

In lead to a lack of empathy

[Life](#), [Friendship](#)



In the Edwardian age, the social system in the United Kingdom was based on the separation of classes.

The rigid social hierarchy that ruled the land split people apart by placing insurmountable barriers and requirements to climbing the social ladder, resulting in many lower and middle class people being looked down upon for superficial reasons. The prevalence of this thinking was entrenched within the upper class resulting in their stratification of those below them. The obstructionist system in place often led to stereotypical thinking on all sides of the social spectrum, with little room for growth. Shaw, seeing the flaws in this thinking, protested by attempting to spread his own opinions on the social system of the day. In Shaw's *Pygmalion*, he highlights the flaws in this system, namely the lack of unity and obstructionism, and uses Higgins' high standards to argue that such defects lead to a lack of empathy in people and more division between the classes. He tackles this by proposing the balance of ambition and empathy as a way to transcend the social ladder through his juxtaposition of Eliza's failure and her father's success at achieving such balance. Within the published pages of this play, Shaw sought to relate the growing disparity between the upper and lower classes through their social interactions and discrepancies. These discrepancies are most blatant between the characters of Eliza and Higgins, as an analysis from [markedbyteachers.com](https://www.markedbyteachers.com) proves,

“There was a lot of ignorance between the two classes, not only the rich taking no notice of the poor and their desperation, but also of the uneducated poor who were not familiar with the rich luxuries for example, Eliza did not realise that Higgins' bath tub was a place to wash people, not

clothes, ' Gawd! what's this? Is this where you wash clothes? Funny sort of copper I call it.'"(MarkedbyTeachers. com). Eliza's lack of understanding serves as a microcosm of the widening gap between the upper and lower classes as she fails to understand even the basic items essential to standards of life of the upper class. Her lack of communication with the other side serves to put distance between herself and Higgins and prevents her from advancing herself without help. These discrepancies would only serve to ignite the elitism of the upper class, as her lack of knowledge and crude communication skills only further the stereotypes entrenched in their minds. Through the course of the play, Higgins' treatment of Eliza symbolizes the elitist and separatist views of the upper class.

The upper class mindset itself is predominantly one of superficiality that lends itself to categorization, and it is explained by the website Markedbyteachers. com, in their in-depth analysis of the play, " Shaw uses Pygmalion to show how false the class system is and how it is based on superficial ideas. Shaw shows that people can't be put into categorize when he makes the characters exceed the boundaries of the groups they have placed in."(MarkedbyTeachers. com). Higgins follows this thinking and uses it to justify the classifications and stereotypes he applies to Eliza regularly. In his first interaction with Eliza, he makes a claim with a fellow linguist about his ability to teach her language and belittles her the entire time, " You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days.

Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. I could even get her a place as lady's maid or shop assistant, which requires better English." (Shaw 14). His almost instinctive need to insult her and his vicious treatment of her reflect the potency of the social stratification at the time as he wants to separate himself from her as much as possible.

This treatment also kept him from seeing things from her perspective, adding to the overall ignorance that plagued the Edwardian era. The only way to break this hard exterior was through the employment of Shavian wit, as Higgins' character is defined by his valuation of speech and other linguistic markers. Higgins' need to be impressed by wit in language reflects Shaw's message of advancement through learning. Higgins' is widely portrayed as someone only impressed by skill in language. This is evident by the way he treats Pickering when he first meets him as Hongwei Chen states in his analysis, "It is this power of speech that serves as Higgins's standard to measure his relationship with the people around him.

When the play begins, Higgins and Pickering are total strangers. But with the revelation of their common interest in language, one as the student in Indian dialects and the other as the author of Higgins' s Universal Alphabet, they immediately recognize each other as intimate friends belonging to the same " Empire." (Academypublication. com). Higgins' treatment of a fellow gentleman this way reveal his universal nature and his obstructionist views. He refuses to relate to those who he deems as worthless and only respects those who pass his litmus test of language and skill. Higgins is the perfect

conduit of the social order because he applies it indiscriminately. He uses it on Pickering to gauge his worth and become his acquaintance, and on Eliza to deem her unfit and not worth his time.

