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“Why Can’t the English”... Learn to Get Along?

Musical Reinforcement of Negative Personal Characteristics in My Fair Lady

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"Why Can't the English" … Learn to Get Along?

Musical Reinforcement of Negative Personal Characteristics in My Fair Lady

A hush falls over the mid-twentieth century audience as the curtain goes up on another
classical comedy during the genre’s “Golden Age.” The audience members are accustomed to
hearing a lively overture and a rollicking opening number, with an energetic singing and dancing
ensemble. They expect the show to start off on a high note, with the promise of a romance to
come. They look forward to a glamorous ballet in the middle of the show, and a growing conflict
that resolves happily in the end—frequently resulting in a marriage. If this is the successful
formula for a musical comedy during the 1940’s and ‘50’s, then how did a show that managed to
break most of these rules slip by to become Broadway’s longest-running musical comedy to
date?

My Fair Lady, Lerner and Loewe’s crowning achievement, overcame the odds stacked
against it by the previous Broadway hits that defined a new era in stage musicals, namely
Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma! and South Pacific. The musicals of the time normally
ended on a high note, with the hero and heroine falling in love and living happily ever after.
These musicals began with a lively opening number, with the players breaking into song at
definite high points in the story. However, My Fair Lady followed none of these norms, and
proved that even a show with constantly bickering, less-than-virtuous characters could be one of the most endearing and enduring musicals of all time.

Irish playwright and satirist George Bernard Shaw provided the biting farce, *Pygmalion*, on which *My Fair Lady* is based. This 1912 “potboiler” features a cast of characters that represent many of the negative idiosyncrasies of English society during the early years of the twentieth century. With just a little bit of reconstruction and a whole lot of music, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe more fully developed this satiric take on post-Victorian England.

Although the matter of adaptation is a delicate one, a majority of Shaw’s original work is retained in *My Fair Lady*—over half of the show is the original *Pygmalion* script (Lerner *Street 23*). With the exception of the altered ending, almost all of Shaw’s poke at English society is intact. But in this case, the songs of the musical serve an even greater function than just relaying what is on the characters’ minds when the orchestra starts to play. The characters of this show are sometimes lovable, yet often detestable, for a great deal of their negative issues and “darker sides” are revealed. It is this more pessimistic side of the characters that is especially amplified through the songs in the show. By examining a few of the selections in their lyrical and musical details, it is evident that the musical numbers of *My Fair Lady* greatly enhance Shaw’s characterization of his *dramatis personae* as intolerant, impatient, insensitive, snobbish, and generally disagreeable beings.

To begin, it is helpful to have an understanding of the mythical literary basis of *Pygmalion*. The character of Pygmalion appeared in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which dates back to Rome, 1 AD. He is the unmarried King of Cyprus, and a sculptor as well (Martindale 208). Irritated by the female corruption he sees around him, he refuses to marry, and instead fashions a statue of Venus out of ivory (Berst, *Spin 6*).
Pygmalion then proceeds to fall in love with his lifelike creation. He dresses the statue up, gives it jewelry and other presents, and even takes it to bed with him. He prays to the gods to give it life, and as he fondles the statue in his bed, Venus grants it life, and it is transformed into the living, breathing Galatea. Pygmalion and his beautiful creation—now endowed with life—marry (Martindale 208). One assumes that the pair lives happily ever after, but this may not really be the case. After all, Pygmalion’s wish for his living ideal came true, but Galatea had no choice in the matter—she was merely a piece of work manipulated by her creator and some divine intervention. Did she openly accept this fate suddenly thrust upon her? And was she happy about it?

The open-endedness of these questions sets the stage well for Shaw’s interpretation of the myth. His turn-of-the-century, “modern-day” version of the story places Eliza Doolittle, a poor, disadvantaged flower-selling girl, in the manipulative and self-serving hands of a Professor Henry Higgins, a snobbish London phoneticist. After weeks of work, he transforms her from a Cockney-talking “guttersnipe” into a high-class society lady with all the proper diction, pronunciation, and manners thereof. Shaw uses this plot device as a springboard, and his characters as soapboxes by which he communicates his distaste for the pretenses and snobbery of contemporary English society.

