

Film Commentary: *My Fair Lady* (1964)

This is a charming, sophisticated and elegant comedic musical that entertains at several levels. It's an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, a mythical figure who fell in love with a sculpture he created, which later came to life. It's possible to enjoy the film merely for its colorful sets, choreography and clever musical lyrics, which alone are worth the price of admission. However, what makes it unique is that this was an early shot fired in the battle waged by Cultural Marxists.

In the opening scene, two scholars of phonetics meet by chance at *Covent Gardens Opera*. **Professor Henry Higgins** (Rex Harrison) is secretly studying the accents of vendors who are selling flowers to theatergoers as they exit. By coincidence he meets **Colonel Hugh Pickering** (Wilfrid Hyde-White,) a fortuitous encounter because each is familiar with the other's work and both intended to meet. Their common interest prompts **Higgins** to engage in an impassioned rant about how England's various accents permanently consign its citizens to a particular social class. He uses a nearby flower girl named **Eliza Doolittle** (Audrey Hepburn) as an example. (Song: "*Why Can't the English?*")



Col. Pickering Meets Professor Higgins



Higgins & Eliza Doolittle

To illustrate his thesis, **Higgins** bets **Pickering** that by teaching **Eliza** to abandon her *Cockney* accent and pronounce English properly, he could pass her off as "**a Duchess at an Embassy Ball.**" **Pickering** gladly accepts **Higgins'** invitation to be a guest in his home, and the two leave Covent Gardens deep in conversation. Their conversation continues at **Higgins'** home the next day, when **Eliza** appears unexpectedly and offers **Higgins** a fee to teach her "*proper*" English. Her dream is to become a flower girl in an upscale London flower shop in order to earn better wages. (Song: "**Wouldn't It Be Lovely?**")

After some discussion, **Pickering** accepts **Higgins'** bet. The lessons begin that very day, but only after **Eliza** is thoroughly scrubbed by **Higgins'** housemaids and given new clothes, which **Eliza** loudly and angrily resists. The lessons are tedious and exhausting, and persist into many late evenings. While **Eliza** slaves away under **Higgins'** demanding schedule, which often consists of endless repetitions of vowel sounds, both **Higgins** and **Pickering** callously take tea without inviting her, or relax while she labors. Moreover, **Higgins** is often abrupt with **Eliza**, which prompts **Pickering** to defend her. (Song: "**Poor Professor Higgins.**")

Eliza begins to grow resentful and she soon starts to fantasize. She imagines herself charming King Edward VII, who is so smitten with her that he proclaims May 20th to be *Eliza Doolittle Day* in England, and grants her wish to have **Henry Higgins** shot by firing squad. (Song: "**Just You Wait.**") After three months, and late one night when all three are exhausted, **Eliza** finally begins to pronounce English properly. (Song: "**The Rain in Spain.**") All three then dance absurdly in celebration. Afterward, it's clear that **Eliza** is infatuated with **Higgins**. (Song: "**I Could Have Danced All Night.**")

When **Eliza's** father, **Alfred P. Doolittle** (Stanley Holloway) learns she's residing in the home of a "*swell*" on upscale Wimpole Street, he immediately assumes the relationship is illicit, and proudly declares to his drinking buddies, "**I knew she had a career in front of her.**" Although

he's had little contact with **Eliza** and contributed nothing to her support, he shows up at **Higgins'** home intending to extort money from him. **Doolittle** is equally averse to work and sobriety, so he assumes the arrangement between **Eliza** and **Higgins** affords him an opportunity to profit from it and fund his vices. (Song: *"With a Little Bit of Luck."*)



Alfred P. Doolittle Trying to Extort Professor Higgins

Doolittle proposes what he calls "an arrangement" involving **Eliza**, which prompts **Pickering** to ask, *"Have you no morals, man?"* To this, **Doolittle** replies that he's too poor to afford the luxury of morals, stating, *"No, I can't afford 'em Guvernor. Nor could you if you was as poor as me."* **Higgins** won't be extorted, but he's so impressed with **Doolittle's** candor that he offers him 10 Pounds. However, **Doolittle** will only accept a "Fiver," so his common-law wife won't get any ideas about marriage. **Higgins** is so impressed, he recommends **Doolittle** to a wealthy American philanthropist as *"...one of the most original moralists in England."*

As a "dress rehearsal" prior to the annual *Ambassador's Ball*, **Higgins** and **Pickering** escort **Eliza** to the races at Ascott, where **Higgins' Mother** (Gladys Cooper) owns a box. **Eliza** is cautioned to limit her conversations exclusively to the weather and everyone's health, and she is initially charming. **Higgins** excuses **Eliza's** verbal meanderings as examples of the "*new small talk*," which he implies is fashionable. However, during one of the horse races, **Eliza** forgets herself and loudly cheers on her horse with "*Come on Dover, move your blooming arse.*" **Higgins** is amused, but his mother's guests are mortified.

