

## Themes and Conflicts in *Pygmalion*

### Major Theme(s):

- Professor Henry Higgins transforms a common flower girl into a graceful lady, like the legendary Greek sculptor *Pygmalion* carved an exquisite female statue out of a shapeless piece of ivory.
- Higgins achieves this incredible transformation by teaching Eliza to speak correctly.
- While this is nothing more than a scientific experiment to him, he is amazed to find that Eliza has fallen in love with him.
- While Shaw's avowed intention is to make "the public aware that there are such people as phoneticians, and that they are among the most important people in England at present," the play turns out to be an education in the incalculability of the human heart.

### Minor Theme(s):

- *Pygmalion* as a comedy of ideas is concerned with manners and class.
- It is a criticism of social barriers and class distinctions and it upholds the ideal of equal opportunities of wealth and education for all, regardless of class and gender.
- It exposes the sham of genteel standards and examines the real difference between a lady and a flower girl, a gentleman and a dustman.
- It is a scathing criticism of the Victorian concept of the "undeserving poor," who were accused of bringing their indigent state upon themselves due to vice.
- Other minor themes include the limitations imposed by respectability, the fundamental difference of opinion between men and women, and the way gender differences may inadvertently complicate relationships.

### Protagonist Conflict:

- Henry Higgins is the protagonist.
- He represents the legendary character *Pygmalion*.
- Higgins transforms Eliza Doolittle.
- He cannot handle the love Eliza has for him because it is an emotional commitment.
- His aim was merely to reform the human race and not have people at a disadvantage simply because of the way they speak.

### Antagonist Conflict:

- Eliza is the antagonist as she rebels against Higgins by becoming independent-minded after he has finished experimenting with her.
- Her accusations that he has used and disposed of her in the last act reveals Higgins for what he is, a coldhearted and emotionally vacant man who puts all his energies into his career.
- In the final act, Eliza insists that it was the Colonel's unfailing gentility and kindness and not Higgins' efforts that have truly transformed her into a lady.
- In fact, in the confrontation between Higgins and Eliza in Act V, Eliza has become superior to Higgins in many ways.

### Climax:

- Act IV constitutes the climax of the play.
- Eliza, Higgins, and Colonel Pickering have been to a fashionable ball at an embassy in London. Eliza has played her part perfectly and has passed as a lady and thereby won Higgins' bet for him.
- While Higgins and the Colonel begin talking, Eliza listens in miserable silence. The men are glad that the tiresome affair is over at last.
- There is a confrontation between Higgins and Eliza when she throws his slippers at his face in a fit of rage.
- She realizes that she has been made a lady and is fit for nothing else.
- Higgins, amazed to see his creation come to life, loses his temper.

### Outcome:

- The play ends on an uncertain note.
- Whether or not Eliza will marry Higgins is left ambiguous.
- However, Shaw does provide a resolution in the epilogue in which he lists the reasons against such a union.
- Instead, Eliza marries Freddy Hill and the two end up running a fashionable green grocer shop.
- It was typical of Shaw who loved paradox to have provided such an anti-romantic conclusion to the play.
- The majority of the critics accuse Shaw of deliberately twisting the natural end of *Pygmalion* merely to make the play unromantic.
- However, critics who eagerly attribute this anti-romantic ending to Shaw's perversity or to his supposed oedipal attraction towards his mother would do well to remember that the actual point of the ending is not the issue of Eliza's marriage but her gaining independence.