

BERNARD SHAW

PYGMALION

SUMMARY:

Pygmalion is a comedy about a phonetics expert who, as a kind of social experiment, attempts to make a lady out of an uneducated Cockney flower-girl. Although not as intellectually complex as some of the other plays in Shaw's "theatre of ideas," *Pygmalion* nevertheless probes important questions about social class, human behavior, and relations between the sexes.

Shaw plotted to trick his audience out of any prejudicial views they held about the play's content. This he did by assuming their familiarity with the myth of Pygmalion, from the Greek playwright Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, encouraging them to think that *Pygmalion* was a classical play. In Ovid's tale, Pygmalion is a man disgusted with real-life women who chooses celibacy and the pursuit of an ideal woman, whom he carves out of ivory. Wishing the statue were real, he makes a sacrifice to Venus, the goddess of love, who brings the statue to life. By the late Renaissance, poets and dramatists began to contemplate the thoughts and feelings of this woman, who woke full-grown in the arms of a lover. Shaw's central character—the flower girl Liza Doolittle—expresses articulately how her transformation has made her feel, and he adds the additional twist that Liza turns on her "creator" in the end by leaving him.

In addition to the importance of the original Pygmalion myth to Shaw's play, critics have pointed out the possible influence of other works, such as W.S. Gilbert's *Pygmalion* and *Galatea* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*. Shaw denied borrowing the story directly from any of these sources, but there are traces of them in his play, as there are of the well-known story of Cinderella, and shades of the famous stories of other somewhat vain "creators" whose experiments have unforeseen implications: Faust, Dr. Frankenstein, Svengali.