

Remember the play was written in 1912, two years before the outbreak of the First World War. Read the section on 'Historical Background' on pages xvi-xviii of the Longman edition of the text.

Differences between rich and poor

- 70% of England's wealth was owned by 1% of the population.
- The rich in the play are the Host and Hostess of the embassy reception. They are satirised by Shaw - shown as gullible and stupid for believing so easily that Eliza is 'a princess at least' (p 71).
- Nepommuck claims to be royal and a language expert but is stupid. He believes that Eliza is Hungarian, like him, and thinks she is extremely clever to say that she does not understand Hungarian (p 70).
- Compare Eliza who is poor but intelligent and principled. She wants to improve herself (p 23), values her independence more than wealth and success (p 100), seeks true love with Freddy rather than a materially comfortable life with Higgins (p 101).

Social class, manners and behaviour, aspirations

- Fixed expectations of behaviour in the middle classes - the tea party, introductions, 'how do you do', small talk, shock at Eliza's 'Not bloody likely!' (p 52-62).
- Mrs Higgins and Mrs Pearce both complain about Higgins' language and behaviour which often seem at odds with his middle class status - Mrs Higgins says his language would be appropriate 'on a canal barge'. Mrs Pearce complains about his table manners and bad language (p 36-38).
- Everyone is aware of their position in society - Mrs Higgins comments on Mrs Eynsford Hill's tenuous connection to the middle class (p 66), Mrs Pearce describes Eliza on her first visit as 'a very common girl' (p 22).
- Appearances are important - both Mrs Pearce and Mrs Higgins ask on what 'terms' Eliza will live in Higgins' house (p 29 & p 63).
- Pickering's behaviour towards Eliza is always polite and gentlemanly (p 24, 92-93).
- Social aspirations are evident in the play - Mrs Eynsford Hill clings on to her middle class position despite having no money (p 62); Eliza aspires to 'be a lady in a flower shop stead of sellin' at the corner of Tottenham Court Road' (p 23); Higgins says people want to change the way they speak because they live in 'an age of upstarts' (p 14).

Position of women

- Women at this time did not have equal rights with men - it took until 1918 for women over 30 to be allowed to vote, and until 1928 for women over 21.
- Violence against women is mentioned in the play - Doolittle advises Higgins to hit Eliza (p 47); Higgins talks about Eliza marrying someone with boots to kick her with (p 102).
- Women had little status - Doolittle advises Higgins to marry Eliza while she knows no better and says if she is unhappy 'she's only a woman and don't know how to be happy anyhow' (p 45).
- Eliza is aware that she could have had a worse life than selling flowers - 'I could have been a bad girl if I'd liked' i.e. a prostitute (p 101).
- Shaw was a champion of women's rights and some of this shows in Higgins' attitudes - he tells Eliza that a woman fetching a man's slippers is 'a disgusting sight' (p 99).