He represents the social ladder, forcing people into set roles when he views them as unworthy. His indiscriminate harshness directly reflect the needlessly selective nature of the upper class but they also further Shaw's message of advancement through skill, because regardless of background, one could only earn his respect through wit and mastery of linguistics. As the story progresses, Eliza, Freddy, and Mr Doolittle's successes in advancing themselves despite opposition perpetuate Shaw's message of the futility of social expectations. Throughout the play, Eliza goes beyond the issues of background and linguistic limitations by breaking the expectations set for her by Higgins and Pickering. She does this by succeeding in the bet made between them when she fits in with the upper class at the King's ball. She manages to pull this off quite easily and she absorbs the lessons so well, then she eventually earns the respect of Higgins. Alternately, throughout the play, Freddy is used to negatively transcend stereotypes.

He is held to somewhat high standards due to his previous life as one of the upper class, but he negatively breaks out of these because he's not adjusted to his new life. He fails to empathise with those who live in his current situation so he is unable to get a job and provide for his family. He is considered stupid and incompetent by his former peers and he is seen as weak because he takes orders from his sister. To add to this however, he also breaks the limitations of him being able to support a family based on his

gender and really cannot adjust to his surroundings “ He is a perfect example of how the upper classmen would have a difficult time adjusting to being a lower class when the family suffers economic hardships.”

(Cognotes). Using these examples of positive and negative ways to exceed expectations, Shaw manages to once again highlight his main point, that people should not be put into boxes based on the classism of the time. By showing how people who are expected to act one way act another, he subverts this ideal that was popular at the time and tries to spread a more open one.

While Eliza’s journey through the book leads her to become a member of the higher class, she ultimately fails to be a Shavian hero as she loses her ability to straddle the social line. Throughout the play, Eliza is shown to go beyond expectations with her confidence and advance herself, but in doing all this, she forfeits her self-sufficiency. She often shows this confidence by not letting people control her situations and taking necessary steps to better herself. She first displays this when she approaches Higgins for language lessons despite clearly not being welcome. “ I know what lessons cost as well as you do; and I’m ready to pay.” (Shaw 23). By showing this initiative she makes steps towards her future as she plans to use the lessons to allow her to sell more flowers.

This initial confidence is steeped in fear and conformity to the social system as she still valued what others thought of her. In the beginning of the play she was visibly self-conscious when her societal standing was questioned as she wanted to preserve her reputation, “ I ain’t done nothing wrong by

speaking to the gentleman. I've a right to sell flowers if I keep off the kerb. Hysterically I'm a respectable girl: so help me, I never spoke to him except to ask him to buy a flower off me ... They'll take away my character and drive me on the streets for speaking to gentlemen. They— (1. 59) This shows that while she was very sound in her confidence, she still had a shaky sense of social self.

The message of transformation is highlighted through her growth in this area throughout the play. She moves from a shaky flower-girl who cared a lot about how she was perceived, to an adjusted, confident woman through the incorporation of language skills. The process involved stages that went from her simply cleaning up and looking nicer to her imbibing the lessons taught to her to become the duchess. She starts the transformation by attempting to clean herself up before meeting Higgins, " The flower girl enters in state. She has a hat with three ostrich feathers, orange, sky-blue, and red. She has a nearly clean apron, and the shoddy coat has been tidied a little. (2. 21).

This humble step led to another when she became fully clean and looked completely different. This is was shown when her father, Mr. Dolittle, ran into her when he was leaving the Higgins estate and didn't recognize her, " Doolittle hurries to the door, anxious to get away with his booty. When he opens it he is confronted with a dainty and exquisitely clean young Japanese lady in a simple blue cotton kimono printed cunningly with small white jasmine blossoms. Mrs. Pearce is with her. He gets out of her way deferentially and apologizes. Beg pardon, miss.

THE JAPANESE LADY. Garn! Don't you know your own daughter? (2. 289-290)" The fact that her own father did not recognize her brings light to the vast difference that the little things in upper class culture, like baths and sap, could fully transform a lower class person. Her transformation was not fully complete yet, as she had not yet implemented the language of the rich to elevate herself and defy the social system of the time. She eventually takes this step when she blends well with the rich at the party and passes the test. Higgins and Pickering later discuss this, " But you've won your bet, Higgins. Eliza did the trick, and something to spare eh?" (Shaw 83).

She seems to have passed the test easily as Pickering and Higgins discuss how calm she was when faced with the situation. " Eliza didn't seem a bit nervous. Oh, she wasn't nervous I knew she'd be all right.

