

My Fair Lady Film Summary

My Fair Lady by George Cukor

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Context

My Fair Lady is based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, one of the favorite plays of all time. In this famous play, Shaw examines the influence of training and education on success and social class. He uses Eliza to show that training and education can help someone rise from humble beginnings to live a happier, more successful, and more confident life.

My Fair Lady was Warner Brothers' most popular musical romantic comedy. It was also their most expensive film up to that time, totaling in at \$17 million. Part of the reason for the expense was that Warner Brothers had to pay \$5.5 million to purchase the film rights to the already popular Broadway hit. *My Fair Lady* ended up being one of the top five biggest hits of 1964. With clever lyrics and memorable tunes combined with amazing sets, fantastic costumes, and great leads and supporting cast, the lavish film was a sure winner from the beginning. Much of the success of the film was due to Alan Jay Lerner, who was responsible for the screenplay, and Frederick (Fritz) Loewe who co-wrote the music and lyrics.

My Fair Lady was directed by George Cukor, who was already famous for working with many talented and beautiful actors and actresses. Cukor was born July 7, 1899, and became one of the most famous actors in Hollywood during his fifty-year career. Those who knew him considered him to be full of an endlessly flowing energy that made him a success. He was known as "the woman's director," thanks to his empathy and understanding of women. However, he also discovered Cary Grant and launched the careers of such famous actors as Jack Lemmon, James Stewart, and Spencer Tracy.

The first film for which Cukor received full directing credit was *Tarnished Lady* (1931). A year later, *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932) propelled Cukor and new star Katharine Hepburn to the top of their industry. Cukor went on to make Greta Garbo famous in the film *Camille* (1936) and to propel others to the top of their careers as well. Although he had been nominated for numerous Oscars, he finally won his first as Best Director for *My Fair Lady*.

In the 1960s, Musicals made a major comeback in Hollywood, with famous films such as *My Fair Lady* and *The Sound of Music*. *My Fair Lady* was one of the greatest blockbusters of the era. Audrey Hepburn was a favorite then, just as she is now even after her death. Her enthusiasm and beauty attracted crowds to her movies. Rex Harrison was also a very popular actor who had an amazing singing voice. Supposedly, he even taped his songs from *My Fair Lady* live; you can see that his tie pokes out further during his numbers to hide the large 1960s microphones.

When producers and directors were casting parts for this show, they wanted Julie Andrews, who was famous for her role as Eliza Doolittle in the stage version of the musical. There are different opinions as to why Andrews did not get the part; many believe she passed it up because of her previous commitments to *The Sound of Music* and *Mary Poppins*. However, anyone who has seen the movie knows how different it



would be had Andrews, rather than Audrey Hepburn, played the role of Eliza. Even now, the name Eliza Doolittle and the words *My Fair Lady* bring to mind the lovely face of Audrey Hepburn.

My Fair Lady won twelve Academy Award nominations and took home eight of the awards. Harrison won Best Actor, while Cukor won Best Director and the film won Best Picture. Despite her phenomenal performance, Audrey Hepburn did not receive a nomination, probably because most of her musical pieces were dubbed over by Marni Nixon. Instead, Andrews won the award for her role in *Mary Poppins* that year.

My Fair Lady has become one of the most famous and loved movies of all time. In addition to providing entertainment for the masses, Cukor created a film that explores numerous important issues, including social classes and the relationship between men and women. The fantastic cast became an apex of the movie musical genre. In this film, Audrey Hepburn becomes the most sophisticated and gorgeous leading lady in history. Although she made many other wonderful films made throughout her career, she reaches a certain pinnacle in this film.



Summary and Analysis

Before the first scene of *My Fair Lady*, viewers sit through an overture where all the credits are shown on a background of beautiful flowers. Beautiful music allows viewers to begin to get the feeling of the film and its characters before the movie even begins. These beautiful, bright-colored spring flowers become the flowers that line the entrance to the Covent Opera House.

My Fair Lady begins as members of the upper echelons of society leave the opera house. As they come out of the building, it begins to rain and the upper class and lower class people mingle. As young Freddy Eynsford-Hill tries to get a cab for his mother, he bumps into Eliza, and causes her to drop her flowers. Eliza begins screaming about how he has ruined her wares and cost her a day's wages. Colonel Pickering comes on the scene and gives Eliza some coins without receiving any flowers in return.

As Eliza lashes out at the rich people mingled about the area outside the opera house, Professor Henry Higgins begins taking notes about her speech. After Pickering gives Eliza the coins, a bystander tells Eliza to watch out, because a gentleman is standing behind her recording every word she says. Eliza's self-consciousness is obvious in this scene, which shows basic character traits scene through the characters' words and actions.

