

Teacher's notes

My Fair Lady

by Alan Jay Lerner



SUMMARY

My Fair Lady was originally a stage musical based on the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. It tells the story of Eliza Doolittle, who is a poor girl selling flowers on the streets of London until she meets Henry Higgins, a professor of linguistics. Higgins is coming out of a theatre when he hears Eliza shouting in her harsh 'Cockney' accent. He says to an acquaintance 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. She would be able to leave the street and find a respectable job.

Later Eliza comes to Higgins' bachelor apartment and offers him money to give her lessons. Higgins is interested in the experiment, and agrees. She moves into his home under the care of his housekeeper, and Higgins and his friend Colonel Pickering work hard to turn the flower girl into a lady. Eventually, Higgins takes Eliza out into London society, where she stuns everyone. But the beautiful Eliza has another battle on her hands: to make Higgins see her as a person, not just as an interesting experiment - and also to make him acknowledge that he loves her.

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 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 (1902-1980), 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 Dixon - was brought in to dub her own voice over that of Hepburn's.

Alan Jay Lerner's words for the songs use many of the spoken words in George Bernard Shaw's play. This was partly because Lerner, when he was adapting Shaw's play, by law had to stay as close as possible to the original. There is no song in the film or the musical called 'My Fair Lady': this title comes from a well-known nursery rhyme about London.

ABOUT SHAW AND PYGMALION

During his long life, the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) became one of the most admired and most controversial figures in the world of literature. He was born in Dublin, but moved to London when he was twenty, and soon began publishing journalism 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*, *Androcles and the Lion*, 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.

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PRE-
INTERMEDIATE

MY FAIR LADY



Teacher's notes

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 in 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.

The title of the play *Pygmalion* comes from a Greek legend. Pygmalion was a king of Cyprus who fell in love with a statue of a woman that he had made. The goddess Aphrodite gave the statue life and turned it into a real woman, Galatea.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. Further supplementary exercises, covering shorter sections of the book, can be found on the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers, but with the exception of pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

- Tell students to read the introduction to the book. Ask them these questions:
 - Who wrote the play *Pygmalion*?
 - Who wrote the words for the musical play?
 - Who wrote the music?
 - When did the musical play come out?
 - When did the film come out?
- Ask students if they have seen *Pygmalion* or either the musical play or film *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 the good and bad points of musicals - at the theatre and on film.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1-3

- Henry Higgins is a professor of linguistics and knows a lot about phonetics. Tell students about the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) if they do not know it (get them to look in their dictionaries). Do some dictionary work to practise phonetics.
- In small groups, ask students to discuss: How important is it for people to speak a foreign language with a 'perfect' accent?

Chapters 4-6

- In pairs, students answer: Which letters of the alphabet is Eliza saying when she says, 'Ahyee, Eeee, lyee, Ow, You!' on page 17?
How could you write the following letters in words? For example, 'b' = 'be/e'.
c, j, p, q, t, x, y
- Eliza makes terrible mistakes when she is at the races. Six weeks later, at the Ball, people think she is 'beautiful' and 'absolutely charming'. Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss the reasons for the change in Eliza at the Ball.

Chapters 7-9

In small groups, students tell the story of these chapters. They are the people below. Each student takes it in turns to say one sentence.

- Eliza (for chapters 7-9)
- Henry Higgins (for chapters 8 and 9)
- Mrs Higgins (for chapters 8 and 9)

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

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?

Glossary

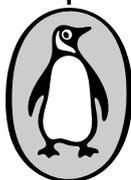
It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-3

absolutely (adv) completely
accent (n) the way somebody says words because of where they live, eg. a Scottish accent
bully (n) someone who tries to frighten other people who are weaker than them
gentleman (n) a man, often rich, who is polite and acts well towards other people
lady (n) a woman, often rich, who is polite and acts well towards other people
machine (n) a piece of equipment that uses electricity to do a job
phonetics (n) the study of speech sounds
play (n) a story which is written for actors in a theatre
pronounce (v) to make the sound of a letter or word
recording (n) a piece of music or speech which has been put onto a machine

Chapters 4-6

ball (n) a large party where people dance
charming (adj) very polite and pretty
races (n) where horses race against each other and people watch
slipper (n) a soft shoe which people wear indoors and when they are in their night-clothes



Student's activities

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Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

- 1 Read the back cover of the book. Who is the person on the front cover?
- 2 Look at the 'fair lady's' hat and dress in the picture. When do you think the story happens?
 - (a) about 1500-1520
 - (b) about 1700-1720
 - (c) about 1900-1920

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-3

Chapter 1

- 1 Answer these questions.
 - (a) How does Freddy first meet Eliza?
 - (b) Why do some people think Henry Higgins is a detective?
 - (c) What kind of writing is in Higgins' book?
 - (d) How does Higgins know Eliza is from west London?
 - (e) How long does Higgins think he needs to teach Eliza to speak well?
 - (f) Why has Colonel Pickering come to London?
 - (g) Why does Higgins throw some money to Eliza?
- 2 Here is some information that Henry Higgins wrote down later about Eliza Doolittle. Some of it is wrong. Change it to make it right.

