Throughout his career, George Bernard Shaw agitated for the reform of the vagaries of English spelling and pronunciation, but his assertion that Pygmalion was written to impress upon the public the importance of phoneticians is immaterial. Pygmalion, like all of Shaw’s best plays, transcends its author’s didactic intent. The play is performed and read not for Shaw’s pet theories but for the laughter its plot and characters provoke.

The play is a modern adaptation of the Pygmalion myth (although some have claimed that it is a plagiarism of Tobias Smollett’s The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle, 1751), in which the sculptor-king Pygmalion falls in love with Galatea, a creature of his own making, a statue that the goddess Aphrodite, pitying him, brings to life. The Pygmalion of Shaw’s play turns up as Henry Higgins, a teacher of English speech; his Galatea is Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl whom Higgins transforms into a seeming English lady by teaching her to speak cultivated English. In the process of transforming a poor, uneducated girl into a lady, Higgins irrevocably changes a human life. By lifting Eliza above her own class and providing her with no more than the appurtenances of another, Higgins makes her unfit for both. On this change and Higgins’s stubborn refusal to accept its reality and its consequences, Shaw builds his play.

From the beginning, when Higgins first observes her dialectal monstrosities, Eliza is characterized as a proud, stubborn girl, though educated only by the circumstances of her poverty and gutter environment. She has the courage to ask Higgins to make good his boast that he can pass her off as a duchess within a matter of months, and she calls on him and offers to pay him for elocution lessons that will enable her to work as a saleswoman in a flower shop. Like all the proud, she is also sensitive, and she tries to break off the interview when Higgins persists in treating her as his social inferior.

Higgins can best be understood in contrast to Colonel Pickering, his foil, who finances the transformation. As a fellow phonetician, Pickering approves of the project as a scientific experiment, but as a gentleman and a sensitive human being, he sympathizes with Eliza. It is Higgins’s uproariously tragic flaw that he, like all of Shaw’s heroes, is not a gentleman. He is brilliant and cultured, but he lacks manners and refuses to learn or even affect any, believing himself to be superior to the conventions and civilities of polite society and preferring to treat everyone with bluntness and candor. He is, or so he thinks until Eliza leaves him, a self-sufficient man. When he discovers that she has made herself an indispensable part of his life, he goes to her and, in one of the most remarkable courtship scenes in the history of the theater, pleads with her to live with Pickering and himself as three dedicated bachelors. At the end of the play, he is confident that she will accept his unorthodox proposition, even when she bids him good-bye forever.

As a matter of fact, Shaw himself was never able to convince anyone that Eliza and Higgins did not marry and live happily ever after. The first producer of the play, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, insisted on leaving the impression that the two were reconciled in the end as lovers, and this tradition has persisted. Enraged as always by any liberties taken with his work, Shaw wrote an essay that he attached to the play as a sequel in which he denounces sentimental interpretations of Pygmalion. He concedes that Pygmalion is a romance in that its heroine undergoes an almost miraculous change, but he argues that the logic of the characterization does not permit a conventional happy ending. Higgins is, after all, a god and Eliza only his creation; an abyss separates them. Furthermore, Shaw contends, their personalities, backgrounds, and philosophies are irreconcilable. Higgins is an inveterate bachelor and likely to remain so because he will never find a woman who can meet the standards he has set for ideal womanhood—those set by his mother. Eliza, on the other hand, being young and pretty, can always find a husband whose demands on a woman would not be impossible to meet. Therefore, Shaw insists, Eliza marries Freddy Eynsford Hill, a penniless but devoted young man who has only an insignificant role in the play. Stubbornly, Shaw does not even permit them the luxury of living happily ever after: They have financial problems that are gradually solved by their opening a flower shop subsidized by Colonel Pickering. Shaw’s Pygmalion is too awe-inspiring for his Galatea ever to presume to love him.

Even with the addition of this unconventional ending to the play, Pygmalion would be highly atypical of Shavian drama were it not for the presence of Alfred Doolittle, Eliza’s father. Through Doolittle, Shaw is able to indulge in economic and social moralizing, an ingredient with which Shaw could not dispense. Like Eliza, Doolittle undergoes a transformation as a result of Higgins’s meddling, a transformation that in his case is, however, unpremeditated. Early in the play, Doolittle fascinates Higgins and Pickering with his successful attempt to capitalize on Eliza’s good fortune. He literally charms Higgins out of five pounds by declaring himself an implacable foe of middle-class morality and insisting that he will use the money for a drunken spree. Delighted with the old scoundrel, Higgins mentions him in jest in a letter to a crackpot American millionaire, who subsequently bequeaths Doolittle a yearly allowance of three thousand pounds if he will lecture on morality. Thus this dustman becomes transformed into a lion of London society, and the reprobate becomes a victim of bourgeois morality. Although he appears only twice in the play, Doolittle is so vigorous and funny that he is almost as memorable a comic character as Higgins.

The play itself is memorable because of its vigor and fun, notwithstanding Shaw’s protestations about its message. It is likely that Shaw insisted so strenuously on the serious intent of the play because he too realized that Pygmalion is his least serious and least didactic play. In 1956, Pygmalion was adapted into the Broadway musical My Fair Lady; the musical, with book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner and music by Frederick Loewe, was extremely successful, and several revivals have been produced since that time. A film version of My Fair Lady, starring Audrey Hepburn as Eliza and Rex Harrison as Higgins, was released in 1964.