Higgins takes notes for several minutes before Eliza realizes he is observing her. When she does notice that he is watching her, she finds his behavior to be suspicious. Believing that he is taking notes because he suspects her of wrongdoing, Eliza begins screaming at Higgins that she has not been doing anything wrong. Throughout her tirade, Higgins continues to take notes on her speech, finally explaining his interest in linguistics. Then the scene moves into his song, "Why Can't the English Learn to Speak."

Higgins' disdain for his countrymen and his snobbish attitude are clear as he sings his song. Other bystanders begin to stare, especially the high class opera audience loitering outside the opera house. The difference between high and low social classes is apparent in this scene that introduces all the main characters.

Higgins' song attracts attention from numerous bystanders, including Colonel Pickering. Pickering has recently come from India to meet Higgins due to his interest and expertise in linguistics. Higgins can place any person within five miles of their birthplace simply by listening to him or her talk. The discussion between Higgins and Pickering about linguistics and its impact on peoples' social standing piques Eliza's interest and results in her desire to become a lady. She then begins to sing the famous song "Wouldn't it be Lovely?"

Higgins' and Pickering's discussion reveal the differences between the upper and lower classes. A person's standing has less to do with money than with his or her education



and training. By focusing on this fact, the movie reveals that all people have strengths and weaknesses, and should not be judged by their social standing.

Higgins heads home and Eliza stays out on the street preparing to sell her wares. Eventually, Eliza decides that she wants to become a lady, and she goes to Higgins' home to convince him to help her become a lady. Higgins believes that her desire is ludicrous, but Pickering convinces him that it might be quite a worthwhile challenge. To convince Higgins to take on the challenge, Pickering agrees to pay for everything during Eliza's training.

After agreeing to coach Eliza in preparation for the upcoming ball, Higgins promptly sends her upstairs with the maids to see that she is properly bathed. Higgins shares his true feelings about women in his song, "Let a Woman in your Life." Soon after, Eliza's father, Alfred P. Doolittle, comes to Higgins' house and tries to cash in on Eliza staying there. He thinks that by throwing a fit about Eliza staying in Higgins' home, he can earn some quick money. In this scene, Alfred breaks out into his song, "With a Little Bit of Luck."

Higgins is a misogynist who constantly criticizes women. However, he eventually gains a grudging respect for Eliza, and he expresses kindness to his housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce. Alfred's attempt to cash in on Eliza's good fortune also expresses the differences between upper and lower classes. Although an upper-class man might try to cash in on his daughter, he would never waltz into a stranger's house to announce his feelings.

Eliza spends weeks working with the phonograph to record her voice in a perfect, respectable accent and tone that will help her enter polite society. Numerous times she becomes angry and frustrated, taking her feelings out on Higgins. However, after weeks of excruciating and exhausting practice, Eliza is finally able to sing "The Rain in Spain" with a perfect accent. After a wonderful dance with Higgins, she sings, "I Could Have Danced All Night."

Eliza has finally shown that even a flower girl can master the more difficult habits of speech, dance, and upper class mannerisms. While she and Higgins are up until 3 a.m., she finally finds something within her that allows her to produce the desired responses. Her next major trial will be to mingle with polite company in public.

Eliza is finally ready to be presented to the public, and Higgins chooses the prestigious Ascot Races as the perfect time to present her. Before going to the races, Higgins explains to Eliza that she should only speak of the weather to the people she meets. However, Eliza does begin to speak about her family and other subjects, at which time it becomes painfully obvious that she is not part of the upper classes. The information she reveals about her family gives her away, as well as her accent and manner of speaking. Eliza's greatest faux pas occurs as they are watching the race and she screams, "Move your blooming arse!" at one of the horses. However, despite her many inconsistencies and blunder, Eliza still wins the heart of the handsome young Freddie Eynsford-Hill.



That evening, Freddie shows up outside Higgins' home wishing to see Eliza, but is turned away by the maid. Freddie expresses his love for Eliza in his song "On the Street Where You Live" as he skips along the street outside of the house. Embarrassed by her actions at the race track, Eliza refuses to see Freddie. Eventually, she meets him and begins to sing "Words, Words... Show Me" in an effort to convince him to show her his love rather than just expressing his feelings in words.

Eliza runs into her father and his friends exiting a pub after having drunk a bit too much. Her father is at his bachelor's party. After Higgins sent a man in America Alfred's name as a speaker, he has become a middle-class man, and Eliza's mother has demanded that he make an honest woman out of her. In this scene he sings "Get Me to the Church on Time."

The big day has finally arrived! Pickering and Higgins have to face the final test: showing Eliza off at the ball for the Queen of Transylvania and convincing everyone, including a Hungarian linguistics professor, that she is truly a lady. Although nervous, Eliza feels that she is up to the challenge, and after she charms the Queen, captivates the prince (who asks for a dance), and outwits the Hungarian specialist, Higgins and Pickering also know that she has at last become a true lady.

