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ACT 1

1

In this opening act we are introduced to the main characters as well as some of the more minor ones. The act opens at the portico of St. Paul's Church in Covent Garden. It is 11.15 pm and a summer thunderstorm has caused various people to seek shelter from the rain in the porch. Amongst these people are a lady and her daughter in evening dress. Her son returns from an unsuccessful attempt to get a cab but is sent off to try again. A girl who sells flowers in the street and an older gentleman in evening clothes join them. Behind one of the columns with his back to everyone else a man is standing writing things down in a notebook.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. Notice how Shaw uses the device of the rainstorm in order to bring his characters together. How effective do you find this?
2. A number of the major figures of the play have been introduced already. The family in evening dress will later be introduced as the Eynsford-Hills. What is your initial impression of them at this early stage?
3. What is your impression of the young flower-seller (we later learn she is called Eliza Doolittle)?
4. The gentleman in evening dress is Colonel Pickering. How does he respond to the flower seller?

At this point someone warns the flower-seller that the man with the notebook is writing down everything that she says. This frightens her and she feels sure that he must be a policeman. She turns to Colonel Pickering for protection, begging him to prevent her from being arrested. The man with the notebook comes forward and denies that he has anything to do with the police. Eliza asks to see what he has written and he shows her although she can make no sense of it. The man reads out to her exactly what she has said using her own pronunciation. He goes on then to identify the areas that several of the bystanders come from and finishes off by identifying Pickering's background. By now the rain has stopped and the ladies in evening dress go off to catch a bus while the other bystanders go their separate ways.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. The character with the notebook, Henry Higgins has been present from the beginning but up until this point he has been silent. What is the effect when he does speak?
2. He has written down everything that the flower girl has said using what is called a phonetic alphabet. This is an alphabet where each symbol represents a sound so that he can record the girl's dialect speech. Higgins is a student of dialects which is why he can tell what part of the country or even which part of London someone comes from. What effect does his ability to do this have on the others?
3. What kind of impression do you get of Higgins from this early meeting?

Everyone has now left the portico except the flower girl, the man with the notebook and the gentleman in evening dress. The girl continues to complain about the way she has, in her eyes, been mistreated by the man with the notebook. The two men introduce themselves to one another. The note-taker is Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics and the gentleman is Colonel Pickering, an authority on Indian dialects. It appears that the two men have been anxious to meet for some time. Higgins explains how he teaches millionaires from humble backgrounds to speak 'correctly' and he uses the flower-girl as an example to illustrate what he means. He explains that her dialect condemns her to a life in the gutter but he claims that he could change the way she speaks so much that within three months she could pass as a duchess.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. This scene forms the basis of the whole play and is the beginning of the three-way relationship involving Eliza, Higgins and Pickering. When Higgins first mentions the idea of passing the flower girl off as a duchess he has no thought of actually doing it, of course. What is Eliza's view though and how does she view the thought of being a 'duchess'?
2. Shaw develops Higgins's character in more detail. Make notes on his character as it emerges here.

Higgins throws some money into Eliza's flower basket and he leaves with Pickering.

Questions on Act 1

1. Make a note of the parts of the act that are important to the plot.
2. How do we know that Eliza wants to improve herself?

The next act opens at 11 am the following morning in Higgins's house on Wimpole Street. His living room is equipped as a phonetics laboratory and Higgins and Pickering are discussing their favourite topic - phonetics. Eliza arrives and she has obviously tried to dress as smartly as she can. She wants to pay Higgins a shilling an hour to teach her to speak properly so that she can get a job in a florist's shop. At this point Pickering reminds Higgins of his boast that he could pass Eliza off as a duchess and he challenges him to a wager to try to do just that.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. What kind of figure does Eliza appear as here? How effective are her efforts to appear 'elegant'?
2. Why is Eliza angered by Higgins? What is her impression of him here?
3. Make a note of the ways in which Shaw presents Higgins.
4. How does Pickering contrast as a character with Higgins?