*Pygmalion* is, as Shaw himself described it, “intensely and deliberately didactic,” which he felt all great art should be (Shaw 113). Indeed, the play is overtly preachy at times, with the individual characters making several long speeches commenting on issues of society. Nevertheless, by weaving his play together with “elements of myth, Faustian legend, and Cinderella fairy tale,” Shaw presents an amusing satire on English classism and social distinctions (Garebian 12).
The threat of the *Pygmalion*’s content was enough to worry casts, critics, and audiences alike. Dubbed a “deadly play,” *Pygmalion* did not have a typical happy ending, or perhaps even a real *ending* at all (Garebian 12). In the final act, Eliza and Higgins have a heated argument, and finally frustrated at the professor’s egotistical and incorrigible behavior, Eliza walks out, simply saying, “Then I shall not see you again, Professor. Good bye,” and Shaw has his leading man end the play laughing to himself about the young lady who has departed (Shaw 208). In spite of objections from the popular audience, Shaw had his own reasons for ending his comedy without the typical “comedy” ending, where the lead characters are drawn together and finally are married.

Shaw’s greater purpose in writing the play was not to satisfy his audiences with a storybook romantic ending. Rather, he felt the need to comment on the great injustices being done the English language by its speakers, as well as hypocrisy and societal discrimination. Critic Desmond McCarthy more eloquently describes *Pygmalion* as Shaw’s vehicle for commentary on the “disinterested yet ferocious egotism of artists, of genteel standards, [and] of the contrast between man’s sense of values and woman’s . . .” (Berst *Spin* 20). Called a “dramatist of life,” Shaw has often been criticized for making the characters of his works too obviously “mouthpieces,” and the works themselves his soapboxes (Hackett 25).

Initially, the most obvious societal issue Shaw deals with in *Pygmalion* is that of the differences in class. These distinctions are manifested through pronunciation and diction, and the most ardent “mouthpiece” of Shaw’s is none other than the leading man, phoneticist Henry Higgins. He introduces the audiences to the various levels and locales of gentility as he pinpoints the crowd members’ origins in the initial scene. The next issue that surfaces—one that Shaw was quite sensitive about himself—is that of the bastardized pronunciation utilized by certain groups
of British people. As he states in his preface, it is the unfortunate accent of an impoverished citizen that keeps them in their low-class position, and it is “neither impossible or uncommon” for a few phonetics lessons to improve a person’s lot in society (Shaw 113). By combining these grievances, Shaw lets Higgins expound on these societal woes, and sets up the opportunity for Higgins’s great experiment: transforming a common “guttersnipe” into a high-class lady.

Shaw also appears to be making a mockery of the general English public as simply an unthinking mob, which could also account for their unintentional slaughter of their native tongue. In the opening scene, the bystanders blindly shift their loyalties from character to character. They first turn on Eliza in her noisy misery, then belligerently stand up to Higgins and Pickering, protecting the innocent girl they had castigated only moments before. As the scene closes, it seems that the bystanders are depending on someone to guide their next action. Higgins comments that the rain has stopped, and one man replies, “Why didn’t you say so before?” suggesting that Higgins, a member of a more prestigious social class, should be the one telling him, a lower-class citizen, what to do (Shaw 123).

Returning to the idea of Higgins’s experiment, audiences can plainly see that although Higgins is an educated and (socially) higher-class man, he is not really what one would call a gentleman. On the contrary; he is a “confirmed old bachelor” not just for the reason that he believes men and women are completely opposite in their motivations. Throughout the play, he constantly confirms his selfishness, intolerance, and immaturity in dealing with any sort of emotional matter. His experiment with Eliza is solely for the advancement of his career and his ego, and he really doesn’t care if he disrupts anyone else’s life in the process.

As he begins his extended interaction with Eliza, he is quite cunning in snapping the girl up into the experiment, tempting her with chocolates and taxicabs. However, he refuses to
acknowledge that she is anything more than an object, wholly without feeling. He screams at poor Eliza to shut up, and when admonished by Mrs. Pearce (the housekeeper) for always treating people so cruelly, he is shocked that she could even so much as think that he was as harsh person (Shaw 135). Surprised at Higgins’s outbursts, Pickering asks him to consider Eliza’s feelings, and Higgins says to him: “Oh no, I don’t think so. Not any feelings that we need bother about. [Cheerily] Have you, Eliza?” (Shaw 137) He is not about to let anything as trifling as compassion stand in the way of his goal of producing a lady.

