

PYGMALION (LECTURE 2)

Pygmalion is a play by George Bernard Shaw. It is named after a Greek mythological figure. It was first presented on stage to the public in 1913.

In ancient Greek mythology, Pygmalion fell in love with one of his sculptures, which then came to life. The general idea of that myth was a popular subject for Victorian era British playwrights.

Shaw mentioned that the character of Professor Henry Higgins was inspired by several British professors of phonetics: Alexander Melville Bell, Alexander J. Ellis, Tito Pagliardini, but above all, the cantankerous Henry Sweet.

Act One

A group of people are sheltering from the rain. Among them are the Eynsford-Hills, consisting initially of Mrs. Eynsford-Hill and her daughter Clara. Clara's brother Freddy enters. He was earlier dispatched to secure them a cab which they can ill-afford. As he is timid and faint-hearted, he has failed to do so. He goes off once again to find a cab. He bumps into a flower girl, Eliza. Her flowers drop into the mud of Covent Garden. She needs the flowers to survive in her poverty-stricken world. Shortly, they are joined by a gentleman, Colonel Pickering. While Eliza tries to sell flowers to the Colonel, a bystander informs her that a man is writing down everything she says. The man is Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics. Eliza worries that Higgins is a police officer. She will not calm down until Higgins introduces himself. It soon becomes clear that he and Colonel Pickering have a shared interest in phonetics. Pickering has come from India to meet Higgins, and Higgins was planning to go to India to meet Pickering. Higgins tells Pickering that he could pass off the flower girl as a duchess merely by teaching her to speak properly. These words of praise spark an interest in Eliza. She wants to make changes in her life and become more mannerly. It only means working in a flower shop. At the end of the act, Freddy returns only to find that his mother and sister have gone and left him with the cab. The streetwise Eliza takes the cab using the money that Higgins tossed to her, leaving him on his own.

Act Two

Higgins' home – the next day

As Higgins demonstrates his phonetics to Pickering, the housekeeper Mrs. Pearce, tells him that a young girl wants to see him. Eliza has shown up because she wishes to talk like a lady in a flower shop. She tells Higgins that she will pay for lessons. He shows no interest. She reminds him of his boast the previous day. Higgins claimed that he could pass her for a duchess. Pickering makes a bet with him on his claim. He says that he will pay for her lessons if Higgins succeeds. She is sent off to have a bath. Mrs. Pearce tells Higgins that he must behave himself in the young girl's presence. She advises him to stop swearing, and improve his table manners. He is at a loss to understand why she should find fault with him. Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father, appears with the sole purpose of getting money from Higgins. He has no paternal interest in his daughter's welfare. He sees himself as a member of the undeserving poor. With his intelligent mind untamed by education, he has an eccentric view of life. He is also aggressive. When Eliza, on her return, sticks her tongue out at him,

he goes to hit her, but is prevented by Pickering. The scene ends with Higgins telling Pickering that they really have got a difficult job on their hands.

Act Three

Mrs. Higgins' drawing room

Higgins bursts in and tells his mother that he has picked up a "common flower girl". He has been teaching her. Mrs. Higgins is not very impressed with her son's attempts to win her approval. It is her 'at home' day and she is entertaining visitors. The visitors are the Eynsford-Hills. Higgins is rude to them on their arrival. Eliza enters and soon falls into talking about the weather and her family. Whilst she is now able to speak in beautifully modulated tones, the substance of what she says remains unchanged from the gutter. She confides her suspicions that her aunt was killed by relatives, and mentions that gin had been "mother's milk" to this aunt, and that Eliza's own father was always more cheerful after a goodly amount of gin. Higgins passes off her remarks as "the new small talk", and Freddy is enraptured. When she is leaving, he asks her if she is going to walk across the park, to which she replies, "Walk? Not bloody likely!" (This is the most famous line from the play, and, for many years after the play's debut, use of the word 'bloody' was known as a Pygmalion; Mrs. Campbell was considered to have risked her career by speaking the line on stage. After she and the Eynsford-Hills leave, Henry asks for his mother's opinion. She says the girl is not presentable and is very concerned about what will happen to her, but neither Higgins nor Pickering understands her thoughts of Eliza's future, and leave feeling confident and excited about how Eliza will get on. This leaves Mrs. Higgins feeling exasperated, and exclaiming, "Men! Men!! Men!!!")