

Shaw's Pygmalion

Historical Background

George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1856 to Lucinda and George Shaw. His father was a corn merchant who suffered from alcoholism, and his mother was a house wife and singer. Lucinda ran away to London with her voice teacher, George Lee. All her children followed her there. After a fall out with Lee, Shaw's mother pursued an unconventional teaching career in singing using the techniques Lee taught her.



Shaw began working as a clerk in a land agency at the age of fifteen, but abandoned that career before age twenty and resolved to fashion himself as a modern Shakespeare. He came of age as a writer in the late Victorian era, and much of his work demonstrated a rebellion against the morays of the time. Shaw's first essays into the writing profession were as a music and art critic, and his success allowed him to expand the range and style of his criticism. He developed into an extremely prolific playwright, novelist, and lecturer. Shaw was an active Fabian socialist and a supporter of feminists and homosexuals. His aggressive and diverse social commentaries kept him in the public eye throughout his long life.

Shaw died in 1950, at the age of 94.

Pygmalion is the most famous and perhaps most beloved of Shaw's many plays. Shaw was often criticized for writing plays full of unsubstantial, if witty, banter. With *Pygmalion*, Shaw challenged his critics by making both the subject and the content of the play speech. He used phonetics and Ovid's story of Pygmalion as a means of defending his artistic creation and addressing feminist issues. Several film adaptations have been made of the play, one of which garnered Shaw an Academy Award for best screenplay in 1938.

HISTORICAL SETTING

In the year, 1914, the disturbances in Europe that eventually produced World War I, The Great War, began with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Personally, Shaw's interest in education preventing the tragic devastation of human life due to wars was demonstrated in *Pygmalion*. Great Britain was still a colonial power with colonies in the Pacific, Atlantic, Africa and the Caribbean. Queen Victoria characterized the times with a set of values called Victorianism which revolved around "social high-mindedness, domesticity, and a confidence in the expansion of knowledge and the power of reasoned argument to change society." Industrialization had brought a demographic shift causing many more unskilled laborers to seek work in the city. Such was the nature of the Doolittles in *Pygmalion*. Gradually, during the nineteenth century, there had been a relaxing of the traditional property requirements to allow many more Englishmen to vote. This also brought the introduction of women's suffragette organizations. "Increased political participation further prompted a shift in

sex roles: British society had already noted the phenomenon of the new woman, and was to see further changes such as increasing numbers of women in the work force, as well as reforms to divorce laws and other impacts upon domestic life."

- Galens, David and Lynn Spampinato, ed. *Drama for Students*. 13 vols. Detroit: Gale, 1998.

The Victorian Era (1837 - 1901)

by Ilana Miller

The **Victorian era** is generally agreed to stretch through the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). It was a tremendously exciting period when many artistic styles, literary schools, as well as, social, political and religious movements flourished. It was a **time of prosperity**, broad imperial expansion, and **great political reform**. It was also a time, which today we associate with "prudishness" and "repression". Without a doubt, it was an extraordinarily complex age, that has sometimes been called the Second English Renaissance. It is, however, also the beginning of Modern Times.

The **social classes of England were newly reforming**, and fomenting. There was a churning upheaval of the old hierarchical order, and **the middle classes were steadily growing**. Added to that, the upper classes' composition was changing from simply hereditary aristocracy to a combination of nobility and an emerging wealthy commercial class. The definition of what made someone a gentleman or a lady was, therefore, changing at what some thought was an alarming rate. By the end of the century, it was silently agreed that a gentleman was someone who had a liberal public (private) school education (preferably at Eton, Rugby, or Harrow), no matter what his antecedents might be. **There continued to be a large and generally disgruntled working class, wanting and slowly getting reform and change.**

Conditions of the working class were still bad, though, through the century, three reform bills gradually gave the vote to most males over the age of twenty-one. Contrasting to that was the horrible reality of child labor which persisted throughout the period. When a bill was passed stipulating that children under nine could not work in the textile industry, this in no way applied to other industries, nor did it in any way curb rampant teenaged prostitution.