Higgins unwittingly admits to the audience his own immaturity when he is discussing Mrs. Pearce’s impressions of him with Pickering. He says, “I’ve never really been able to feel really grown-up and tremendous, like other chaps” (Shaw 144). This is especially evident when he is in the presence of his mother, however, pointing to the idea that an Oedipal complex might be the reason for his appalling behavior. The original Pygmalion held Venus as an ideal, and in turn, Higgins’s ideal female figure is his mother. In comparison, all other women are lacking, and that is why he has never been able to find a woman to marry (Miller 209). In fact, Higgins admits to this as well: “My idea of a loveable woman is something as like you as possible. I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women: some habits lie too deep to be changed.” And obviously, Higgins has some bad habits, which his mother must constantly correct: “Stop fidgeting and take your hands out of your pockets . . . That’s a good boy . . .” (Shaw 159). As expected, Henry always obeys his mother, and the audience realizes that he really needs a mother figure more than he does a mate. Hence, he would rather have Eliza with him and Pickering as an old “bachelor buddy” (Berst 219).

Personal development appears as another poignant issue in Pygmalion. Just as Higgins is stubborn and set in his ways, Eliza grows to be his foil. She learns a great deal about herself
during this “experiment,” and it is the misery thrust upon her by Higgins throughout the torturous experience that makes her development all the more meaningful. Her quick ear with phonetics and music surpasses Higgins’s skill, and she recognizes that she can be a success with her newfound skills and gentility.

However, she sees clearly after the experiment is “tested” at the ambassador’s garden party that she has been manipulated into a new lifestyle in which she is lost. Since the experiment is over, she asks Higgins “What’s to become of me?” (Shaw 179) She realizes that she cannot go back to her old life as a flower vendor, and she knows that she doesn’t have the money to start a new life. She is not happy with Higgins’s suggestion that she find herself a man to marry, saying that previously “I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now you’ve made a lady of me I’m not fit to sell anything else. I wish you’d left me where you found me” (Shaw 181).

The resolution between Eliza and Higgins is a far cry from a storybook ending, although that is what many audiences would expect. Shaw hated happy endings, and that was the very reason he ended his *Pygmalion* in the manner he did. Fortunately, for those reading the play instead of seeing it on stage, he rationalized his conclusion in an epilogue.

Shaw’s epilogue denounces those audience members who long for the “ready-mades” and “reach-me-down” stock happy endings (Shaw 209). Eliza decides to marry Freddy Eynsford-Hill, realizing that she could never entice Higgins into a relationship—he is too dependent on his mother. Eliza and Freddy experience a rocky start upon opening their flower shop, but work hard to make their venture pay off. However, her other relationship, with Higgins, isn’t quite as kindly. The two continue to provoke each other, and Shaw explicitly states that the two do not like each other (Shaw 224).
The way the play ends is really a logical one, though, when one considers realistic, humanistic conditions. Charles Berst acknowledges that a marriage between an eighteen-year-old girl and a middle-aged man with an oedipal complex would make for a miserable life (*Spin* 21). Higgins is not looking for a physical ideal, like Pygmalion, but rather an intellectual ideal (Berst 200). He finally accepts Eliza when she stands up to him after the garden party, and Berst recalls the relationship between this story and the original, commenting that in this case, Pygmalion can’t handle his Galatea because she has finally found her own soul (215).

A deeper relationship between Eliza and Higgins would really not be successful, for both characters are much too strong for each other. Higgins is satisfied with Eliza as his secretary, but he does not see her as a person with feelings. Oppositely, she craves even the slightest bit of emotion from him, and simply wants him to take notice of the people around him. Jane M. Miller mentions that Shaw’s analysis of his characters shows that strong people are attracted to weak ones (and vice versa), and since both Higgins and Eliza are both strong characters, their wills would clash too much to be satisfactory (209).