No, it's the strain of putting the job through all these months that has told on me." (Shaw 83). This display of calm self-assuredness is a far cry from the scared self-conscious girl she was when she first walked into the manor and it reflects the message that skills, especially in language, can allow people to break out of expectations and leave their backgrounds behind. While Shaw argues that language could transform people and elevate them, this book also looks into the flaws of those who are elevated and this is apparent in the changes to Eliza's self-sufficiency and ability to do things on her own. As Eliza advances up the social ladder, her self-sufficiency goes down and she loses the ability to do things on her own. In the beginning of the book, Eliza shows strong confidence and bravery by approaching Higgins but she also displayed a knowledge of how to take care of herself.

When she talked about the price of the lessons she knew exactly what she was talking about, “ I know what lessons cost as well as you do; and I’m ready to pay.” (Shaw 23). She was ready to pay for the lessons but knew enough to not get a bad deal out of it, so in that way, she displayed her self-sufficiency. Despite this strong start, Shaw’s argument about the change causing a disconnect proves true as she leaves this skill behind in exchange for becoming higher class. She comments back on this in act 5 when she considers marrying Freddy and she seems to realize this too, “ I have forgotten my own language, and can speak nothing but yours.” (Shaw 124). With this statement, she realizes how she left her old ways behind for good and can’t go back even if she tried.

This shows how she failed in her attempt at balance. Her loss of that ability bolsters Shaw’s argument because while she was able to rise up the social ladder, she failed in transcending it. She was able to utilize her Shavian wit to go forward, but she was unable to change direction, so she lost her ability to empathise with both sides of the divide.

While Eliza Doolittle serves to showcase the negatives of aiming too high, Mr Dolittle serves as the perfect level of initiative, ability and confidence to embody Shaw’s ideal society. Mr Dolittle performs this well because he understands both sides and made a conscious decision where he wants to go fully understanding that. He is introduced when he approaches the Higgins manor because he finds out Eliza has been there for a while and converses with Higgins. Her father, on the other hand, who describes himself as one of the “ the undeserving poor,” extorts a small amount of money from Higgins

but refuses the offer of a larger sum, explaining that substantial wealth would hinder his preferred mode of existence by requiring responsibility. (markedbyteachers. com) This entire exchange between him and Higgins impresses Higgins so much that he earns his respect and is seen as a man of wise words, despite his shady character.

This display of wit, confidence but also humility reflects the ideal members of society that Shaw envisions. People who are able to move past their limitations, fit in with the upper class, but not lose their connections and be able to close the gap between the rich and poor. Shaw decided not to make the character of Mr. Dolittle a morally good person and instead kept his moral ambiguity because in that way he had the widest appeal. As people are not purely black or white, neither was Mr. Dolittle, so his ability served to relate to the audience their potential to become such a citizen, to elevate themselves, but not lose their roots.

Pygmalion is message wrapped up as a play, it is (alter the wording). Their actions and attitudes towards the social system and those around them shaped Shaw's argument. Higgins, with his uniform disdain for people embodied the idea of scaling the social ladder. His needless requirements for respect and his critical lens to the world perfectly embody the Edwardian social system, and his harsh demeanor also proves Shaw's argument about skills and linguistics allowing people to progress as those who impressed him, like Eliza, Pickering, and Mr Dolittle have all shown this skill - rephrase. Eliza throughout the play is a beacon for the advancement of self through upper class behaviour, and manages to relate to them by learning the

language from Higgins. Despite her success, she also shows the negative side of advancement as she does not do so ideally, she loses her self-sufficiency because she could not relate well with both sides of the class spectrum and could not regain it. While Higgins embodies the system keeping people in place and Eliza embodies the failures of transforming oneself, Mr Dolittle goes beyond and represents the final form of Shaw's ideal citizen as he is able to transcend to the upper class when he needs to and does this through his command of language. - good, expand on this throughout the essay.

With this, he is able to impress even Higgins but knows when to stop and prevent himself from going too far, as is evident by his choice of declining the extra money to preserve his lifestyle. All in all, the situations set up by Higgins, Eliza and Mr. Dolittle encourage the audience to throw off society's shackles and advance to their full potential, but Shaw reminds them to stay grounded so they can still relate to their past. In this way they are able to speak to both sides of the class divide and work together to make a truly United Kingdom.