Higgins is very taken with Pickering's idea. He is determined to make a duchess of Eliza and he makes a start straight away by ordering Mrs. Pearce, his housekeeper to take away Eliza's clothes and burn them and to clean her up and order new clothes for her. He will not listen to any objections and eventually Mrs. Pearce takes Eliza away to be bathed.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. Notice how Shaw creates some conflict here in order to make the scene more dramatically effective and interesting. Why do you think both Mrs Pearce and Higgins feel uncomfortable?
2. What do you make of the way Higgins acts here? What tactics does he use to get his own way?
3. What does Eliza make of the events here?
4. What questions does Mrs Pearce raise about the whole plan?

ACT 2

4

Back in the laboratory Pickering wants Higgins's assurance that Eliza will not be taken advantage of. Higgins says that he has no personal interest in her. Mrs. Pearce enters and comments on Higgins's habits, such as constantly swearing. She says that he must reform his bad habits in order to set a good example for Eliza.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. What impression do you get of Higgin's attitude to women?
2. According to Mrs Pearce what bad habits does Higgins have?
3. How does Higgins respond to Mrs Pearce?

At this point Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, enters. He is very indignant and suggests that Higgins has lured Eliza away for immoral purposes. He is prepared to overlook this, though, if Higgins pays him five pounds. To Doolittle's surprise, Higgins orders him to take Eliza away immediately, accusing him of blackmail and threatening to call the police. Eventually, though, Higgins becomes taken with Doolittle's admission that he has no moral standards and he gives him five pounds anyway.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. A new character introduced at this stage helps to maintain interest and adds variety. Watch out for Shaw using this technique as the play progresses. Write down your impression of Doolittle and make a list of the points you learn about him and the ideas that he has.
2. What does Higgins make of Doolittle?

Eliza enters just as Higgins is leaving. She is clean after her bath and dressed in a Japanese Kimono which was the only thing that Mrs. Pearce could find to dress her in and Doolittle does not recognise his daughter. Eliza herself feels transformed and is very conscious of her appearance.

The act ends with a glimpse of Eliza undergoing a lesson and this shows us what an ordeal it is for her. She will have to endure months of this before we see her again.

Questions on Act 2

1. How do Higgins's speeches hint at the unsatisfactory outcome of the experiment?
2. What is the purpose of the 'bath' scene? What does it suggest about the way in which Eliza will react to the experiment as it develops?

Mrs. Higgins, Henry's mother is making preparations to entertain guests when her son bursts in to tell her that he has invited Eliza to visit her. The Eynsford-Hills arrive and as usual Higgins behaves badly in company. Colonel Pickering also arrives.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. The introduction of another character, in the form of Mrs Higgins adds further interest to the play. What impression do you get of her and what kind of relationship does she seem to have with her son?
2. What do you think of Higgins's behaviour here?
3. Note down any further points you learn about the Eynsford-Hills here.

Eliza enters, elegantly dressed and beautiful and her speech is equally impressive. Mrs. Eynsford-Hill and Clara are both impressed by her and Freddy immediately falls in love with her. However, the problems occur when she tries to converse socially - her attempts at this are disastrous. In the end Higgins signals her to leave. Eliza's departure is quickly followed by the Eynsford-Hills. Mrs. Eynsford-Hill is in a state of shock because of Eliza's language.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. Make a note of the various 'blunders' that Eliza makes in this scene.
2. What is the effect of Eliza's story?
3. Do you feel any sympathy for the Eynsford-Hills here?

After the others have left Higgins asks his mother if Eliza 'is presentable'. Obviously she is not ready to pass as a lady yet and his mother tells him so. She also goes on to point out that Eliza does present something of a problem and she raises the question of what is to become of her when the experiment is over. However, neither Pickering nor Higgins seem to have given this any thought. They leave and Mrs. Higgins reflects with exasperation on their short-sightedness.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. What comments does Mrs Higgins make about her son's language?
2. What concerns Mrs Higgins about the 'experiment' and why? What does she think about Higgins's and Pickering's attitude towards Eliza?

