

Pygmalion notes for teachers. TNT theatre & ADG Europe.

PYGMALION is a masterpiece of English dramatic literature but it has suffered for many years by comparison with *My Fair Lady* and drawing room comedies such as those of Oscar Wilde.

Our aim is to look afresh at this play, to reveal its modern relevance and to entertain while challenging the idea that this powerful work is only a comedy.

Key themes:

We are judged by how we communicate even more than how we look. Speech “betrays” our origin and education. Using the common English idiom : to betray our origin - is I think a starting point for Shaw. Betrayal, treason, traitor...our words are often beyond our control. Our words give us away, revealing who we are even if we wish to hide or protect our identity. Words can only be controlled, prevented from betraying us by education. How we communicate is perhaps as, or even more important than what we communicate. Another familiar idiom being: the medium is more, important than the message. Or: “the medium is the message”. What Eliza says is not important to Professor Higgins. He only cares how she says it.

Shaw is identifying a very modern phenomenon: the superficial judgement of people based on their style of communication rather than the content of what they communicate. Perspective, especially historical perspective, allows us to understand our own time and place. For example, the internet often seems to be more concerned with presentation than content. Social media presents us as what we wish to be rather than what we are and usually the self we present is untroubled and positive (beautiful or handsome too!) rather than how we really feel or indeed look.

Social mobility has slowed down in most modern societies since the 1980's. A strong regional accent, especially one associated with industrial cities, remains a powerful social and economic handicap. It might be interesting to ask students if they can think of exceptions in public life, in politics, the arts or celebrities they know.

Shaw was always considered to be a great visionary, to be a man ahead of his time. His attitude to women is very positive. In the age of #Me Too PYGMALION is a relevant and exciting text. Higgins (and to an extent Pickering) believe they have the right to mould Eliza, to change her but not to take to responsibility for that change. They understand how powerful this change will be, Eliza does not, indeed cannot, because she has no idea of the social world she will be propelled into. Higgins and Pickering know they are making a type of monster, someone who will no longer be able to live with her old friends or family but only appear to fit in with “high” society. The only place Eliza will fit in is at the house of Higgins. But Higgins is a “confirmed bachelor”. Shaw is very clear that this is not a romantic comedy. Eliza is isolated by Higgins. she is treated as an experiment not a human. She rebels, she goes to the only sensitive and intelligent character in the play for support: Mrs Higgins, the professor's mother. It is important to Shaw that our sympathy as an audience lies with the two main female characters, indeed we might say that Mrs Higgins represents us the audience- what she thinks is what we think, she voices our opinions and judgement.

The other important male character in Eliza's life is her father, Alfred Doolittle. Shaw is not sentimental. It is not only the rich and intelligent males who are criticised in this play. Alfred may have charm and the ability to communicate but he is a terrible parent. He treats his daughter as a

commodity, a source of income and a nuisance to his self-indulgent life. As with Higgins, he refuses to take responsibility for Eliza. Women are seen as objects not equals by these powerful men. The men do not articulate this. The men think they are behaving fairly or naturally. They believe they are right, even moral. This is what Shaw is challenging: the assumption of superiority by those who have no right to be superior because their actions are deeply selfish. Both Higgins and Alfred are immature. They behave like the worst boys, boys who disdain girls. Alfred feels trapped by both fatherhood and marriage. Higgins and even Pickering want to live as bachelors with every luxury, served by their female housekeeper (who protects them from the adult practical world) and given comfort by their “pet”, a woman who they have trained to entertain them, to irritate other adults and throw their slippers (like a dog).

So why does not Eliza see this and simply leave? This is a good question to ask a class before suggesting answers as I do now. Eliza starts as a lonely figure. She lives a fragile existence selling flowers in the vegetable market of Convent Garden in the heart of London. We can see how tough she needs to be. Every half penny matters to her. She shamelessly pushes for a sale. We are uncomfortable because her selling is close to begging. We also see that she has a strong sense of herself. She is respectable. She may be close to being a beggar but she is not a beggar (or worse). But she is frightened of the police. She knows that her poverty makes her suspect by the Law, especially as she sells to the rich. The poor do not buy flowers. Eliza is isolated before she meets Higgins. Shaw does not depict a jolly working class world of friendly traders. No one shows Eliza kindness until she meets Higgins housekeeper (although Pickering treats her better than Higgins). Above all her family either do not exist or treat her and each other with indifference or cruelty. We may laugh at the brilliant scene at Higgins’ mother’s tea party but behind the comedy lies a brutal cruelty; her aunt was probably murdered for her meagre possessions. A sick woman is killed by a drunk for a straw hat. This is grotesque comedy and dark satire. Eliza escapes from a lonely and terrifying world. But it was her world. She cannot return with her upper class speech patterns. When she tries to she fails. In our production we dramatise a key scene that Mrs Higgins only describes: after the argument with Higgins late at night when they return from the Ball, Eliza storms out of Wimpole Street and wanders through her old haunts in Convent Garden. No one recognizes her. This is not her true home. Her drunken father denies her any other home. Eliza is truly alone and in despair. Mrs Higgins says that at this moment poor Eliza is about to throw herself in the river to drown. At this point the play could almost be a tragedy. But Eliza is resilient, she’s is a natural survivor and indeed a strong woman. But the sad truth is that the only place she can go to, her only nest and refuge is Higgins and his house. He and she are bound together. This is no romance, it is perhaps a cruel mutual dependence.

Like Shakespeare, Shaw is able to take these serious and profound themes and explore them through comedy. It would be interesting to ask the class if they think the ending is a happy ending and if the play really is a comedy. We are too used to thinking of laughter as being something frivolous and light. Yet laughter, unlike crying, is unique to humans. English (and especially British) literature, understands the power and seriousness of comedy. Pygmalion is a supreme example of this special art, a work that speaks to us today even as we smile.

Paul Stebbings 2018