When I met Eliza she was selling vegetables at a street market at Opera Garden. She was about twenty-five or thirty years old, and she was very good-looking. She was wearing a big, clean, pink hat, a clean white blouse, a new skirt and new shoes. Her hair was clean and her teeth were perfect. She spoke very politely and did not have a London accent. She was from east London.

- 3 Match the names with the descriptions.
 - (a) Freddy Eynsford-Hill
 - (b) Henry Higgins
 - (c) Colonel Pickering
 - 1 a writer of books on Indian languages
 - 2 a professor who studies phonetics
 - 3 a rich young man, about twenty years old

My Fair Lady



Chapters 2 & 3

True (✓) or false (X)?

- (a) Alfred Doolittle likes working.
- (b) Professor Higgins makes recordings of different accents.
- (c) Higgins thinks that Eliza is going to pay him sixty pounds an hour.
- (d) Pickering says that if Higgins can teach Eliza to speak like a lady, he will pay for her lessons.
- (e) Higgins wants to help Eliza because he likes her.
- (f) Higgins wants Mrs Pearce to burn Eliza's clothes so that the police won't find her.
- (g) Mrs Pearce is worried about Eliza.
- (h) Higgins thinks he will be happier when he finds a wife.

CHAPTERS 4-6

Chapter 4

- 1 What happens in this chapter? Put numbers 1-8 next to these sentences. What happens first, what happens second, etc?
 - (a) Higgins gives Alfred £5 for Eliza.
 - (b) Eliza and Higgins dance together.
 - (c) Eliza begins to pronounce 'The rain in Spain...' perfectly.
 - (d) Alfred goes to Higgins' flat.
 - (e) Higgins, Pickering and Eliza sing together.
 - (f) Alfred tells Higgins that he wants Eliza back.
 - (g) Eliza is angry with Higgins about the work he makes her do.
 - (h) A woman tells Alfred that Eliza is 'living with a rich gentleman'.
- 2 Who is described with the following adjectives? Choose from these names: Mrs Pearce, Eliza, Alfred.
lucky worried tired
Now explain why those adjectives are used to describe them.
- 3 Can you remember the words to Eliza's song on pages 19-20? Here are the first two verses. Read the song again before you do this activity, then close your book (see page 43 of your book for help with the meaning of the song).
Bed! Bed! I couldn't to bed!
My head's too light to try to set it !
Sleep! Sleep! I couldn't sleep !
Not for the jewels in the crown!

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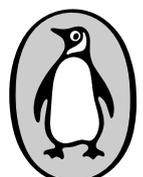
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PRE-INTERMEDIATE

MY FAIR LADY



Student's activities

I could have danced all night!
 I could have danced all night!
 And still have begged for
 I could have spread wings
 And done a thousand
 I've never done before.

Chapters 5 & 6

- Answer these questions.
 - Why does Higgins take Eliza to Ascot before the Embassy Ball?
 - What does Freddy do immediately he sees Eliza?
 - What happens when Eliza talks about things she doesn't know how to say?
 - Why does Eliza want Dover to win the race?
 - Why doesn't Eliza want to see anyone after the races?
 - What word do two people use to describe Eliza at the Ball?
 - Why does Eliza throw her slippers at Higgins after the Ball?
 - What does Higgins say Eliza can do now?
- Write down all the pairs of words in the song on pages 24-5 which end in the same sound. For example, 'I' and 'high' in the first verse. Check your answers in a dictionary which has phonetic symbols.
- Who says the things below?
 - 'Miss Doolittle, you look beautiful.'
 - 'I've come to like that girl so much in the last few weeks.'
 - 'Charming. Absolutely charming.'
 - 'You did it, didn't you? You did it! What about me? Didn't I do it too?'
 - 'I don't think you'll have any trouble finding a good job now, you know.'

CHAPTERS 7-9

Chapter 7

- Who says the things below? Who do they say them to? Explain when and why they say these things.
 - 'You know I'm in love with you, Eliza.'
 - 'My lady-love wants to marry me, now that I've got some money.'
 - 'But good luck.'
- What is Eliza doing when...
 - ... she meets Freddy waiting outside in the street?
 - ... the men at the market stop singing?
 - ... her father comes out of the pub?

Now write three full sentences using past tenses, like this: *She wasing when ...*

- Look at Alfred's song on pages 30 and 31. Write it out in ordinary English - not as a song. (Look at page 43 of your book; there are notes on the song to help you.)

Chapters 8 & 9

- Answer these questions.
 - Why does Higgins want Pickering to call the police?
 - Why does Mrs Higgins say, 'That's terrible, my dear. Really terrible!'
 - Why does Eliza's smile disappear?
 - What will Mrs Higgins do if Higgins isn't polite to Eliza?
 - Why can't Higgins speak?
 - Why does Higgins want to laugh loudly and run to Eliza?
- When Henry 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 Henry mean?
- After Eliza leaves and says, 'I won't be seeing you again,' Henry says to his mother: 'What can I do?' Continue the conversation between Henry and his mother.
- In what ways has Henry changed towards Eliza? What in these chapters makes you think this?

Activities after reading the book

Discuss in small groups or pairs.

- 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?
- Do you think people can really change as much as Eliza does in this story?
- Did you like the story? Why?/Why not? Which part of the story did you like most? Why? Which part did you like least? Why?

