**Introduction & Background: Why are we studying *Pygmalion*?**

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***Pygmalion***, written in 1912 by [George Bernard Shaw](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1925/shaw-bio.html) and first performed two years later, tells the story of Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics (speech), who bets his friend that he can pass off a poor flower girl with a Cockney accent as a duchess by teaching her to speak with an upper class accent.

In addition to being a playwright, Shaw was a theater critic, an essayist, a lifelong socialist and advocate for the working class, and, like Higgins, something of a phonetician. Given the scope of his interests, it should come as no surprise that he had a lot to say about a lot of things. *Pygmalion*, like most of Shaw's plays, is didactic. That is, it's meant to teach the audience about something. In this case, Shaw wants us to think about the problems caused by our "common" language, and how language can separate people from different places and classes, even different parts of the same town. In his preface to the play, entitled, "A Professor of Phonetics," he writes, "The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. They spell it so abominably that no man can teach himself what it sounds like.” Seems like he's about ready to yell, "We have a failure to communicate!" Well, instead of screaming, he wrote *Pygmalion*.

It's easy to sympathize with Shaw, though. If you've ever had trouble understanding someone because his accent was different than yours, or had trouble pronouncing an unfamiliar word (why *does* "subtle" have a "b" in it anyway?), you probably know what Shaw's talking about: sometimes English doesn't really make much sense, even to native speakers. When you consider that Shaw was writing at a time when the British Empire was still around, when people from all over the globe were expected and sometimes forced to communicate in English, the situation only becomes more complicated.

All this talk about language is only the beginning, though. Shaw uses it as a base to discuss other issues: problems about society, class, and gender. No need to get overwhelmed right off the bat, though. It's best to take it slow and start with words. That's where all literature begins, right?

Given that we can all relate to these problems, however, it's no surprise that *Pygmalion* was and is extremely popular. Most people know the plot from [*My Fair Lady*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058385/), the musical film adaptation of Shaw's play (sorry to say, there's no rain in Spain falling mainly on the plain in the original), and it's been parodied by everyone from [The Three Stooges](http://www.threestooges.com/) to [*The Simpsons*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096697/) and [*Family Guy*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0182576/). Shaw also wrote the [Academy Award](http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/about/history.html)-winning screenplay for the 1938 film version, making him the only person ever to win both an Oscar and the [Nobel Prize in Literature](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/). Pretty good for a play about a grouchy professor and a poor flower girl, no?

**Why Should I Care?**

There's a reason why *Pygmalion*'s been turned into a movie, a musical, and a movie musical. In many ways, it’s a good old-fashioned fairy tale (whether or not there’s a happy ending, depends on the version…) But it also shows us many truths about life. Life is not always so sweet, and it rarely comes wrapped up in a bow.

We know what you're thinking. Enough with the words already. OK, how about some numbers. Get this: approximately 375 million people speak English as their first language. Most of them are American, Indian, Nigerian, British, Filipino, Canadian, and Australian. They're not all quite speaking the same variety of English. Have you ever heard of the term "to borrow leg"? That's Nigerian slang for "to flee," as in, "When I saw that dog coming for me I had to borrow leg." Some of these regional colloquialisms have become better known: lots of people know that "barbie" is Australian slang for barbecue.

This is only the tip of the iceberg, though: at least another half a billion people speak English as a second language, and more are learning every day. Knowledge of English can mean the difference between poverty and employment, and, just like Eliza, thousands if not millions of people are held back because they don't speak English as well as they could. Even today, characters with "funny accents" – whether they be from Brooklyn, China, France, Scotland, or India – can be seen on television and in movies. And though there's nothing wrong with a little fun every now and again, they hint at some uncomfortable realities. That accent can make a big difference.

Shaw was writing about all this stuff nearly a hundred years ago, and his thoughts are *still* fresh He tackles more than just the issues of language, English specifically. He fights the hard issues like poverty and judgment as a result of poverty. He makes it clear that no matter where you started, it’s possible to move up in life; it’s possible to earn the life you want to live. His story does indeed teach some valuable lessons that we can all apply to our lives today.

Questions

1. What does the word **didactic** mean?

2. What does Shaw see as one of the primary problems in the world?

3. How do you know that *Pygmalion* has been a successful play, according to the text?

4. Give 3 reasons, based on this text, that language (specifically English) is an important issue in life.

5. What is the main message Shaw is trying to communicate through the play?