

A Journey through Heritage of Classism in Pygmalion

George Bernard Shaw

Mahir Abdelhaleem Abdelmageed Mahir

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages, University College of Farasan, Jazan University, KSA

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 20 Mar 2026; Received in revised form: 16 Apr 2026; Accepted: 20 Apr 2026; Available online: 24 Apr 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>Pygmalion, Classism, George Bernard Shaw, Psychoanalytical Theory, Social Status</i></p>	<p><i>The study aims at analyzing an examination of George Bernard Shaw in "Pygmalion" focusing on the theme of "Classism." By applying Psychoanalytical Theory lens, the study investigates how the text reflects the socio-political and psychological climates of its era. Special attention is given to the symbolism of "Classism" and its contribution to the overall narrative structure. The analysis of the theme and the characters offers a fresh perspective on the work's relevance to modern literary discourse. In George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion, classism is explored through the lens of linguistic performance, suggesting that social status in England is primarily a product of speech and appearance rather than inherent merit. Shaw uses the transformation of Eliza Doolittle to argue that "English is not accessible even to Englishmen" due to a lack of formal phonetic education, which creates rigid barriers between classes.</i></p>

AS WILL BE SEEN LATER ON, Pygmalion needs, not a preface, but a sequel, which I have supplied in its due place. The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. They spell it so abominably that no man can teach himself what it sounds like. It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him. German and Spanish are accessible to foreigners: English is not accessible even to Englishmen. The reformer England needs today is an energetic phonetic enthusiast: that is why I have made such a one the hero of a popular play. There have been heroes of that kind crying in the wilderness for many years past. When I became interested in the subject towards the end of the eighteen-seventies, Melville Bell was dead; but Alexander J. Ellis was still a living patriarch, with an impressive head always covered by a velvet skull cap, for which he would apologize to public meetings in a

very courtly manner. He and Tito Pagliardini, another phonetic veteran, were men whom it was impossible to dislike. Henry Sweet, then a young man, lacked their sweetness of character: he was about as conciliatory to conventional mortals as Ibsen or Samuel Butler. His great ability as a phonetician (he was, I think, the best of them all at his job) would have entitled him to high official recognition, and perhaps enabled him to popularize his subject, but for his Satanic contempt for all academic dignitaries and persons in general who thought more of Greek than of phonetics. Once, in the days when the Imperial Institute rose in South Kensington, and Joseph Chamberlain was booming the Empire, I induced the editor of a leading monthly review to commission an article from Sweet on the imperial importance of his subject. When it arrived, it contained nothing but a savagely derisive attack on a professor of language and literature whose chair Sweet regarded as proper

to a phonetic expert only. The article, being libelous, had to be returned as impossible; and I had to renounce my dream of dragging its author into the limelight. When I met him afterwards, for the first time for many years, I found to my astonishment that he, who had been a quite tolerably presentable young man, had actually managed by sheer scorn to alter his personal appearance until he had become a sort of walking repudiation of Oxford and all its traditions. It must have been largely in his own despite that he was squeezed into something called a Readership of phonetics there. The future of phonetics rests probably with his pupils, who all swore by him; but nothing could bring the man himself into any sort of compliance with the university, to which he nevertheless clung by divine right in an intensely Oxonian way. I daresay his papers, if he has left any, include some satires that may be published without too destructive results fifty years hence. He was, I believe, not in the least an ill-natured man: very much the opposite, I should say; but he would not suffer fools gladly. Those who knew him will recognize in my third act the allusion to the patent Shorthand in which he used to write postcards, and which may be acquired from a four and six-penny manual published by the Clarendon Press. The postcards which Mrs. Higgins describes are such as I have received from Sweet. I would decipher a sound which a cockney would represent by zerr, and a Frenchman by seu, and then write demanding with some heat what on earth it meant. Sweet, with boundless contempt for my stupidity, would reply that it not only meant but obviously was the word Result, as no other Word containing that sound, and capable of making sense with the context, existed in any language spoken on earth. That less expert mortals should require fuller indications was beyond Sweet's patience. Therefore, though the whole point of his "Current Shorthand" is that it can express every sound in the language perfectly, vowels as well as consonants, and that your hand has to make no stroke except the easy and current ones with which you write m, n, and u, l, p, and q, scribbling them at whatever angle comes easiest to you, his unfortunate determination to make this remarkable and quite legible script serve also as a Shorthand reduced it in his own practice to the most inscrutable of cryptograms. His true objective was the provision of a full, accurate, legible script for our