The Victorian Era was also a time of tremendous scientific progress and ideas. Darwin took his Voyage of the Beagle, and posited the Theory of Evolution. The Great Exhibition of 1851 took place in London, lauding the technical and industrial advances of the age, and strides in medicine and the physical sciences continued throughout the century. The radical thought associated with modern psychiatry began with men like Sigmund Freud toward the end of the era, and **radical economic theory, developed by Karl Marx and his associates**, began a second age of revolution in mid-century. **The ideas of Marxism, socialism, feminism churned and bubbled along with all else that happened.**

The dress of the early Victorian era was similar to the Georgian age. Women wore corsets, balloonish sleeves and crinolines in the middle 1840's. The crinoline thrived, and expanded during the 50's and 60's, and into the 70's, until, at last, it gave way to the bustle. The bustle held its own until the 1890's, and became much smaller, going out altogether by the dawning of the twentieth century. For men, following Beau Brummell's

example, stove-pipe pants were the fashion at the beginning of the century. Their ties, known then as cravats, and the various ways they might be tied could change, the styles of shirts, jackets, and hats also, but trousers have remained. Throughout the century, it was stylish for men to wear facial hair of all sizes and descriptions. The clean shaven look of the Regency was out, and mustaches, mutton-chop sideburns, Piccadilly Weepers, full beards, and Van Dykes (worn by Napoleon III) were the order of the day.

The "prudishness" and "repressiveness" that we associate with this era is, I believe, a somewhat erroneous association. Though, people referred to arms and legs as limbs and extremities, and many other things that make us titter, it is, in my opinion, because they had a degree of modesty and a sense of propriety that we hardly understand today. The latest biographies of Queen Victoria describe her and her husband, Albert, of enjoying erotic art, and certainly we know enough about the Queen from the segment on her issue, to know that she did not in anyway shy away from the marriage bed. The name sake of this period was hardly a prude, but having said that, it is necessary to understand that the strictures and laws for 19th Century Society were so much more narrow and defined that they are today, that we must see this era as very codified and strict. Naturally, to an era that takes more liberties, this would seem harsh and unnatural.

Culturally, the novel continued to thrive through this time. Its importance to the era could easily be compared to the importance of the plays of Shakespeare for the Elizabethans. Some of the great novelists of the time were: Sir Walter Scott, Emily, Anne, and Charlotte Bronte, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Oscar Wilde, and, of course, Charles Dickens. That is not to say that poetry did not thrive - it did with the works of the Brownings, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the verse of Lewis Carroll and Rudyard Kipling.

An art movement indicative of this period was the Pre-Raphaelites, which included William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, and John Everett Millais. Also during this period were the Impressionists, the Realists, and the Fauves, though the Pre-Raphaelites were distinctive for being a completely English movement.

As stated in the beginning, the Victorian Age was an extremely diverse and complex period. It was, indeed, the precursor of the modern era. If one wishes to understand the world today in terms of society, culture, science, and ideas, it is imperative to study this era.

<http://www.likesbooks.com/victorer.html>

Social Class

[David Cody](#), Associate Professor of English, Hartwick College

Class is a complex term, in use since the late eighteenth century, and employed in many different ways. In our context **classes are the more or less distinct social groupings** which at any given historical period, taken as a whole, **constituted British Society**. Different social classes can be (and were by the classes themselves) distinguished by inequalities in such areas as power, authority, wealth, working and living conditions, life-styles, life-span, education, religion, and culture.

Early in the nineteenth century, **the labels "working classes" and "middle classes" were already coming into common usage**. The **old hereditary aristocracy**, reinforced by the new gentry who owed their success to commerce, industry, and the professions,

evolved into an "upper class" (its consciousness formed in large part by the Public Schools and Universities) which tenaciously maintained control over the political system, depriving not only the working classes but the middle classes of a voice in the political process. The increasingly powerful (and class conscious) middle classes, however, undertook organized agitation to remedy this situation: the passage of the Reform Act of 1832 and the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846 were intimations of the extent to which they would ultimately be successful.

The working classes, however, remained shut out from the political process, and became increasingly hostile not only to the aristocracy but to the middle classes as well. As the Industrial Revolution progressed there was further social stratification. Capitalists, for example, employed industrial workers who were one component of the working classes (each class included a wide range of occupations of varying status and income; there was a large gap, for example, between skilled and unskilled labor), but beneath the industrial workers was a submerged "under class"-- contemporaries referred to them as the "sunken people"-- which lived in poverty. In mid-century skilled workers had acquired enough power to enable them to establish Trade Unions (Socialism became an increasingly important political force) which they used to further improve their status, while unskilled workers and the underclass beneath them remained much more susceptible to exploitation, and were therefore exploited.