The second part of the Act shows Eliza, after more coaching, at the Embassy Ball. In one way this scene is essential as it shows the climax of the experiment. By now Higgins and Pickering have worked for six months to pass Eliza off as a Duchess. She attends the ambassador's reception splendidly dressed and appears elegant and beautiful and she creates a sensation. Just by chance a former pupil of Higgins is also present, a Hungarian called Nepommuck. He claims he can identify the background of any person by his or her speech. After talking to Eliza he says that she is definitely a Hungarian princess. The bet is won and Eliza leaves with Higgins and Pickering.

Questions on Act 3

1. Make a list of the parts of this act which move the plot forward and point to things which will happen later.
2. What do you see as the key part of the scene?
3. Make notes on the central characters as they appear in this Act.

Higgins, Pickering and Eliza have just returned home from the reception. The two men discuss events and speak about Eliza as though she is not there. Higgins is glad that the whole thing is over because he had become bored with the project over the last couple of months. Higgins and Pickering go to bed and left alone Eliza throws herself onto the floor in a rage. Higgins comes back down to pick up his slippers and Eliza throws them at him. He is amazed and wants to know what is wrong. She asks him what is to become of her. Higgins suggests that she might get married or open a florist's shop.

She wants to know whether the clothes that she has been bought belong to her - she does not want to be accused of stealing. This angers Higgins and he storms out of the room. Eliza goes up to her room.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. What impression do you get of Higgins's behaviour in this scene?
2. What is Higgins's attitude towards the experiment now?
3. How does Eliza feel? Look carefully at the ways in which she attacks Higgins - it is all designed to make him as cross as possible. Do you find her techniques effective?

Eliza goes to her room, changes her clothes and leaves the house. Outside she finds Freddy Eynsford-Hill who is hopelessly in love with her and spends his time gazing up at her window. He kisses her and they hug each other. They decide to ride around in a taxi all night and then go and ask Mrs. Higgins for advice in the morning.

Questions on Act 4

1. What kind of state is Eliza in when she leaves the house and what does she say to Freddy?
2. Compare Freddy's attitude towards Eliza here with that of Higgins.

ACT 5

8

Mrs. Higgins's parlour maid announces the arrival of her son and Pickering and informs her that they are telephoning the police. Mrs. Higgins sends word to Eliza to stay upstairs out of sight until Mrs. Higgins sends for her. Higgins enters in a very excited state and tells her that Eliza has disappeared.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. Note the amusing way that his mother says he has 'lost something' - reflecting Higgins's attitude towards Eliza as a piece of property. She also makes it clear that Eliza has come to her for advice just as she intended to do at the end of Act 4. How does she handle her son here?
2. She tries to get him to see that something must be wrong for Eliza to run away but he has a problem grasping this. What does he seem to be most concerned about?

The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Alfred Doolittle. He is dressed magnificently in top hat, fashionable suit, patent leather shoes, as if he might be going to a wedding. He is angry at Higgins who he holds responsible for the fact that he has been left a large amount of money and his happiness has been shattered by him being turned into a 'gentleman'. Mrs. Higgins sees one good thing in the situation though, he will now be able to support Eliza. Higgins objects to this though because he feels that she 'belongs' to him. Doolittle objects too.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. Doolittle's arrival adds further interest and variety. Make notes on how Doolittle has come into his money and how he feels about it.
2. List the disadvantages that Doolittle finds in his changed status.

Mrs. Higgins now tells her son that Eliza is in the house and she explains to him and Pickering why their conduct has made her so upset. Eliza comes down to confront both of them. She is calm and gracious and greets Higgins with a cool politeness but warmly thanks Pickering. She tells them firmly though that she will never return to Wimpole Street.

