My Fair Lady

Alan Jay Lerner

About the author

My Fair Lady was originally a stage musical based on the play Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw.

Alan Jay Lerner adapted George Bernard Shaw's play for the musical My Fair Lady. Alan Jay Lerner's words for the songs use many of the spoken words in Shaw's play. This was partly because Lerner, by law, had to stay as close as possible to the original.

The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) was born in Dublin, but moved to London when he was twenty, and soon began publishing articles and reviews in London magazines.

After writing five unsuccessful novels, he turned to play writing in the 1890s, but did not achieve popular success until 1904. His plays surprised theatre audiences of the time because of their serious attention to philosophical ideas, moral questions and current social problems. Many of them – such as Caesar and Cleopatra, Man and Superman, and Saint Joan, as well as Pygmalion – are still very popular today, and many have been filmed.

Shaw was a socialist who believed in equality of income and the abolition of private property. He also supported women's rights. He believed that many of the world's greatest problems could be solved by rational, scientific thinking. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925.

Summary

My Fair Lady tells the story of Eliza Doolittle, who is a poor girl selling flowers on London streets until she meets Henry Higgins, a professor of linguistics.

Chapter 1: Higgins hears Eliza shouting in her harsh 'Cockney' accent in Covent Garden. He says to his new acquaintance, Colonel Pickering, that after six months of lessons with him, he could teach Eliza to speak with such a pure upper-class accent that no one would be able to tell where she came from.

Chapter 2: Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle was thrown out of the pub as he hasn't got enough money to pay for his drinks. Eliza gives him some money.

Chapter 3: Eliza finds her way to the professor's house and offers him money to give her lessons. Pickering is intrigued and offers to pay for the cost if Higgins can really back up his claim. Higgins is interested in the experiment, and agrees. An intensive makeover of Eliza's speech, manners, and dress begins in preparation for her appearance at the Embassy Ball.

Chapter 4: Eliza's father comes to Higgins to extract some money from him. Higgins is impressed by the way he speaks.

Meanwhile, Eliza goes through many forms of speech training. Just as things seem hopeless, Higgins softens his harsh attitude and she suddenly 'gets it'.

Chapter 5: Higgins takes her on her first public appearance to Ascot Racecourse. She makes a good impression, but shocks everyone by her Cockney accent and slang when she gets excited. She captures the heart of a young man named Freddy Eynsford-Hill.

Chapter 6: Finally, Higgins takes Eliza out to the Embassy Ball, where she stuns everyone. After the ball, Higgins is so excited about his triumph and his pleasure that the experiment is now over. Eliza feels used and abandoned.

Chapter 7: She walks out on Higgins and goes back to Covent Garden, but nobody recognises her now. She sees her father there and finds out that he's getting married.

Chapter 8: After Eliza is gone, Higgins soon realises that he has 'grown accustomed to her face'. Higgins finds Eliza at his mother's house, and he attempts to talk her into coming back to him. Eliza rejects him and leave.

Chapter 9: Higgins makes his way home, missing Eliza very much. He plays his recordings to listen to Eliza's voice. To Higgins's great delight, Eliza returns to him.

About the film

The 1964 film of the musical was enormously popular all over the world and won eight Oscars, including those for Best Picture, Best Actor (Rex Harrison), Best Director (George Cukor) and Best Costume Design. Alan Jay
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Lerner was nominated for an Oscar for his adaptation of George Bernard Shaw’s play. The costume design was the work of Sir Cecil Beaton (1904–1980), who was one of the most fashionable photographers and designers in Britain in the 1950s and early 60s. He was particularly famous for his elegant photographs of the most beautiful women of his day.

Audrey Hepburn – who did not receive an Oscar or even a nomination for her performance as Eliza Doolittle – was a world famous star when the film was made, and probably remains one of the best-loved Hollywood actresses of all time. She was born in 1929 in Belgium, of Irish-Dutch parents, and brought up in Holland. She had small roles in films in England from 1948 to 1951, but then moved to the US, where she became a star with films such as Roman Holiday (1953), Sabrina (1954), Funny Face (1957) and Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1961). Audiences fell in love with her charm and beauty, and she was one of the greatest influences on women’s fashion of the 1950s. When she got older she gave much more of her time to charity than to acting. She died in 1993.

The musical’s unforgettable songs were of course one of the greatest attractions of the film. Although Rex Harrison’s singing voice is heard throughout, Audrey Hepburn’s songs were only partly sung by the actress herself. The producer, Jack Warner, would not let her sing, and a professional singer – Marni Nixon – was brought in to dub her own voice over that of Hepburn’s.

Relationship between Eliza and Higgins: Speaking without a very strong London accent is not the only goal Eliza is after. She has another battle on her hands: to make Higgins see her as a person, not just as an interesting experiment.

Men vs. women: The story shows the caring attitude of women, such as Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins. Higgins, however, doesn’t appreciate it and says, ‘Why can’t women be more like men?’

Discussion activities

Chapter 1
Before reading
1 Discuss: Talk about musicals. Ask students if they have seen Pygmalion or My Fair Lady. If they have, put them into groups and tell them to discuss the good and bad things about them. If they haven’t, ask them to discuss good and bad points of musicals – at the theatre and on film.

After reading
2 Retell: Have students work in small groups. They look at the pictures on pages 3 and 5, and take turns to retell the story of Chapter 1. Encourage them to describe the characters, e.g. how they look, how they talk, what they are doing, etc.

