

# An Introduction to *Pygmalion*



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# George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw was born into a poor Protestant family in Dublin, Ireland, on July 26, 1856. Despite childhood neglect (his father was an alcoholic), he became one of the most prominent writers of modern Britain.

His mother introduced him to music and art at an early age and after 1876, when he moved to London to continue his self-education, she supported him for nine more years. During this period Shaw wrote five unsuccessful novels. Then, in 1884, he met William Archer, the prominent journalist and drama critic, who urged him to write plays.

Shaw's plays were frequently banned by censors or refused production (both their themes and their expansive scope made them difficult to stage), so he sought audiences through open readings and publication.

After the turn of the century, Shaw's plays gradually began to achieve production and, eventually, acceptance in England.

Shaw received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925, which was considered to be the high point of his career (although he was still to write seventeen more plays).

In later life, he remained a vigorous symbol of the ageless “superman” he proclaimed in his works, traveling extensively throughout the world and engaging in intellectual and artistic pursuits.

In September, 1950, however, he fell from an apple tree he was pruning, and on November 2 of that year died of complications stemming from the injury.

# “Pygmalion”

*Pygmalion* is a comedy about a professor who, as a kind of social experiment, attempts to make a lady out of an uneducated, poor flower-girl. Although not as intellectually complex as some of Shaw's other plays, *Pygmalion* nevertheless probes important questions about social class, human behavior, and relations between the sexes.

# “Pygmalion”

The title of the play comes from the myth of Pygmalion, from the Greek playwright Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

In Ovid's tale, Pygmalion is a man disgusted with real-life women who chooses celibacy and the pursuit of an ideal woman, whom he carves out of ivory. Wishing the statue were real, he makes a sacrifice to Aphrodite, who brings the statue to life.





# “Pygmalion”

*Pygmalion* takes place in London, England in the early 1900's. It provides a glimpse of what city life was like at the time, as well as a glimpse of the class system that existed at this time.



# British Class System in the early 1900's

In addition to the differences in wealth and social status between the middle and upper class there was also a huge difference in education which created a large gap between these two classes.

The working class of England spoke in varying accents which were called dialects. A person's dialect was a dead giveaway as to where a person lived.

# Characters

- ◉ Colonel Pickering – first introduced to us as “The Gentleman” Colonel Pickering is a very wealthy man. He is not royalty, but he is amongst the highest class of English society.
- ◉ Prof. Henry Higgins – first introduced to us as “The Note-taker” Higgins is a highly educated and wealthy man.
- ◉ Eliza – first introduced to us as “The Flower girl” she is very poor and uneducated and has a horrendous dialect.