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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Pygmalion

by George Bernard Shaw

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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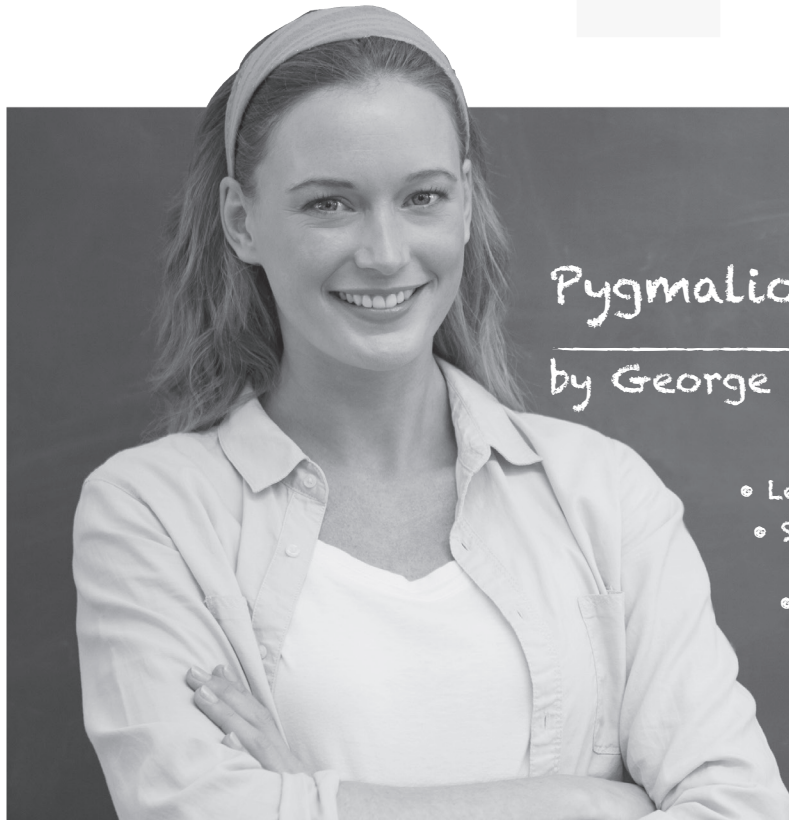
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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. summarize the classical myth upon which Shaw based *Pygmalion*, pointing out where Shaw's play parallels the myth and where it departs from it; identify the themes and major concepts that the two stories have in common.
2. trace Eliza Doolittle's transformation over the course of the play, pointing out the ways in which she has changed and the various roles that other characters play in her transformation.
3. explain the meaning of the phrase "theater of ideas" as it relates to Shaw's work; point out and discuss those features in *Pygmalion* that make the play a "drama of ideas."
4. define the term "didactic" and point out the ways in which *Pygmalion* is a didactic play; discuss Shaw's views on didactic art and literature, according to his own remarks in the Preface.
5. identify and discuss at least two incidents in the play that can be seen as examples of what is referred to as "Shavian wit," a technique in which Shaw takes conventional wisdom and shows that thinking to be false or superficial.
6. discuss the social and economic concerns that Shaw deals with in the play, specifically the plight of the poor, the inequalities that exist among the classes, and the objectification of women.
7. discuss the extent to which Professor Higgins is an "alter ego," or mouthpiece, for Shaw.
8. explain how Shaw uses humor and satire to explore contemporary social issues, and point out at least two targets of his satirical attacks.
9. infer from the dialogue and stage notes on the last page of the play what the future holds for Liza and Henry, supporting that inference with examples from the text.
10. explain how Shaw presents class distinctions in early 20th-century English society, pointing out how speech and dress, in particular, influence a person's perceived social standing.
11. identify the differences between the poor working class, as represented by Eliza Doolittle, and an elite upper class whose money and power derive from inherited wealth and tradition, as represented by the Eynsford Hills; explain how Shaw presents these two classes and discuss his apparent attitude toward each of them.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In his Preface, Shaw explains why he made a professor of phonetics the hero of his play. What are his reasons? How do they relate to his comments about the state of the English language, as it is spoken, and the importance of proper speech and grammar?
2. As a professor of phonetics, what are Henry Higgins's goals and priorities? How does he profit financially from people who have moved upward in socioeconomic status, yet still speak with lower class dialects?
3. Define "didactic literature," and explain how Shaw feels about it, according to his Preface. Discuss why Shaw considers *Pygmalion* a didactic play.
4. Why does Eliza Doolittle initially come to Higgins's house to ask for speech lessons? What does she hope to achieve by improving her manner of speaking?
5. Describe the wager that sets the main plot in motion. Who proposes this wager, and of what does it consist?
6. Describe Mrs. Pearce and discuss her role in the play. What is her major concern regarding Henry's efforts to transform Liza? Which other characters share this concern?
7. What does the reader learn about Henry's personal habits and manners from Mrs. Pearce? In light of this information, what is both hypocritical and ironic about Henry's plan to transform Liza into a refined lady?
8. Describe Liza's father, Alfred Doolittle. Explain his meaning when he refers to himself as one of the "undeserving poor." How are Doolittle's views on "middle class morality" characteristic of what is referred to as "Shavian wit," a technique in which Shaw takes conventional wisdom and turns it upside down?
9. What is Liza's reaction to the mirror in the bathroom at Henry's house? Explain how her reaction can be interpreted on a metaphorical level, as well as on a practical level. What might the mirror symbolize?
10. When Liza is introduced to Mrs. Higgins and the Eynsford Hills, she speaks with nearly perfect pronunciation and with "great beauty of tone." However, what is comical and inappropriate about her topics of conversation? What explanation does Henry fabricate to make her conversational topics seem chic and fashionable?
11. Throughout the play, Shaw uses satire to expose the absurdities of class pretensions. Explain why Clara Eynsford Hill, her mother, and the type of people they represent are objects of this type of satirical attack. Provide examples from the text to support your answer.