noble but ill-dressed language; but he was led past that by his contempt for the popular Pitman system of Shorthand, which he called the Pitfall system. The triumph of Pitman was a triumph of business organization: there was a weekly paper to persuade you to learn Pitman: there were cheap textbooks and exercise books and transcripts of speeches for you to copy, and schools where experienced teachers coached you up to the necessary proficiency. Sweet could not organize his market in that fashion. He might as well have been the Sybil who tore up the leaves of prophecy that nobody would attend to. The four and six-penny manual, mostly in his lithographed handwriting, that was never vulgarly advertised, may perhaps someday be taken up by a syndicate and pushed upon the public as The Times pushed the Encyclopedia Britannica; but until then it will certainly not prevail against Pitman. I have bought three copies of it during my lifetime; and I am informed by the publishers that its cloistered existence is still a steady and healthy one. I actually learned the system two several times; and yet the shorthand in which I am writing these lines is Pitman's. And the reason is, that my secretary cannot transcribe Sweet, having been perforce taught in the schools of Pitman. Therefore, Sweet railed at Pitman as vainly as Thersites railed at Ajax: his raillery, however it may have eased his soul, gave no popular vogue to Current Shorthand. Pygmalion Higgins is not a portrait of Sweet, to whom the adventure of Eliza Doolittle would have been impossible; still, as will be seen, there are touches of Sweet in the play. With Higgins's physique and temperament Sweet might have set the Thames on fire. As it was, he impressed himself professionally on Europe to an extent that made his comparative personal obscurity, and the failure of Oxford to do justice to his eminence, a puzzle to foreign specialists in his subject. I do not blame Oxford, because I think Oxford is quite right in demanding a certain social amenity from its nurslings (heaven knows it is not exorbitant in its requirements!); for although I well know how hard it is for a man of genius with a seriously underrated subject to maintain serene and kindly relations with the men who underrate it, and who keep all the best places for less important subjects which they profess without originality and sometimes without much capacity for them, still, if he overwhelms them with

wrath and disdain, he cannot expect them to heap honors on him.

Of the later generations of phoneticians I know little. Among them towers the Poet Laureate, to whom perhaps Higgins may owe his Miltonic sympathies, though here again I must disclaim all portraiture. But if the play makes the public aware that there are such people as phoneticians, and that they are among the most important people in England at present, it will serve its turn. I wish to boast that *Pygmalion* has been an extremely successful play all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else. Finally, and for the encouragement of people troubled with accents that cut them off from all high employment, I may add that the change wrought by Professor Higgins in the flower girl is neither impossible nor uncommon. The modern concierge's daughter who fulfils her ambition by playing the Queen of Spain in *Ruy Blas* at the Theatre Francais is only one of many thousands of men and women who have sloughed off their native dialects and acquired a new tongue. But the thing has to be done scientifically, or the last state of the aspirant may be worse than the first. An honest and natural slum dialect is more tolerable than the attempt of a phonetically untaught person to imitate the vulgar dialect of the golf club; and I am sorry to say that in spite of the efforts of our Academy of Dramatic Art, there is still too much sham golfing English on our stage, and too little of the noble English of Forbes Robertson.

Eliza Doolittle is the central character of *Pygmalion* along with the protagonist (hero) Henry Higgins. She is a flower girl who sells flowers in the corner of Tottenham Court Road. She comes from the lower class of society and lives in Drury Lane. But, she is very moralistic by nature. Her oft-quoted sentence, "I'm a good girl I am" clearly indicates that she is particular about morals. This is further seen when she hangs a towel over the bathroom mirror at Higgins' house. She doesn't even want to see herself nude.

Eliza is very sensitive by nature. She cares a lot about politeness and wants to be treated politely too. That is why she is shocked by Higgins' behavior

and impressed by Pickering's attitude towards her. It is Pickering's politeness that makes her understand the power of self-esteem (respect for oneself).

At the outset, Eliza picks up all that Higgins teaches her like a parrot. But gradually, with language, she gains self-confidence. When Higgins and Pickering do not acknowledge her effort after the ambassador's party, she feels offended. She hurls Higgins' slippers at him as a mark of protest against his attitude towards her. She clearly tells Higgins and Pickering how they have not cared about her identity crisis (problem of identity - where does she belong?). But, now that she has language to her advantage, she decides to battle against life on her own. She refuses to return to Higgins. Even Higgins recognizes her strength of character and calls her "a tower of strength" and "a consort battleship."

Eliza is symbolical of the mythical character Galatea. She is Higgins' creation just as Galatea was *Pygmalion's*. But, unlike Galatea, Eliza is not a meek and pretty woman who is ready to be married to Higgins. She is a strong-willed woman who decides to carve her own destiny. She respects Higgins and Shaw does hint that she has a soft corner for him. But she knows that marriage to him will not work out for both. So, she decides to marry Freddy at the end.

To conclude, Eliza is one of the strongest characters of Shaw. She is a combination of beauty and brains and represents the self-reliant and strong-willed woman.

Colonel Pickering is one of the major characters in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. He is also a linguist like Henry Higgins. His interest is in Indian languages, particularly Sanskrit and is also the author of Spoken Sanskrit. Colonel Pickering is very polite and treats everyone with great respect irrespective of the class to which they belong. This is seen in his treatment of Eliza Doolittle. Although she is an ordinary flower girl, he treats her like a lady. It is Pickering who teaches us the importance of self-respect.

