

Irish Masterpiece

from *Pygmalion*

Drama by George Bernard Shaw



George Bernard Shaw
1856–1950



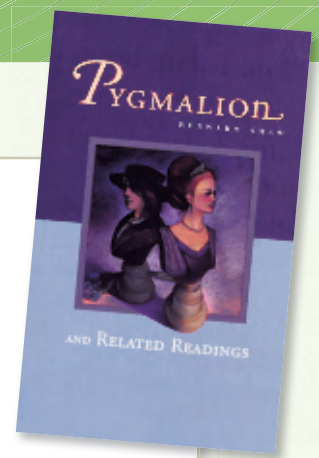
READING 4 Evaluate how the structure and elements of drama change in the works of British dramatists across literary periods.

BACKGROUND George Bernard Shaw might be described as a late bloomer. Born in Dublin, Ireland, in the early decades of the Victorian age, it was not until the dawn of the 20th century that he began to enjoy sustained success as a playwright, winning both critical and popular acclaim and the 1925 Nobel Prize in literature for plays such as *Major Barbara*, *Pygmalion*, *Saint Joan*, and many others.

Shaw's *Pygmalion*, his attack on the British class system, is considered one of his funniest plays; it is also one of his most popular. The play's title refers to the Pygmalion of Greek mythology, a sculptor who created a figure of a woman so beautiful that he fell in love with it. In Shaw's *Pygmalion*, a confirmed bachelor and professor of languages named Henry Higgins "shapes the clay" of a low-born young woman named Eliza Doolittle by teaching her proper English. In the following scene, Henry Higgins, known at first only as "The Note Taker," along with Colonel Pickering, "The Gentleman," meet flower-seller Eliza Doolittle among a crowd of people who have taken shelter from a downpour on the porch of a church near London's Covent Garden Theatre. Eliza complains when she realizes that Higgins has been taking notes about what she has been saying.

LITERARY ANALYSIS The English language plays a key role in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. The characters' dialogue defines the broad social gap between them. Eliza speaks the Cockney dialect of London's East End, one of the city's poorest areas, occupied by immigrants and working-class British. Higgins and Pickering, one the other hand, use "Queen's English," speech associated with aristocracy and the educated. Dialogue is important, but **stage directions** also provide useful clues: Characters' facial expressions, tones of voice, and body language provide valuable insights into their social status and how they treat people from social classes different than their own. Notice how the stage directions tell us that Higgins speaks to Eliza "explosively," as if it is acceptable to speak rudely to a stranger if the stranger is of a lower social class. Notice, too, how Eliza responds. She attempts to defend herself, but she does so "with feeble defiance," as if she has no right to object to Higgins' treatment of her because of his superior social position.

DISCUSS After you have read the scene, discuss additional examples of stage directions, making specific reference to the text. What do these stage directions reveal about each character's personality? What do they reveal about the social differences between the characters and how they view one another?



FROM ACT ONE, SCENE 1

The Note Taker (*explosively*). Woman: cease this detestable boo-hooing instantly; or else seek the shelter of some other place of worship.

The Flower Girl (*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 Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.

- 10 **The Flower Girl** (*quite overwhelmed, looking up at him in mingled wonder and deprecation without daring to raise her head*). Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo!

The Note Taker (*whipping out his book*). Heavens! what a sound! (*He writes; then holds out the book and reads, reproducing her vowels exactly.*) Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo!

The Flower Girl (*tickled by the performance, and laughing in spite of herself*). Garn!

The Note Taker. You see 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.

The Flower Girl. What's that you say?

- 20 **The Note Taker**. Yes, you squashed cabbage leaf, you disgrace of 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.

Pickering (*with enthusiasm*). I came from India to meet you.

Higgins. I was going to India to meet you.

- 30 **Pickering**. Where do you live?

Higgins. 27A Wimpole Street. Come and see me tomorrow.

Pickering. I'm at the Carlton. Come with me now and let's have a jaw over some supper.

Higgins. Right you are.