As mentioned above, Eliza decides instead to marry her adoring suitor, Freddy Eynsford-Hill. Earlier in the play, Higgins tells her that she has no right to be loved by a fool like Freddy, and loftily asks her: “Can he make anything of you?” Realizing that she does not need to be someone’s accomplishment to be validated, she says “But I never thought of us making anything of one another; and you never think of anything else. I only want to be natural” (Shaw 205). By saying this, Eliza deposes Higgins as her creator. Shaw makes reference to this in the final part of his epilogue, hearkening back to the ancient original story: “Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion: his relation to her is far too godlike to be altogether agreeable.” In Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, this is because Eliza’s will is comparable to that of her godlike Pygmalion, Higgins.
Even with the rationalization behind his ending, Shaw’s opinion was definitely in the minority when it came to satisfying the audiences at the theatre. The original actors of his play, Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Sir Beerbohm Tree, disagreed with his ending, as did the audiences. These players took liberties with their roles, and romanticized the characters. Even over the actors’ protests that the audiences preferred their portrayal of Eliza and Higgins, Shaw was bitterly upset, and wondered aloud if the English public “still had any taste” (Garebian 14-15).

Although his satire may have repelled audiences, one person in particular saw promise in Shaw’s bittersweet drama. Gabriel Pascal, a Transylvanian actor and director, loved Shaw’s work, and attempted for several years to buy the rights to Shaw’s plays. Two of Shaw’s plays had been adapted for film, and those ensuing movies had been disasters, so it is understandable why Shaw was distrustful of movie studios (Garebian 18). Shaw eventually granted Pascal exclusive rights to his plays, and when Pascal wanted to adapt Pygmalion for the big screen, he was able to convince Shaw to write the screenplay. The show was a box office smash, and Shaw won an Academy Award in 1938 for Best Screenplay (Garebian 22).

Pascal’s next passion was to make a musical version of Pygmalion. However, Shaw was staunchly opposed to this, especially after Pascal had rewritten the final version of the film with a more romantic ending—without telling Shaw. Shaw had been previously offended with The Chocolate Soldier, Oscar Straus’ musical adaptation of Shaw’s Arms and Man, and was not willing to let another of his works be “destroyed” as such (Green 303). Finally, in 1950, Pascal supposedly got the rights to make a musical version of Pygmalion. Shaw died later that year, and most historical accounts are unclear as to whether Shaw actually did give Pascal the go-ahead on a musical adaptation.
Finally, work would commence on what Brooks Atkinson called “the greatest musical of the twentieth century” (Lerner, *Celebration* 186). After Shaw’s death, Pascal acquired a two-year grant on the rights to *Pygmalion* and attempted to find a musical team that would put together his show. He approached several popular composers and lyricists of the contemporary musical theater, such as Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz (*Anything Goes*), E.Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy (*Finian’s Rainbow*), Cole Porter (*Anything Goes, Can-Can*), and Frank Loesser (*Guys and Dolls, How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*). However, none of these men were at all willing to attempt an adaptation of this dry, didactic story (Flinn 341). Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein III (*South Pacific, Oklahoma!* ) did in fact attempt an adaptation, but gave up in 1952 when they decided that it simply could not be done.

Pascal finally approached Lerner and Loewe about the project, and covertly assured them that they were his first choice to adapt the play. The pair examined the play, and worked dutifully on an adaptation. However, their first attempt was unsuccessful. They were intimidated by these characters who “wouldn’t stop talking,” and a script that was bereft of any romance (Kasha 220). Lerner’s previous five musicals had been created from original stories, so the task of adaptation was a new challenge for him (Green 302). Nevertheless, the pair believed that it was a worthy challenge.

Loewe was known for his ability to take any setting and write music for it that sounded contemporary, and Lerner had an innate sensitivity to English language and style that would no doubt be of great use with this script that focused so heavily on proper English. They struggled for story ideas that would provide them an ensemble, and only came up with having Higgins as a professor of phonetics at Oxford and using undergraduate students as the ensemble. Frustrated
with the “clumsily inspired and useless” adaptation they had labored to come up with, the pair abandoned the project and went their separate ways (Garebian 28-29).

