

How does shaw  
introduce his ideas  
about society and  
language in the first  
two act...

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



From the first two acts of Pygmalion, Bernard Shaw has already begun to develop society and language using a number of different techniques and aspects. In the first act the audience is introduced to three main social classes all brought together by the weather. We see their stereotyped judgements, their attitudes and prejudices against each other. It is Higgins' belief that men trying to climb the social ladder will "give themselves away every time they open their mouths" (Act 1). Shaw also uses accent, revealing society's bias that accent is the key to social status.

This is already apparent through the proleptic irony of Liza, and the status of those around her. Humour is used to show how different the characters' situations are. Each class has at least one character that is humorous, but all their wit and comedy originates from different sources, for example Liza and her need for money. The first two acts of Pygmalion show great insight into the well-rounded representatives, which will come together and make Shaw's image of society. Shaw commences by exploring the different social classes.

All classes have been unexpectedly gathered under a shelter from the rain and bustling streets of London. There are three main types. The upper class consisting of Higgins and Pickering, the servants consisting of Mrs Pearce, and the lower class consisting of the Dolittles. The assortment of social classes have little respect of each other, but are together cautiously civil. However Higgins disrupts the peace by commenting that a woman who talks with a cockney accent has "no right to live" (Act 1).

He sees no harm in expressing his extreme prejudices, widening the gap between the social classes. This prejudice is seen in act two when Higgins describes the current stranger, Alfred Dolittle, as a "blackguard." He makes the assumption that Dolittle is an uncivil, unpleasant human being simply because he is Liza's father and therefore the same class. Even Pickering assumes they will "have trouble with him" (Act 2). This is a rare example in the first two acts of Pickering sharing the same prejudices as Higgins. In act two Pickering urges Liza to take "no advantage" of Liza's position.

Shaw avoids using stereotypes. He portrays Higgins as a man who goes in the opposite direction to the rest of society in most matters. He would take the chance of trying to turn Liza into "the Queen of Sheba" (Act 1). He is impatient with high society, forgetful of his public graces, and poorly considerate of normal social niceties. Along with believing he alone has the ability to change a person's direction in life. Shaw also represents the differences between the social classes in the characters of Liza and Clara, the daughter. Clara is a weak, fragile character.

Her reaction when Freddy fails to find her a cab is "Do you expect us to go and get one ourselves?" (Act 1) She is impatient and completely dependent on others. However, lower down in social status is Liza who is a complete contrast. She is witty and strong. She encourages the gentleman by telling him to "cheer up; and buy a flower off a poor girl." Unlike Clara she is very independent which is also shown in Act two when she asks Higgins for a lesson. In this case Higgins' main belief is that Liza's accent can change her status. Higgins' is, of course, extremely biased.

He believes that " a woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere" (Act 1). He represents a side to society, which many people may outwardly oppose, but internally agree with. He believes that Liza's English " will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days" (Act 1) It is his conviction that the key to social status is accent. Higgins' has a higher social status than Liza, so disapproves of her accent. The contrast of Liza and Higgins' expression and pronunciation shows how Shaw has introduced society and language in Pygmalion.

Liza's coarse and broad cockney accent can be difficult to represent without the phonetic alphabet. She asks, " Ow, eez ye-ooa san, is e? "(Act 1) meaning 'oh he's your son, is he? ' This is a complete conflict with Higgins " resorting to the most thrillingly beautiful low tones"(Act 1. ) The imaginably high-pitched shrieks, " Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-oo," of Liza's expression supports Higgins' theory that a cockney accent is less widely accepted. The contrast in pronunciation represents the contrast in social status.

The variety of accents and expressions is also evident in the humour from the different social classes. Shaw uses humour to introduce society and language by concentrating their humour on their circumstances. The audience can see this through Liza and Higgins. When Liza becomes annoyed with Higgins she exclaims, " Don't be so saucy. " When Higgins is asked about Liza he jokes " put her in the dustbin". Both these remarks are very comical. Higgins and Liza use many of the same techniques in their humour as they are obvious, rude, witty and smart mouthed.

However, the majority of their humour is based around their status. Liza is comical about her desperation for money and her ignorance of higher classes. She cries, " I've never took off all my clothes before. It's not right. " She doesn't understand any other way of living, but her own. However, Higgins' source of humour originates from his high status, and good education. He amuses other characters and the audience by assessing where they are from. He boasts, " your mother's Epsom, unmistakeably. " His irritating intelligence complicates civil situations.

Higgins' also uses sarcasm and continually mocks those of a lower class, again portraying his narrow-mindedness. He exclaims, " Shall we ask this baggage to sit down or throw her out the window,"(Act 2). He is purposely rude and unlike with his own class, he fails to be courteous and apologize. Higgins' is portrayed as a cheeky, yet charming character. He makes the most iconoclastic, scandalous statements, but all with such wit and humour that the audience cannot help but find his ideas attractive. In the same way, Alfred Dolittle's tactics of persuasion and lack of morals are humorous.

He describes Liza by saying " in the light of a young woman, she's a fine handsome girl. As a daughter, she's not worth her keep" (Act 2). He will happily exchange his daughter for money, using light-hearted, humorous language. Freddy's humour is based around a much more simple situation, but still reflects his status. The woman left him " with a cab on my hands! Damnation! " His dilemma is laughed at and not with. The fact he orders a cab and then becomes frustrated that he has one, shows the insignificant problems of the higher class compared to the poorer classes.

Therefore, Bernard Shaw introduces his ideas about society and language in the first two acts by investigating the different aspects of the characters class and status. He develops his image of society by portraying the clear boundaries which separate class through characters, accent and expression, and humour. Through the prejudices which are displayed, Shaw delivers the subtle message that inside we are all the same, just as Liza believes that her " character is the same to me as any lady's" (Act 1). Shaw begins to use the characters, their lives, attitudes and language to reflect Society's intolerance and discrimination.