

An atypical romance in five acts



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

On the title page of *Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw describes the play as ‘A Romance in Five Acts’. Throughout the play, readers might assume that the heroine and hero of *Pygmalion* will end up romantically together. In fact, a common complaint about Shaw’s masterpiece is that, though it he calls it a romance, the protagonists are not, and do not fall in love during the course of the play. Upon closer observation, it is plain to see why the main characters do not end up together. Henry Higgins is not only unfit to marry the poor flower girl he turns into the image of a grand princess, he is unfit to marry anyone at all. Though readers may complain, he will remain a self-proclaimed bachelor. A major reason why Higgins will never marry is that he does not have the need to marry. Although it may seem odd to readers, Higgins has his ideal of a perfect woman in his mother. When the reader meets Mrs. Higgins in Act III, Shaw describes in great detail her simple and elegant furniture and decorating style. This gives the impression that she is a woman of good taste who manages to be in style without cluttering her home. Presented as the proper hostess, Mrs. Higgins is polite and charming. When Higgins tells his mother that he and Colonel Pickering have picked Eliza up, literally off of the street, the concern that Mrs. Higgins shows is admirable. It lets the reader know that Mrs. Higgins is aware that her son is not perfect, and that she is thoughtful about others. Readers see this again at the end of Act IV when Eliza runs away from the less approachable Higgins, to his mother’s home. Mrs. Higgins listens to what Eliza tells her and tries to make her comfortable. Shaw, himself, talks a great deal in his epilogue about why Mrs. Higgins is one of the reasons her son does not marry. Shaw tells readers that Higgins knew young women “ had an irresistible rival in his mother” (110). He explains to the reader that “ if an

imaginative boy has a sufficiently rich mother who has intelligence, personal grace, dignity of character without harshness, and a cultivated sense of the best art of her time...she sets a standard for him against which very few women can struggle" (110). This is indeed true and one of the best examples of why Higgins has no need to marry. Perhaps the best reason why Higgins will not marry is that marriage, considered the act of sharing one's soul with a life partner, goes against his personality and almost all that he stands for. His stubborn independence keeps him from wanting a partner for life, especially because he does not need one. His mother, his secretary, and Eliza assist him in anything that he needs and he does not have to be tied down with responsibilities, if he does not choose. When Eliza argues with him that he never treated her well, he responds that her problem is not that he does not treat a flower girl as if she was a duchess, it is that he "treat[s] a duchess as if she was a flower girl" (101). This is indeed typical of Higgins' behavior; he does not flatter and does not wish to be flattered. Higgins does not go out of his way to be more polite to women; his idea of a gallant compliment is the plain and blunt truth. It is doubtful how well Higgins would have survived in the Middle Ages during the time of chivalry. The particular complaint of most readers of *Pygmalion* is not that Higgins did not marry; it is that he did not marry Eliza. Shaw easily explains this in his epilogue by having the reader look at the personalities of both and the roles that they had to each other. Higgins and Eliza are both strong-willed independent people. Eliza's ideal man is one who shows his love for her and, in some ways, holds her above him and idolizes her. The main reason why she is attracted to Freddy is that he is attracted to her and he acts as though he cannot live without her. Higgins seems to hold this type of man in contempt.

He equates strong emotions with violence and even if he was attracted to Eliza, he would never fawn over her in the way that Freddy does. In some ways, this hurts Eliza's pride. At first, she wrongly believes that if she does things for Higgins, such as carrying his slippers to him, he will love her. When she finally stands up to him however, he tells her that this is "better than snivelling; better than fetching slippers and finding spectacles" (107) and that he likes her more when she speaks her mind. Another major reason why Higgins did not marry Eliza is their difference in class. Though Higgins teaches her to look and act like a member of the middle class, Eliza is still a flower girl picked from the gutter. As Shaw says "I cannot conceive a less happy ending to the story of Pygmalion than a love affair between the middle-class professor, a confirmed bachelor with a mother fixation, and a flower girl of 18" (128). In the end, for Higgins the cons of marriage far outweigh the pros. In his mother, Mrs. Pearce, and Eliza, Higgins has all of the female companionship he will ever need. Actually, between the three women mentioned, he has far more female companionship than he will ever want. To have Higgins marry would be to go against the nature of the characters, and though Pygmalion is a romance, it is plain to see Shaw's purpose in having his protagonist remain single.