In 1954, around the time of Pascal’s death, Lerner and Loewe happily reunited and attacked the Pygmalion adaptation with renewed interest. But the initial problems still remained; how would it be possible to write a musical without a subplot or a chorus, and would it be possible to write non-love songs? Lerner admitted that his personal taste had always leaned toward the romantic, and said, “I instinctively look for humor in the antics of personality” (Lerner Street 33). Indeed, Lerner did find a worthy challenge in Pygmalion, with all the highly charged personality issues brought forth by the characters.

Since their last attempt, the “rules” for musicals had changed in Lerner and Loewe’s favor. No longer was it necessary to have an ensemble chorus or a subplot. Lerner and Loewe then decided to use the enhanced screenplay from the 1938 film version of Pygmalion from which to adapt the musical instead of Shaw’s original script (Garebian 29). The parts which Shaw and Pascal had added to the movie script (Eliza’s bath scene and the expanded Embassy Ball scene, for example) did fill in most of the perceived gaps in the original story (Garebian 19). In addition, Lerner and Loewe simply added to their script that which Shaw, within the text of the play, suggested had happened offstage or in the past.

Adaptations always present the problems of being faithful to the original work, and Lerner and Loewe’s project was no exception. Lehman Engel, in The Making of a Musical, says that the question of “faithful” is irrelevant, and the most important concern to those adapting the work is what will serve their purposes best (98). In this case, Lerner said that his main concern was not to change Shaw’s original work through any additions to the dialogue, or by the
impending additions of music (Celebration 186). He was faithful and successful in this area, as he created a show in which half of the material is originally Shaw’s.

However, the job of the lyricist, or librettist, is not just as simple as copying the original words and handing them to the composer. Richard Kislan, in fact, conjectured that the librettist has the most difficult job to do, and in this case that especially involves keeping the adaptation as comparable to the non-lyric theatrical work (176-77). “Brevity” was another factor that Kislan felt was necessary in the adaptation, where the librettist might work from a “skeletal play,” therefore enhancing the subplot, as well providing periods of rest (from singing) for the principal players. Additionally, Jerome Robbins believed that the lyricist needed to convey the play’s plot immediately (Kislan 191-92). With all these various opinions coming into play, it is not difficult to imagine the pressure that Lerner and Loewe felt when they first embarked on this adaptation. However, as the upcoming musical analyses will attest, the pair solved their adaptation challenge with some unconventional yet engaging musical means.

When the show premiered—having finally accepted its name as My Fair Lady—it was a rare commodity in an unexceptional 1956-57 Broadway season. Shaw’s Pygmalion had set up the story and wit of the musical, and Lerner and Loewe incorporated both Shaw’s satire and their emotion-filled music into one successful show. My Fair Lady’s novelty lay in the fact that the plot actually had substance, and the characters were rooted in mythology and other literature (Garebian 9). As Denny Martin Flinn notes in Musical! A Grand Tour, the show was also breaking several established rules of Broadway: it was not a romance, Americans were writing and directing English subject matter, and the leading man couldn’t even sing.

Adding to the show’s uniqueness, it did not have a concerted finale, or even an opening chorus. It had very little ensemble work, and no real duets (Garebian 99). The “drawing room”
setting was very restricted, and was not conducive to the development of attention-grabbing
songs. Lerner and Loewe were nevertheless successful in their musical delivery. Going back to
Lerner's search for "humor in the antics of personality," a great deal of this triumph can be
attributed to their careful crafting of passion-charged songs for the individual characters.
However, they did this without the typical pleasant personalities and underlying love story
present in most successful musicals. Indeed, their characters were almost all at odds with each
other and society. Using the music as a vehicle, the various characters had no difficulty
communicating to the audience that they could all use a little improvement in their societal roles
and interpersonal skills.