Pickering is equally interested in Eliza's welfare and therefore funds the money for her learning. But, unlike Higgins who never cares for Eliza's feelings, Pickering always tries not to hurt her feelings. Till the very end, he tries to make Eliza understand that he cares for her. He tells her that he doesn't see her as a mere object of experiment. Eliza

always likes and admires him. That is why she says, "He treats a flower girl as if she was a duchess."

Towards the end, Shaw hints that Higgins and Pickering continue to help Eliza. Pickering is a flat character who remains the same till the very end.

Alfred Doolittle is a dustman and is a minor character in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. He is the father of the central character Eliza Doolittle. He is a true representative of the lower class that cares not for values or morals. This is shown in the play when he doesn't care about Eliza and in fact turns her out of the house.

When Eliza comes to Higgins' place to learn, then Doolittle misunderstands the situation. He thinks that Eliza is having an illicit relationship with Higgins and comes to claim money for the same. When Higgins asks him whether he has no morals, he simply cannot afford having any. Doolittle represents the lower class that is deprived of comfort and luxury that other classes enjoy. Therefore, those of the lower class try to derive happiness and pleasure by leading a life however they like. This immorality makes up for all that the comfort and luxury they lack in life.

Although Doolittle belongs to the lower class, he is not greedy. He is happy with a five pound from Higgins in return for Eliza and doesn't want more. He lives with a woman but is unable to marry her because she knows that he wouldn't get her gifts or woo her after marriage.

When Higgins elevates the status of Doolittle from dustman to gentleman, there is a dramatic change in him. He becomes more respectable and attaches importance to morals. He is careful about how he behaves in society. The best example of this is his marriage to the woman he has been living with.

In spite of complaining against his new status, Doolittle is unable to reject the new-found status or money. So, he quietly accepts his new condition. He now becomes a representative of middle class morality.

Through Alfred Doolittle, Shaw ridicules (makes fun of) the sham and hypocrisy (pretensions) in society.

Henry Higgins is the protagonist of Shaw's comedy, *Pygmalion*. Shaw made a linguist the central character of *Pygmalion* to show that only such a

person can make society better. Language is the soul of every individual. So, only a linguist can improvise on a person's soul through language.

Higgins is a professor of Phonetics. He is a realist who dislikes people wearing masks to hide their real situation. Therefore, whenever he gets a chance, he tries to tear their masks. This is seen when he talks to Mrs. And Miss Eynsford Hill at Mrs. Higgins' place. His love for realism is such that he even considers politeness a pretention. That is why he speaks rudely to Eliza when she comes home.

Higgins is extremely fond of the English language. So, he gets angry when he hears people like Eliza speaking bad English. His desire to mold Eliza into a better human being and an excellent English speaker succeeds to a great extent. But, in doing so, Higgins sets Eliza in a dilemma. He does not train her to adapt to her new identity.

Higgins is deeply attached to his mother. This is seen in his conversations with her. Although he does get angry with his housekeeper Mrs. Pearce's comments, he likes and respects her. He has great respect for Pickering who is also a linguist like him.

Higgins' attachment for Eliza cannot be termed love. He is fond of her because she is his best creation. But he never shows his fondness or appreciation openly. This is why Eliza gets offended and walks out of his house. But Higgins is very protective about her. He gets anxious when she is found missing and makes attempts to search for her. He is relieved when he finds her at his mother's place. He gets angry when she says she is to marry Freddy. Higgins thinks that Freddy is not good enough for Eliza whom he has molded so carefully. His respect and admiration for Eliza increases when she refuses to return to his house. He realizes that his creation is not a mere parrot. She is in fact, a strong-willed woman who can decide for herself.

Although Higgins' rude nature is discouraging, his intentions are good. He disapproves of the immoral nature of Doolittle and therefore elevates his status. In short, Higgins' actions should not be taken as acts of arrogance. On the other hand, they should be viewed as the attempts of a man who wants a more linguistically sound society.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, George Bernard Shaw uses "Pygmalion" to challenge our understanding of "Classism." Through the use of symbolism, characters, and narrative structure, the work transcends its original context to offer universal insight into the human conditions. This study underscores the enduring relevance of the text, providing that its theme of "Classism" continues to resonate with modern studies.

The conclusion of Pygmalion is a triumph of self-respect over social standing. It replaces the "Cinderella" trope with a gritty, realistic assertion that true transformation happens in the mind and soul, not just in the vowels.

REFERENCES

- [1] Kerswill, P. (2009). Language and Social Class. *English Language*, 358–372. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-07789-9_19
- [2] Kumar, T., Musabal, A., AbdAlgane, M., & Yunus, M. M. (2024). The Impact of Social Class on Speech and Speech Inventiveness in George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4565759>