Eliza is just explaining how she can never go back to what she was before and that she will never make one of her old noises when she sees her father and immediately lets out one of her old terrible noises, much to Higgins's satisfaction. Doolittle tells them that he is about to marry Eliza's stepmother and Eliza says that she will come to the wedding and goes off to get her hat. Pickering agrees to be best man and Higgins will be a guest. Doolittle and Pickering leave for the church and Mrs. Higgins goes off to get ready. Higgins and Eliza are left alone.

POINTS TO NOTE

1. How does a) Higgins and b) Pickering respond to what Mrs Higgins has to say?
2. What new understanding has the transformed Eliza arrived at?
3. Make a note of the way in which Mrs Higgins once again keeps her son under control.
4. Note how Shaw creates a situation where Higgins and Eliza are left alone on the stage.

Now they are alone Higgins and Eliza talk through their relationship. Higgins wants her to return to his house and he admits that he would miss her if he did not see her any more. However, he will not agree to treat her politely and with consideration because he says that he will treat her just the same as he treats everybody else.

Eliza does not mind the rudeness, it is being ignored that really annoys her and hurts her. She does not want Higgins to be in love with her but she cannot bear the fact that he seems to have no feeling for her whatsoever. She tells him that she will earn a living teaching phonetics and marry Freddy. This angers Higgins and he is baffled by the whole situation. The play ends with Eliza leaving with Mrs. Higgins. Higgins laughs contemptuously at the thought of Eliza marrying Freddy.

Questions on Act 5

1. Make detailed notes on the concluding dialogue between Eliza and Higgins. What dramatic qualities does it possess?
2. What questions are raised in your mind at the end of the conversation? Why do you think Shaw ended his play in this way?
3. How does Eliza make use of Freddy in this section?

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

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The play is written in an unusual way because it is presented in its written form rather than as a conventional script. Notice how Shaw narrates some episodes and this allows the play to be structured more loosely than a more conventional method might allow. Nevertheless, the play does have a firm and definite structure.

Here's one way of looking at the play's structure.

Act 1 - Introduction to main characters, we learn about:

Higgins's work

Colonel Pickering's interest in language

Some things about Eliza

Act 2 - introduces Alfred Doolittle follows and develops the main characters.

Act 3 - comedy develops through Eliza's efforts to be a lady. The Embassy Ball presents a kind of false climax.

Act 4 - presents the real dilemma of the play as Eliza brings to the fore issues that have been developing in the background.

Act 5 - the return of Doolittle gives a sense of rounding off the play.

- the ambiguous ending leaves the audience pondering the Key issues Shaw has raised.

Make notes on how Shaw structures his play and develops the plot and the themes.

CHARACTERS

Before studying individual characters it is worth thinking about how Shaw presents his characters to us. He does this through:

Stage directions, often quite detailed, to describe a character to us.

What the characters say and how they say it.

What they do and how they behave.

Now think about the characters in the play.

PROFESSOR HIGGINS

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Make notes on your first impressions of Higgins as he appears in Act 1.

Examine the way that Higgins speaks. Do this by selecting three or four passages and make notes on the kind of vocabulary he uses. It would be useful if the passages you select involve Higgins speaking to different people.

Now make notes on the way that Higgins behaves. You might find words like eccentric, egotistical and self-centred describe his behaviour quite accurately but also see if you can find moments when it is clear that he cares about what Eliza thinks about him.

Think, too, about the way that people react to him. In particular look at the way that Eliza reacts to him when he decides to take on the 'experiment' in Act 2; after the Embassy Ball and at the end of the play. Also look at the way that Mrs. Higgins and Pickering react towards him.

Here are some character points. Look at each one and then write down some examples from the play of where or how he displays each:

His picture of himself is of an amiable, kindly man who often has to ensure the unreasonable behaviour of others.

In reality he likes to get his own way.

He is irresponsible and like a child with a new toy.

He is innocent and doesn't mean to hurt anybody.

He is devoted to his work.