It seems appropriate to focus on the character of Henry Higgins in this musical inquiry, as
he serves to be the most inflammatory and disagreeable character in the show. Higgins's songs
are unique in that they are conveyed in a manner of speech-song. Higgins's speech-song is not
really similar to the 20th century German version of sprechstimme made famous by Arnold
Schönberg:

![Figure 1. Pierrot Lunaire, 9. Gebet an Pierrot (Schönberg 27)](image)

Higgins's verses are not like the distorted, shrieking, and almost unsingable intervals that
Schönberg wrote. However, his pieces are more closely related to the "patter" style of song,
made famous by England’s operetta team of Gilbert and Sullivan (Garebian 43). Compare the style and language of the following excerpts:

**Figure 2. The Pirates of Penzance, No. 13 “I am the very model of a modern Major-General”** (Gilbert 74)

**Figure 3. My Fair Lady, “I’m An Ordinary Man”** (Loewe 55-56)

This way, the words could be spoken or sung without changing the music. Using this style of song was a conscious choice on the part of Lerner and Loewe, since they had already handpicked their Higgins: Rex Harrison.

Deemed the “finest light comedy actor in the world,” Harrison was many things as a performer, but a strong singer was not one of them (Garebian 33). He was also meticulous in
creating his role as Higgins, and wanted to ensure that Lerner was being faithful to Shaw’s original work. He worked with Lerner on Higgins’s pieces, noting where the lyrics were too topical and shallow. Harrison emphasized that the speech-song was an especially important to the music as a vehicle for the character’s dialogue, for in this manner the musical style would not overshadow the words, as is a possible pitfall of straight singing. After all, the goal of all the creative crew involved with *My Fair Lady* wanted to preserve Shaw’s original dialogue, and through this method of singing the biting, satirical lines would still come through.

In his first song, “Why Can’t the English?”, the audience can plainly see that Higgins is a learned man—the kind that is not at all tolerant of ignorance. He condemns his fellow countrymen all around for their native dialects, with words very similar in spirit to Shaw’s.

Shaw: “They give themselves away every time they open their mouths” (Shaw 124)
Higgins is bitter that so many British citizens don’t espouse his love and honor of the English language, lamenting “But use proper English, you’re regarded as a freak” (*MFL* 29). In addition, the complicated use of rhyming words in the lyrics is another typical convention by which a character can be made to seem a very educated person (Kislan 197). In the above excerpt, a listener can hear how several syllables are packed into a few short measures. The words used are almost all multisyllabic, and fitting such long words, which are even so arranged as to rhyme, is quite a feat for the librettist. No doubt Lerner chose each word very carefully, for both the necessity of fitting words to music and staying close to Shaw’s version. The rhyming lines of the song prove that Higgins is very intelligent and cultured, but we can already see that Higgins is proving to be a temperamental character. As can be seen with his interaction with Eliza, he is not concerned with observing the feelings of others. His insults flow freely.

Interestingly, this first song does not reflect a major dramatic peak in the show. This style is indicative of several of the other songs in *My Fair Lady*. Like the style that was set forth in *The King and I*, the musical scenes are used not just for melodramatic climaxes, but also to express simple emotions and everyday occurrences (Engel *AMT* 91). The audience, after seeing these songs performed, can assume that this is not the first time Professor Higgins has ever been frustrated by the language of his fellow Englishmen.

This song serves to introduce just a hint of the plot (Higgins’s distaste for improper pronunciation), but more importantly it simply introduces his acidic character. The modest accompaniment is adequate, but not really something so powerful as to signal a really meaningful event. His strong feelings on the subject are punctuated by the repetitions of his “Why Can’t the English?” motive from the orchestra:
Most of the songs in the musical do indeed serve the main purpose of developing the characters. In addition to the extensive dialogue, the songs in the ensuing scenes bring out the worst in Higgins. He grows especially more detestable in “I’m an Ordinary Man.” However, he does segue into the song with a few calm, even philosophical words about his own experience. These lines are culled directly from Shaw’s play:

“...I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance. I find the moment that I let myself become friends with a woman, I become selfish and tyrannical. So here I am, a confirmed old bachelor, and likely to remain so. After all, Pickering ... (sings)” (Shaw 141, MFL 56)

The opening line of the song is enough to provoke the disapproval of the listener, who doesn’t have to be attentive to notice that Higgins is far from being ordinary. He is far too impatient, short-sighted, intolerant, and selfish to claim, “An average man am I” (MFL 56).