3 Pair work: Tell students about the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) if they don’t know it. Get them to look in their dictionaries. Do some dictionary work to practise phonetics. See the examples below:

a Give students some phonetic symbols, e.g. /ɔ/, /ə/, /ɑ/, /æ/, /ɛ/, etc. Then have students look for the words with those symbols.

b Give students some words and have them look them up in their dictionaries. Ask some individual students to write the words with phonetic symbols on the board.

c Write some words using the phonetic symbols on the board. Have students guess what the words are.

Chapters 2–3
Before reading
4 Discuss and predict: Talk about Alfred Doolittle. Have students look at the picture on page 8. Ask the following questions and lead a whole-class discussion.

• Who do you think he is?
• What type of accent do you think he has?
• Why do you think he looks unhappy?

After reading
5 Discuss: Talk about Higgins. The title of Chapter 3 is ‘The Crazy Professor’. Do you agree that Higgins is crazy? What makes you think he is crazy? What did he say? What did he do? Discuss in groups.

Accent: At the time of this story, speaking with a proper accent meant a higher social status. If Eliza can speak with an ‘upper-class’ accent, she would be able to leave the street and find a respectable job.

Background and themes

Pygmalion was first performed in 1913 in Vienna, and published and performed in London in 1916. The story is very much the same as it appears in My Fair Lady, except that the musical version made the relationship between Eliza Doolittle and Professor Higgins more romantic. In the play, as the musical, Eliza grows in confidence and independence and finally wins Higgins’s respect. But in a postscript to the play, Shaw said that Eliza went on to marry Freddy Eynsford-Hill, not Higgins.

Shaw partly modelled the character of Higgins on a real linguist, Henry Sweet (1845–1912), who was one of the first people to study phonetics in England.

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Teacher’s notes

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Chapter 4

6 Discuss: Talk about a foreign language and an accent. Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following questions.
• Do you want to speak with a 'perfect' accent?
• What is the 'perfect' accent for you?
• How important is it for people to speak a foreign language with a 'perfect' accent?

Chapter 4

Before reading

7 Predict: Have students look at the pictures on pages 18 and 20. Put students into pairs and have them take turns to describe the pictures. Then have them guess what will happen in this chapter.

After reading

8 Group work: Put students into groups. Give each group a specific sound, such as 'h' and 'long a'. Have them discuss and come up with sentences containing those sounds. For example, 'Three authors were thinking of writing a thriller,' for the sound 'th'. Monitor the groups and help them if needed. Later, ask each group to share their sentences with the rest of the class.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

9 Guess: Put students into small groups. Ask them to imagine Eliza's first public tryout. Encourage them to think of what she's going to wear, what she's going to talk about, and to guess if she's going to make any mistakes or not, if she does, what will happen, etc. When they are ready, ask each group to share their sentences with the rest of the class.

After reading

10 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Have them work on the following questions.
• Which letters of the alphabet is Eliza saying when she says, 'Ahyee, Eeee, Iyee, Ow, You!' on page 17?
• How could you write the following letters as words: c, j, p, q, t, x, y? For example, 'b' = 'be' or 'bee'.

11 Discuss: Talk about the change in Eliza at the Ball. Put students into small groups. Have them compare Eliza at the races with Eliza at the Ball six weeks later. Encourage them to talk about what people think of her. Ask them to discuss the reasons for the change in Eliza.

12 Pair work: Have students work in pairs to write down all the pairs of words in the song on pages 24–25 which end in the same sound. For example, 'I' and 'high' in the first verse. If some pairs finish earlier than other pairs, ask them to give you the answers. Later, check the answers with the whole class.

Chapters 7–9

Before reading

13 Discuss: Talk about the title. Lead a whole-class conversation by asking about the title of the chapter. Who do you think is going to be married in the morning? Why do you think so?

After reading

14 Group work: Put students into small groups. Have them look at Alfred's song on pages 30–31. They work in groups to rewrite this song in ordinary English – not as a song. They can use the notes on pages 49–50.

15 Discuss: Talk about what Higgins really means. When Higgins finds Eliza at his mother's house, Eliza speaks to him, then he says, 'Don't you try that game on me!' Read this part of the story again. What does he mean by 'game'?

16 Role play: After Eliza leaves and says, 'I won't be seeing you again.' Higgins says to his mother, 'What can I do?' Put students into pairs, and have them continue the conversation between Higgins and his mother.

17 Discuss: Talk about the change in Higgins. In what way has Henry changed towards Eliza? What in these chapters makes you think this?

18 Retell: In small groups, students take turns to say one sentence each in order to tell the story of the following characters: Eliza (Chapters 7–9), Henry Higgins (Chapters 8–9) and Mrs Higgins (Chapters 8–9).

Extra activities

19 Discuss: Put students into groups. Ask them to imagine that Eliza does not go back to Henry Higgins. What will she do now? Where will she go? Then ask the groups to discuss: Is Eliza's life better now than it was before she went to stay with Higgins?

20 Discuss: Have students work in groups to discuss as follows: In this story, a person's accent is very important. If someone has a strong accent, rich, important people are not so interested in them. People with strong accents cannot get the best jobs. Are accents as important as this in your country?

21 Discuss: Do you think people can really change as much as Eliza does in this story? If you can change yourself, how do you want to change?

22 Discuss: Did you like the story? Why? / Why not? Which part of the story did you like most? Why? Which part of the story did you like least? Why?

23 Project: Put students into groups. Give each group a name of place in the story, e.g. Royal Opera House, Ascot, etc. Have them prepare a presentation on these places.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.