This basic hierarchical structure (presented here in highly oversimplified form), comprising the "upper classes," the "middle classes," the "Working Classes" (with skilled laborers at one extreme and unskilled at the other), and the impoverished "Under Class," remained relatively stable despite periodic (and frequently violent) upheavals, and despite the Marxist view of the inevitability of class conflict, at least until the outbreak of World War I. A modified class structure clearly remains in existence today.

<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/Class.html>

Pygmalion

Pygmalion saw so much to blame in women that he came at last to abhor the sex, and resolved to live unmarried. He was a sculptor, and had made with wonderful skill a statue of ivory, so beautiful that no living woman could be compared to it in beauty. It was indeed the perfect semblance of a maiden that seemed to be alive, and only prevented from moving by modesty. His art was so perfect that it concealed itself, and its product looked like the workmanship of nature. Pygmalion admired his own work, and at last fell in love with the counterfeit creation. Oftentimes he laid his hand upon it, as if to assure himself whether it were living or not, and could not even then believe that it was only ivory. He caressed it, and gave it presents such as young girls love, bright shells and polished stones, little birds and flowers of various hues, beads and amber. He put raiment on its limbs, and jewels on its fingers, and a necklace about its neck. To the ears he hung earrings and strings of pearls upon the breast. Her dress became her, and she looked not less charming than when unattired. He laid her on a couch spread with cloths of Tyrian dye, and called her his wife, and put her head upon a pillow of the softest feathers, as if she could enjoy their softness.

The festival of Venus was at hand, a festival celebrated with great pomp at Cyprus. Victims were offered, the altars smoked, and the odor of incense filled the air. When Pygmalion had performed his part in the solemnities, he stood before the altar and timidly said, "Ye gods, who can do all things, give me, I pray you, for my wife" he dared not say "my ivory virgin," but said instead "one like my ivory virgin." Venus, who was

present at the festival, heard him and knew the thought he would have uttered; and, as an omen of her favor, caused the flame on the altar to shoot up thrice in a fiery point into the air. When he returned home, he went to see his statue, and, leaning over the couch, gave a kiss to the mouth. It seemed to be warm. He pressed its lips again, he laid his hand upon the limbs; the ivory felt **soft to his touch**, and yielded to his fingers like the wax of Hymettus. While he stands astonished and glad, though doubting, and fears he may be mistaken, again and again with a lover's ardor he touches the object of his hopes. It was indeed alive! The veins when pressed yielded to the finger and then resumed their roundness. Then at last the votary of Venus found words to thank the goddess, and pressed his lips upon lips as **real** as his own. The virgin felt the kisses and blushed, and, opening her timid eyes to the light, fixed them at the same moment on her lover. Venus blessed the nuptials she had formed, and from this union Paphos was born, from whom the city, sacred to Venus, received its name.

- Pygmalion named his lover Galatea

Morris tells the story of Pygmalion and the Image in some of the most beautiful verses of the Earthly Paradise.

This is Galatea's description of her metamorphosis:

"My sweet,' she said, 'as yet I am not wise,
Or stored with words aright the tale to tell,
But listen: when I opened first mine eyes
I stood within the niche thou knowest well,
And from my hand a heavy thing there fell
Carved like these flowers, nor could I see things clear,
But with a strange confused noise could hear.

"At last mine eyes could see a woman fair,
But awful as this round white moon o'erhead,
So that I trembled when I saw her there,
For with my life was born some touch of dread,
And therewithal I heard her voice that said,
"Come down and learn to love and be alive,
For thee, a well-prized gift, today I give.""

BE READY FOR A QUIZ TOMORROW, on any or all of the following questions:

1. Briefly describe how Queen Victoria characterized the values of the time. What factors, in term of the economy and the women's movement, allowed people to embody the Queen's values? How?
2. Briefly describe the initial class structure before the Victorian Age. How and why did this begin to change?
3. How was the composition of the upper class changing during this time? What made someone a "gentleman" or a "lady"? What role did education play?
4. What was happening with the working class at this time? Were their conditions improving? Why or why not?
5. What was the perceived power of education? How did this influence class status? What is the significance of this development to Shaw, the playwright?
6. What was happening with women and women's rights at this time? Were their conditions improving? Why or why not?
7. Briefly describe the myth of Pygmalion in the packet. How did Pygmalion feel about women and marriage?
8. How did Pygmalion, the sculptor in the myth, feel about women and marriage? How was he able to find a companion?