Higgins’s sing-songy verses are too gentle and restrained to be taken seriously, and the following verse is the most perfectly ironic one in the entire song:

“I’m a very gentle man;
Even tempered and good-natured,
Whom you never hear complain;
Who has the milk of human kindness
By the quart in every vein.
A patient man am I
Down to my fingertips . . . ”

The sort who never could, ever would, let an insulting remark escape his lips.

Just a very gentle man.

Figure 6. My Fair Lady,
“I’m an Ordinary Man” (Loewe 54)

The gentle motives following this verse (and the others) playfully resolve the line in a “nice” manner. However, the ensuing refrains immediately pick up Higgins’s rage and impatience with short passages of staccato eighth notes from the brass section. (See Figure 7, next page.)

The song definitely captures Pygmalion’s spirit, if not necessarily the letter. In the play, Higgins refers to the opposite nature of man and woman, saying “One wants to go north and one wants to go south; and the result is that both have to go east, though they both hate the east wind.” Placing this text next to the following passage from “I’m an Ordinary Man,” and the result is a very comparable rendition.
"Make a plan and you will find
She has something else in mind;
And so rather than do either,
You do something else that neither
Likes at all." *(MFL 57)*

"I'm an Ordinary Man" *(Loewe 59-61)*

The driving rhymes and pulsing rhythms push fervently toward the end of the lines, and ultimately to the end of the song, where finally Higgins can relax again. Quietly and reservedly he states, "I shall never let a woman in my life" *(MFL 59).*
The insufferable character of Higgins continues to grow with “You Did It!”, the opening number for Act II. Although it is a song sung mostly by Colonel Pickering and not Higgins, it nevertheless brings out the less than admirable side of Higgins. Just as in *Pygmalion*, where Pickering says “... it’s been a great occasion; a triumph for you” (Shaw 178), and goes on for several minutes reliving the success of the garden party, Pickering kicks off this song in *My Fair Lady* applauding Higgins for Eliza’s success at the Embassy Ball. Almost every other word in his first few lines is “you,” aimed pointedly at Higgins, and not at the person who actually pulled off the great experiment with glamorous success.

Interestingly, the structure of the lyrics does not place the “you” on the strong downbeat, but rather as a pick-up note to the energetically delivered “did” on the strong beat. However, the redundancy of the word assures the audience that Higgins is receiving all the credit for the evening. At the climax of his lines, Pickering holds out the “you” in the “You did it!” for several beats, and therein lies the natural musical emphasis.

![Figure 8. My Fair Lady, “You Did It” (Loewe 155-6)](image-url)
After an interlude in which Higgins explains just how completely Eliza—or rather, he himself—fooled his former phonetics student at the Embassy Ball, Higgins’s entire household gets into the spirit of things. If there would be any type of musical convention that could make Eliza feel any smaller in her hour of triumph, it would be a full-blown chorus of sycophants singing Higgins’s praises, and that is exactly what Lerner and Loewe deliver. Not only do the words fuel Higgins’s ego, but the dramatic upward progression of the final chords really do elevate Higgins to his heroic status, undeserved as it may be.

Figure 9. My Fair Lady, “You Did It” (Loewe 170-2)
Naturally, Eliza is miffed at the gushing over Higgins, on top of the fact that she has been forgotten. After a bitter fight with Higgins, she escapes her oppressor’s house during the night. In the morning Higgins is thoroughly shocked to find her missing, yet his short-sightedness renders him clueless as to what may have offended Eliza.

Although his ensuing musical question, “A Hymn to Him,” does not seem to be found anywhere in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, this embellishment added by Lerner and Loewe does Higgins’s character justice, portraying his true ignorance of the “fairer” sex. This song is very much similar—and could possibly be considered the second-act “twin”—to “I’m An Ordinary Man.”

