

Henry Higgins is a professor of phonetics who plays Pygmalion to Eliza Doolittle's Galatea. He is the author of Higgins' Universal Alphabet, believes in concepts like visible speech, and uses all manner of recording and photographic material to document his phonetic subjects, reducing people and their dialects into what he sees as readily understandable units. He is an unconventional man, who goes in the opposite direction from the rest of society in most matters. Indeed, he is impatient with high society, forgetful in his public graces, and poorly considerate of normal social niceties--the only reason the world has not turned against him is because he is at heart a good and harmless man. His biggest fault is that he can be a bully.



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.

LIZA. 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 who have to be taught to speak like ladies and gentlemen. Now I can teach them--

LIZA. 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.

LIZA [*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 Shakespear and Milton and The Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.

Eliza Doolittle - "She is not at all a romantic figure." So is she introduced in Act I. Everything about Eliza Doolittle seems to defy any conventional notions we might have about the romantic heroine. When she is transformed from a sassy, smart-mouthed kerbstone flower girl with deplorable English, to a (still sassy) regal figure fit to consort with nobility, it has less to do with her innate qualities as a heroine than with the fairy-tale aspect of the transformation myth itself. In other words, the character of Eliza Doolittle comes across as being much more instrumental than fundamental. The real (re-)making of Eliza Doolittle happens after the ambassador's party, when she decides to make a statement for her own dignity against Higgins' insensitive treatment. This is when she becomes, not a duchess, but an independent woman; and this explains why Higgins begins to see Eliza not as a mill around his neck but as a creature worthy of his admiration.



THE MOTHER. You really are very helpless, Freddy. Go again; and don't come back until you have found a cab.

FREDDY. Oh, very well: I'll go, I'll go. [*He opens his umbrella and dashes off, but comes into collision with Liza, who is hurrying in for shelter, knocking her basket out of her hands. A blinding flash of lightning, followed instantly by a rattling peal of thunder, orchestrates the incident*].

LIZA. Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' govin, deah.

FREDDY. Sorry [*he rushes off*].

LIZA [*picking up her scattered flowers and replacing them in the basket*]. There's manners f' yer! Te-oo banches o' voylets trod into the mad. [*She sits down on the plinth of the column, sorting her flowers, on the lady's right*].

Colonel Pickering, the author of Spoken Sanskrit, is a match for Higgins (although somewhat less obsessive) in his passion for phonetics. But where Higgins is a boorish, careless bully, Pickering is always considerate and a genuinely gentleman. He says little of note in the play, and appears most of all to be a civilized foil to Higgins' barefoot, absentminded crazy professor. He helps in the Eliza Doolittle experiment by making a wager of it, saying he will cover the costs of the experiment if Higgins does indeed make a convincing duchess of her. However, while Higgins only manages to teach Eliza pronunciations, it is Pickering's thoughtful treatment towards Eliza that teaches her to respect herself.



THE NOTE TAKER. You hear 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.

LIZA. What's that you say?

THE NOTE TAKER [*turning crushingly on her*] Yes, you squashed cabbage leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns, you incarnate insult to the English language: I could pass you off as the Queen of Sheba. [*To the Gentleman*] Can you believe that?

THE GENTLEMAN. Of course I can. I am myself a student of Indian dialects; and--

THE NOTE TAKER [*eagerly*] Are you? Do you know Colonel Pickering, the author of Spoken Sanscrit?

THE GENTLEMAN. I am Colonel Pickering. Who are you?

THE NOTE TAKER. Henry Higgins, author of Higgins's Universal Alphabet.

Alfred Doolittle is Eliza's father, an elderly but vigorous dustman who has had at least six wives and who "seems equally free from fear and conscience." When he learns that his daughter has entered the home of Henry Higgins, he immediately pursues to see if he can get some money out of the circumstance. His unique brand of rhetoric, an unembarrassed, unhypocritical advocacy of drink and pleasure (at other people's expense), is amusing to Higgins. Through Higgins' joking recommendation, Doolittle becomes a richly endowed lecturer to a moral reform society, transforming him from lowly dustman to a picture of middle class morality--he becomes miserable. Throughout, Alfred is a scoundrel who is willing to sell his daughter to make a few pounds, but he is one of the few unaffected characters in the play, unmasked by appearance or language. Though scandalous, his speeches are honest. At points, it even seems that he might be Shaw's voice piece of social criticism (Alfred's proletariat status, given Shaw's socialist leanings, makes the prospect all the more likely).



DOOLITTLE [*to Pickering*] I thank you, Governor. [*To Higgins, who takes refuge on the piano bench, a little overwhelmed by the proximity of his visitor; for Doolittle has a professional flavor of dust about him*]. Well, the truth is, I've taken a sort of fancy to you, Governor; and if you want the girl, I'm not so set on having her back home again but what I might be open to an arrangement. Regarded in the light of a young woman, she's a fine handsome girl. As a daughter she's not worth her keep; and so I tell you straight. All I ask is my rights as a father; and you're the last man alive to expect me to let her go for nothing; for I can see you're one of the straight sort, Governor. Well, what's a five pound note to you? And what's Eliza to me? [*He returns to his chair and sits down judicially*].

PICKERING. I think you ought to know, Doolittle, that Mr. Higgins's intentions are entirely honorable.

DOOLITTLE. Course they are, Governor. If I thought they wasn't, I'd ask fifty.