Pygmalion

PREFACE

VOCABULARY

abominably – terribly, dreadfully
allusion – an indirect reference
amenity – pleasantness; courtesy
aspirant – one who aspires to a higher position or seeks to achieve something
compliance – agreement
conciliatory – pleasant; appeasing
contempt – dislike, hatred
cryptograms – coded or secret writings
decipher – to interpret or decode
derisive – mocking, sarcastic
despise – to hate
didactic – morally instructive
exorbitant – excessive
hence – from now
inscrutable – difficult to understand; mysterious
libelous – insulting, slanderous
obscurity – the state of being hidden or vague; anonymity
phonetics – the study of spoken language and speech sounds
proficiency – skill, ability
renounce – to give up or abandon
repudiation – rejection, denial
satires – literary works that use humor to ridicule someone or something
syndicate – an agency that sells articles or writings for publication
vulgarly – crudely, tastelessly

1. In his Preface to *Pygmalion*, Shaw explains why he has made a scholar of phonetics the hero of his play. What are his reasons? How do they fit with his complaints about the English people and their language?

4. Why does the Bystander tell the Flower Girl to “be careful”? Why does she insist, “I’m a respectable girl: so help me, I never spoke to him...”?

5. What is it that the Note Taker, who has been mistaken for a “copper’s nark,” has been writing in his notebook? What is a “copper’s nark”?

6. Describe the attitude of the crowd toward the Note Taker.

7. What plot device does Shaw use to get this crowd of people in a situation where the Note Taker will be able to show off his abilities?

8. Earlier, the Flower Girl had said that Freddy lacks manners. For what reasons can it be said that the young Clara and the Note Taker also lack manners?

ACT V

VOCABULARY

bequest – a gift or donation
blasphemy – vulgar or profane speech
brougham – a type of carriage
confounded – puzzling, mystifying
deftly – skillfully
demean – to humiliate or disgrace
ignoramus – a foolish or ignorant person
impudence – nerve, audacity
incorrigible – incapable of change or reform
magnanimous – generous, noble; unselfish
melancholy – sad, gloomy
placidly – gently; calmly
pram – a baby carriage
reproach – criticism; disapproval
resolutely – determined
solicitor – a lawyer
toadying – flattering others for self-serving reasons
vehement – intense, forceful
vexation – annoyance, displeasure

1. What has happened to Mr. Doolittle, and why does he blame Henry for his situation? Why does Doolittle see it as a misfortune?

2. Why does Doolittle not do as Mrs. Higgins suggests and simply refuse the money?

3. What is Mrs. Higgins's explanation for the angry feelings demonstrated by Liza?
