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Pygmalion

(G.B.Shaw)

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Characters sketch of Henry Higgins

Henry Higgins is the most important character of Shaw’s play ‘Pygmalion’. He is a distinguished Professor of Phonetics and the son of Mrs. Higgins. He is a robust, vital, appetizing sort of man of forty. He is of the energetic, scientific type, heartily even violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject and careless about himself and other people including their feelings. Nigel Alexander has remarked: “*His picture of Higgins as he says in his preface, own something to that distinguished Phonetician and scholar Henry sweet.*”

Henry Higgins wants to reform the speech of English nation. He is a keen observer but sometimes he is absent minded and careless. He is restless like a boy. He is habitual swearer.

Sometimes, he is excited and loses control over his tongue. He does not like hypocrisy. He is frank and non-sentimental.

Higgins is very fond of phonetics. He devotes most of his time and energy to it. He works in his laboratory with great care, patience and thoroughness. He moves among common people and notes down the peculiarities of speech. He can correctly place utter strangers merely from their accent and pronunciation. He does not like hollow pretence of a linguist like Nepommuck. He believes that a phonetical training can transform a man. He eagerly accepts the bet of Colonel Pickering and feels pride and pleasure at the progress of the flower girl. Prof. Higgins says: *“You see this creature with her kerbstone English : the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an Ambassador’s garden party. I could even get her a place as lady’s maid or shop assistant which requires better English.”*

Prof. Higgins is impervious to sexual impulses. His female pupils are always sacred to him. Even handsome American ladies are unable stir him. To whom women are positive nuisance. They upset everything and make people selfish and tyrannical. Prof. Higgins declares before his mother: *“Oh, I can’t be bothered with young woman. My idea of a lovable woman is something as like you as possible. I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women : some habits lie too deep to be changed.”*

Eliza revolts against his attitude towards her as a speaking machine as an object for experiment. At last, the professor admits that Eliza has been useful. He offers her good fellowship and friendly companionship. But Eliza wants to marry Colonel Pickering.

There is a sense of “emotional inadequacy” in Prof. Higgins. He does not require the affection of his fellow human being. The world of romance has no room. He does not marry Eliza. After teaching her fashionable language and manners and transforming her into duchess, he asks her to go anywhere she likes. He has made a duchess out of the flower girl. He is one of the greatest teachers in the world, capable not only of educating the flower girl to a duchess but giving the duchess a freedom and emotional independence greater than he himself possesses.

Prof. Higgins is absent minded . He forgets his appointment. He does not recall where he has kept things. He is also careless about ordering table manners, eating wrongly, putting knives and forks on wrong places, using his steeves as napkin and sitting at his meals with his dressing gown on. Sometimes he seems cruel and sometimes he surprises us by his kindness and generosity. Higgins says to Eliza – “ I’ll adopt you as my daughter and settle money on you if you like. Or would you rather marry Pickering ? ”

Sometimes Higgins indulges in a fanciful humour when he tells Eliza of the streets being strewn with the bodies of her lovers or of her marrying a moustached officer in the guards, or of her being taken to the king in Buckingham.

Prof. Higgins is the mouth piece of Shaw. He believes that speech is the great barrier between social classes. Eliza is subjected to get training in Phonetics by Higgins who gets good result because Eliza begins to talk quite in a different manner – just like cultured woman. When Eliza attains considerable skill in Phonetics, Higgins suggests that she should return to flower selling not in the street but in a shop. When Higgins tells Eliza that now she has completed her training in good speech, she can do whatever she likes but Eliza sharply replies to Higgins – “What am I fit for ? What have you left me fit for ? Where am I to go ? What am I to do ?”

Eliza's feeling of helplessness is quite natural because by her special education in Phonetics, she has been taken out of her class and groove and has been there by made unfit for existence. Here Prof. Higgins plea for changing Eliza is very remarkable as a plea of historical necessity : "Would the world ever have been made if its maker had been afraid making trouble ? Making life means making trouble."

That is how the character of Prof. Higgins is justified and distinguished.

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