home? We can only wish and wonder.

But if audiences are sometimes frustrated by the ending of the play, Eliza is not. We may be sorry that the enchanting froth of Cinderella, Galatea, and conventional romance has faded away, but Eliza now has the answer to her wistful question in the second act: “Whod marry me?” She has decided to face the future as the wife of a man who—despite his flaws—is head over heels in love with her. Her performance as an “artificial duchess” has taught her—and us—a fundamental truth: The play’s the thing, as Hamlet famously said, but it’s not the *only* thing. In the end perhaps it is Eliza, not Higgins, who can best lay claim to the title of “the greatest teacher alive” (691).

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NOTES

1. Bernard Shaw, preface to *Pygmalion* in *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays and Their Prefaces*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: Bodley Head, 1970–74), 4:633. All further references to *Pygmalion* are given parenthetically in the text.

2. Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1986), 31.

3. J. Ellen Gainor, *Shaw's Daughters: Dramatic and Narrative Constructions of Gender* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 160.

4. Bernard Shaw, "Mainly about Myself," in *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw*, 1:16.

5. Bernard Shaw, "Mainly about Myself," 1:14.

6. Richard Hornby, "Beyond the Verbal in *Pygmalion*," *SHAW: The Annual of Shaw Studies* 3 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1983), 126.

7. Derek McGovern, "Shavian Elements in the *My Fair Lady* Film," *SHAW: The Annual of Shaw Studies* 31 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2013), 160.

8. McGovern, "Shavian Elements," 160.

9. Gainor, *Shaw's Daughters*, 227.

10. Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 177.

11. Margery M. Morgan, *The Shavian Playground: An Exploration of the Art of George Bernard Shaw* (London: Methuen, 1972), 187.

12. Lynda Mugglestone, "Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in *Pygmalion*," *Review of English Studies* 44 (1993): 377.

13. Gainor, *Shaw's Daughters*, 227.

14. Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, 32.

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17. George Orwell, *The War Broadcasts*, ed. W. J. West (London: Duckworth/BBC, 1985), 118.

18. Lisa S. Starks-Estes, "Educating Eliza: Fashioning the Model Woman in the 'Pygmalion' Film," *Post Script* 16.2 (1997): 46.

19. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters 1911–1925*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Viking, 1985), 225.

20. Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 82.

21. Nigel Alexander, "The Play of Ideas," in *George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 21.

22. Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre*, 161.

23. Charles Berst, "Pygmalion: A Potboiler as Art," in Bloom, *George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion*, 66.

24. Pamela Cooper-White, "Soul Stealing: Power and Relations in Clergy Sexual Abuse," *Christian Century*, 20 February 1991, 197.
25. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, in *The Complete Works of Charles Dickens* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009), 2:659. My thanks to Jenna Kubly for this point.
26. Arthur Ganz, *George Bernard Shaw* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 182.
27. Errol Durbach, "Myth and Anti-Myth in the Plays of Ibsen and Shaw," in Bloom, *George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion*, 14.
28. James Hillman, *Insearch* (Dallas: Spring, 1967), 109.
29. Cooper-White, "Soul Stealing," 197.
30. My comments about Higgins's "sideshow" are indebted to Lawrence Danson's "Hamlet," in his *Tragic Alphabet* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 22–49.
31. Ganz, *George Bernard Shaw*, 105.
32. Gainor, *Shaw's Daughters*, 181.
33. Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*, 82.
34. Berst, "Pygmalion," 66.
35. Hornby, "Beyond the Verbal in *Pygmalion*," 125.
36. Bernard Shaw, "Acting, by One Who Does Not Believe in It," in *Platform and Pulpit*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Hill & Wang, 1961), 12, 18, 20–21, 22, 17.