

Pygmalion: Henry and Eliza

by George Bernard Shaw *from Pygmalion*

George Bernard Shaw's play Pygmalion was the basis for the famous musical My Fair Lady. First performed in 1913, Pygmalion is the story of Eliza Doolittle, a poor and unsophisticated flower seller on the streets of London, who wants to learn to speak "like a lady."

In this passage from Act I, she has met by chance Professor Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, near a church during a rainstorm. They are amongst a group of people who have gathered under the church's portico to stay dry. Henry has been listening to the other people as part of his research. Eliza was afraid for a time that he was a policeman trying to arrest her and is just beginning to recover from her fear. Henry is "The Note Taker" below. Eliza is "The Flower Girl," and "The Gentleman" is Colonel Pickering, who was part of the group. The rain has stopped. Stage directions are in italics.

[All the rest have gone except the note taker, the gentleman, and the flower girl, who sits arranging her basket, and still pitying herself in murmurs.]

The Flower Girl: Poor girl! Hard enough for her to live without being worried and chivied.

The Gentleman: *[returning to his former place on the note taker's left]* How do you do it, if I may ask?

The Note Taker: Simply phonetics. The science of speech. That's my profession; also my hobby. Happy is the man who can make a living by his hobby! You can spot an Irishman or a Yorkshireman by his brogue. I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.

The Flower Girl: Ought to be ashamed of himself, unmanly coward!

The Gentleman: But is there a living in that?

The Note Taker: Oh yes. Quite a fat one. This is an age of upstarts. Men begin in Kentish Town with 80 pounds a year, and end in Park Lane with a hundred thousand. They want to drop Kentish Town; but they give themselves away every time they open their mouths. Now I can teach them—

The Flower Girl: Let him mind his own business and leave a poor girl—

The Note Taker: *[explosively]* Woman: cease this detestable boohooing instantly; or else seek the shelter of some other place of worship.

The Flower Girl: [*with feeble defiance*] I've a right to be here if I like, same as you.

The Note Taker: A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.

The Flower Girl: [*quite overwhelmed, and looking up at him in mingled wonder and deprecation without daring to raise her head*] Ah—ah—ah—ow—ow—oo!

The Note Taker: [*whipping out his book*] Heavens! what a sound! [*He writes; then holds out the book and reads, reproducing her vowels exactly*] Ah—ah—ah—ow—ow—ow—oo!

The Flower Girl: [*tickled by the performance, and laughing in spite of herself*] Garn!

Questions

1. List two character traits that the audience learns about Eliza in this scene. Use quotations to support your answer.
2. List two character traits that the audience learns about Henry in this scene.
3. What does *upstart* mean here: "This is an age of upstarts. Men begin in Kentish Town with 80 pounds a year, and end in Park Lane with a hundred thousand."
4. What is Henry's hobby?