The song begins with furious driving rhymes sung by Higgins:

![Musical notation]

**Figure 10. My Fair Lady, “A Hymn to Him”** (Loewe 215-6)

After this introduction, the style switches to a rollicking march. The words are punctuated by the staccato eighth notes interspersed with eighth rests, giving the piece a very determined feel. (See Figure 11.) It is evident that Higgins is very steadfast in his image of masculinity, and yet truly oblivious to the ways of the woman.
Throughout most of Higgins’s songs, as well as those of the other characters, the music of *My Fair Lady* is rife with negativity, ignorance, and intolerance for others. However, *My Fair Lady* drew criticism for being too romanticized, something Shaw was very much against.
Hundling 24

(Garebian 89). This romanticization is most evident by the final number, Higgins’s sentimental “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face.”

In My Fair Lady, Higgins storms away from Eliza, planning never to see her again, but he surprises himself by realizing that he’s grown accustomed to her. In Pygmalion, he actually does admit to Eliza that “I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance. I like them, rather” (Shaw 202). This, of course, is admitted long before the two part on unfriendly terms and from that point live to antagonize the other.

Higgins’s angry declarations at the beginning of “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” quickly melt into a very tender, lilting melody. Here, the sprechstimme is not utilized as much; at least, not in Harrison’s recordings. This seems to suggest that Higgins’s softer side is finally coming through—he lets himself be carried away on the melody. He wavers between sensitivity and characteristic flashes of fury and selfishness (set to the same musical motives found in “I’m an Ordinary Man,”) in the middle of the song, when recalling that Eliza said she might marry Freddy:

Figure 12. (continued on next page) My Fair Lady, “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” (Loewe 239-41)
Figure 12. (continued from previous page, continued on next page) My Fair Lady, “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” (Loewe 239-41)
In a manner inconsistent with Shaw’s original Pygmalion, however, Lerner and Loewe allowed Higgins to relent slightly, as evidenced by the end of the song. After the above outburst, Higgins just as quickly reverts to a kinder, more thoughtful mood. The grand pauses and held notes are a drastic emotional change from the short, brittle staccato notes that Higgins is usually known to speak-sing.

Almost unbelievably, the audience is hearing and seeing a true departure from the normally brash, arrogant Higgins. In the final scene, Eliza returns to Higgins’s house, and the audience can see (apparent to a reader from the stage directions indicated) that Higgins is happy
to see her come back—even though he faces away from Eliza and doesn’t allow her to see his contented smile.

How could the musical minds in charge allow this drastic departure from the original play, in violation of Shaw’s original intentions? The answer is not hard to fathom; contemporary musical theatre audiences simply wouldn’t respond well to seeing an unresponsive Higgins. With emotions like that—or rather, lack of them—Higgins would be a completely detestable character that audiences could not accept as potentially “real” (Smith 238). In the “Note” preceding the script of My Fair Lady, Lerner explained the reason for his change in the outcome of the show. He said, “I have omitted the sequel because in it Shaw explains how Eliza ends not with Higgins but with Freddy and—Shaw and Heaven forgive me!—I am not certain he is right” (MFL 7).

The different endings in the shows can be seen as the difference in the characters’ emotional maturity, stimulated (or not) through the events documented in the works. In Pygmalion, the play simply ends with the resolution of Eliza and Higgins parting on non-speaking terms. In the sequel/epilogue, the reader learns that even though Eliza still stops by the Professor’s house, the two constantly quarrel about Eliza’s marriage to Freddy and her choices in life. It appears that they have not risen above, or accepted their differences, and will probably live out the rest of their days at odds with one another.

In My Fair Lady, on the other hand, Higgins’s final song shows a marked change in his thought process. He reveals that he respects Eliza as a person, and that his life would be emptier without her. Something about him has matured, and his satisfaction at seeing her back reinforces this. Perhaps, then, the emotionally expressive power of the music is responsible?

Charles A. Berst quotes Lerner in Pygmalion: Shaw’s Spin on Myth and Cinderella as saying: “The end of the play, I hope, satisfies the desire of seeing them together . . . Music can
do that because music can put you in a mood to accept it as inevitable” (22). Truly, the masterful music and sharp-witted script of *My Fair Lady* satisfy both the need for a worthwhile story and characters, and the sentimental desire for a happy ending. Although the characters themselves can sometimes seem rough, and present a pessimistic view of humanity, there is no doubt that the addition of a bit of sentiment has made this musical one of the “fairest” of the century.
Works Cited


Other References