Later, when the *Embassy Ball* arrives, **Higgins** is mildly anxious, while **Pickering** is a nervous wreck. Yet, **Eliza** is calm, beautiful, serene and radiant. She triumphs far beyond the wildest imaginings of either man, and appears to have been born to royalty. She is even summoned by the *Guest of Honor*, the *Queen of Transylvania*, to dance with the queen's son. The evening is a colossal success, and even **Pickering** is jubilant despite losing their bet. However, while the two men celebrate their triumph and praise one another lavishly, **Eliza** is completely ignored, as if she were a mere bystander through it all. (Song: "*You Did It.*")



The Embassy Ball

Eliza is angry and hurt at being ignored, especially when credit for the evening was being handed out so lavishly. She also fears for her future, sensing that she is no longer of any value to **Higgins** now that the experiment is completed. While the rest of the household goes to bed, **Higgins** goes searching for his slippers and discovers **Eliza** sobbing in the library. She angrily throws his slippers at him, and announces that she's leaving for good and that he won't be seeing her again. She then hands **Higgins** her rented jewelry, so he won't accuse her of stealing it, which wounds him. She leaves early the next morning.

Not knowing where to go, **Eliza** returns to the flower market in *Covent Gardens*, but she no longer fits in there. Old friends don't recognize the elegant lady she's become. She runs into her drunken father exiting a pub, who is now quite wealthy because the American philanthropist left him an enormous sum which he claims, "*ruined his life.*" Now, his common-law wife wants to marry him and share that "*middle-class respectability*" that he's carefully evaded for so long. (Song: "*Get Me to the Church On Time.*") Although **Eliza** has often given him money, he advises her to become "*self-sufficient*" and not to come to him for any.

Eliza ultimately seeks refuge at the home of **Higgins' Mother**, who becomes indignant over her son's behavior once **Eliza** recounts the previous night's events. When **Higgins** finds **Eliza** there she speaks to him more frankly than on any prior occasion. She twice attempts to inspire jealousy in him, first by praising **Pickering** for treating her like a lady, and the second time by vowing to marry **Freddy** (Jeremy Brett,) a young man she met at *Ascott* and who is infatuated with her. She tells **Higgins** that she doesn't need him any more. (Song: "*Without You.*")

Higgins leaves his mother's home, and returns to his own. On the way, he slowly comes to the realization that he has feelings for **Eliza** and misses her, which he hadn't previously recognized. (Song: "*I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face.*") Her assertiveness in their frank exchange at his mother's house made **Higgins** realize that **Eliza** has become a

stronger and more self-confident woman than the flower girl from Lisson Grove he first met at Covent Gardens. Somewhat unsettling to Higgins is the additional fact that, like *Pygmalion*, she can now think for herself.

Only nature offers more profound examples of metamorphosis than that of ***Eliza Doolittle***. Shaw's ***Pygmalion*** embodies his belief that we are all the same, and it's exclusively our environments that determine any differences. This is a Marxian concept, so it's no coincidence that Shaw became an influential member of the *Fabian Society* in England, whose purpose was to introduce Britain to "***socialism with a human face.***" Later, Shaw and Josef Stalin became great friends and mutual admirers. Shaw even visited the Soviet Union in 1931, where Stalin was busily orchestrating his own nation's "*metamorphosis*," one intended to produce "***the new Soviet man.***"

Henry Higgins may well be Shaw's alter ego, and just as egotistical, tyrannical and insensitive as his creator. Like ***Higgins***, Shaw was conducting his own "*experiment*" in promoting and supporting England's *Fabian Society*. Its specific purpose was to prod England into each successive stage along its evolutionary advance into socialism, termed "*gradualism*" by Shaw. All that was required of believers was to ignore Stalin's many purges, which may have tallied as many as 40 million victims. Like ***Henry Higgins***, wealthy and influential people like Shaw have a tendency to callously meddle with the lives of those to whom they feel superior.

Shaw's Marxism is evident throughout the film. For example, he paints a very unflattering portrait of the wealthy and upper-class patrons of *Ascott*. Likewise, in their frank conversation at his mother's home, ***Eliza*** explains to ***Higgins*** that "***The difference between a lady and a flower girl is...how she's treated,***" emphasizing the primacy of *nurture* over *nature*. ***Higgins*** justifies his harsh and callous treatment of ***Eliza*** by declaring that he treats everyone the same, hinting at the "*classless society*" that's supposedly at the heart of Marx's "*utopian*" vision.

However, as George Orwell noted in *Animal Farm*, equality may be a stated goal of socialism, but inevitably, *"some are more equal than others."*

The phenomenon of celebrated authors using literature as a weapon in early battles of Marxism's "Culture War" was neatly captured in a wonderful insight by *Fordham University* Professor Angela O'Donnell, who wrote: *"We are forced to face the troubling fact that the gods of art often use the least worthy among us to be their vessels..."*



--- by Earl P. Holt III