He has awful manners and personal habits.

Think about Eliza's appearance. You should have no problems finding out about this because Shaw tells us everything we need to know through the stage directions. Make notes on Eliza's appearance at various points in the play.

Think about how she speaks. Make notes on this under three headings:

1. Her accent
2. The way she expresses herself
3. The kind of things she says.

Find appropriate examples from the text to support the points you make.

Now think about how she behaves at different points in the play and make notes on the Key features of her behaviour.

How do other people react to her? Make notes on how the following characters respond to her:

- a) Colonel Pickering
- b) Higgins
- c) Mrs. Higgins
- d) Freddy.

Here is a list of character points on Eliza. Look at each one and then write down examples from the play to illustrate each one:

She is accustomed to standing up for her rights.

She is ignorant.

She has certain standards of behaviour.

She has certain qualities within herself that the 'experiment' brings out. What are these and how do they show themselves?

She understands other people.

COLONEL PICKERING

How does Pickering treat Eliza?

In what ways is he similar and in what ways different to Higgins?

Here are some character points on Pickering. Provide some examples from the play to illustrate each one:

He is courteous.

He is patient and even tempered.

He can be short-sighted.

He represents sanity and conventional behaviour.

Mrs. HIGGINS

Mrs. Higgins doesn't have a very large part to play but her role is nevertheless an important one.

Look at the detailed stage directions at the beginning of Act 3. What do these tell us about her situation and the kind of person she is?

What kind of relationship does she have with her son and what attitude does she show towards him?

How does she treat Eliza? Look carefully at her responses to Eliza in Act 3 and Act 5.

Here are some character points about her. Illustrate each one with examples from the play.

She is an elegant and cultured woman.

Higgins is devoted to her.

She is perceptive.

She is sympathetic.

Now think about the following characters yourself:

Alfred Doolittle

Freddy Eynsford-Hill

Mrs. Pearce.

THEMES AND IDEAS - CHANGE

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Make notes on the contribution that each one of them makes to the play.

Two of the central themes of the play are to do with CHANGE and CLASS.

CHANGE

Think about the theme of CHANGE to begin with. Make a list of the characters who change during the course of the play and make notes on the ways in which they change.

The three characters that you will probably focus on mainly are:

Higgins

Eliza

Doolittle.

If you have any ideas on the other characters, though, make a note of them.

THEMES AND IDEAS - CLASS

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CLASS

Now think about the idea of class and what the play has to say about this theme.

You may have noticed that everyone in the play is quite clear about the class that they belong to:

The Poor - Eliza and Doolittle

The Servant Class - Mrs. Pearce; Mrs. Higgins' maid

The Middle Class (or Professional Class) - Pickering; Higgins

The Impoverished Gentry - the Eynsford-Hills

The Leisured Class - Mrs. Higgins and some of the guests at the Embassy.

The whole plot of the play involves transforming the poor flower-seller into a Duchess through changing the way she speaks and behaves.

What does this idea seem to suggest that 'Class' consists of?

Examine carefully what Doolittle has to say about class. Make notes on his perspective of the class issue.

What is significant about the position of the Eynsford-Hills?

Now sum up your own thoughts on what Shaw is showing us about class and society.

REVISION QUESTIONS

17

1. Compare and contrast the characters of Higgins and Pickering in *Pygmalion*.
2. What is your response to the character of Higgins? Does he have any qualities?
3. Discuss how Alfred Doolittle adds to the comic effect of the play.
4. Choose TWO settings from the play and examine how Shaw uses them to provide an effective background to the action.
5. What does the play have to say about social class and how do you respond to it?
6. Examine the roles of Mrs. Higgins, and Mrs. Pearce in the play.
7. Choose two scenes that you find particularly comic and write about how Shaw creates his humorous effects.
8. Discuss the theme of 'change' in *Pygmalion*.
9. What contribution do the Eynsford-Hills make to the play?
10. How effective do you find the ending of the play?