Pickering and Higgins escort Eliza home later in the evening, congratulating themselves on their success in the song "You Did It, You Did It." Eliza alone seems to realize that, although Higgins trained her, she is actually the one who "did it." Angry, she lashes out at Higgins because he has now left her with nothing. She cannot go back to being a flower girl, but she doesn't have the money to become a lady; she is now in a veritable no-man's land. Higgins expresses his surprise at her reaction and his anger at her behavior in his song "Why Can't a Woman Be Like a Man?"

Outraged, Eliza leaves Higgins' home and visits her old haunts. None of her old friends even recognize her now, and she realizes she can never again fit into the life of the streets. Knowing that she has nowhere else to go, Eliza heads to Higgins' mother's home. Higgins shows up and makes quite a scene, but his mother agrees with Eliza that he has been insensitive and rude. She leaves Eliza and Higgins alone to talk.

Eliza's venture to the area outside of opera house where she once sold flowers allows her to realize that she no longer belongs there. She has become a lady without a lady's habitat. In frustration and sadness, she visits the only classy woman she has ever known. Higgins' mother, although she loves him dearly, takes Eliza's side as always. She has disapproved of Higgins' plan from the beginning, and she now sees the disappointing repercussions of his actions. At the same time, she realizes Higgins' feelings towards Eliza.

Eliza tells Higgins that she is independent and can take care of herself. She expresses her self-confidence in "I Can Do Without You." She tells Higgins to leave. Higgins screams in joy as he realizes that this step is part of making a lady: he has truly succeeded in reaching his goal. Eliza is even more angered and insists that Higgins



leave immediately. However, on the way home, he realizes how much he will miss Eliza, and he expresses this in his song "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face."

Eliza has finally become a strong, self-sufficient woman through her training and experiences. Her show of strength, courage, and defiance toward Higgins transforms her into a lady who can stand up for and take care of herself. Higgins is proud of "his" achievement, but Eliza knows that he is not really the one who achieved the goal: she is the one who conquered her background and upbringing in order to become a true lady at last.

After returning home, Higgins heads into his study and turns on the phonograph, listening to Eliza's first recording while in training. As he sits in his chair, depressed and alone, Higgins realizes how much he loves Eliza. At the same moment, Eliza enters the room, but he doesn't notice because his head is down. She turns off the phonograph and begins singing. Higgins sits back, relaxes, and asks her to get his slippers.

Although this ending disappoints many people, Higgins' actions fit his personality, and Eliza came back even though she knew his faults. Eliza loves Higgins despite his unruly and sometimes obnoxious nature. He loves her despite his confirmed bachelorhood. Higgins has become accustomed to Eliza's presence and her absence makes him realize that he loves her dearly. We assume that Higgins and Eliza will live happily ever after, as expected in all movie musicals.



Characters

Eliza Doolittle, played by Audrey Hepburn

Description

Eliza Doolittle is a low-class, uncultured flower girl. To Professor Henry Higgins and other persons of his stature, her speech is painful and her actions uncouth. Viewers cringe and laugh as they listen to Eliza's outrageous and unimaginable Cockney accent that distinguishes her so hideously from the upper classes.

Eliza's emotional well-being is also not at all stable in the beginning of the movie. She has a fear of being observed that reveals her self-consciousness. Additionally, when she feels uncomfortable, she makes hasty outbursts at whoever happens to be around. However, we see her grow and change throughout the course of the movie, until she is a lady both in actions and in her mental and emotional states.

Although Eliza's actions and attitude at the beginning of the movie leave much to be desired, she shows a certain fortitude and forthrightness that are endearing. Through the painful speeches in her Cockney accent, Eliza shows a caring and honest character in her many encounters with people not only of her class but also those of the upper classes.

Audrey Hepburn is the perfect choice to play Eliza. She was born and bred a blue blood. The gorgeous actress was born in Belgium and her European upbringing shines through in every part she holds. Although Audrey's songs were dubbed over by Marni Nixon, the singing helps make Eliza more believable and lovely.

Analysis

As a character, Eliza represents all those of lower-class upbringing who have lacked the opportunity to learn to speak with elegance and act with decorum- two of the primary traits of the wealthy upper class. In Eliza, we see that despite a lack in upbringing, she has many admirable qualities.

Eliza shows a certain strength of character and persistence that is to be admired. She is a hopeful person both in personality and in her ability to conquer her fears and upbringing to become a well-rounded and intelligent lady. A positive atmosphere constantly surrounds Eliza, possibly stemming in part from the fact that Audrey Hepburn, a bright-eyed and cheerful actress in all her films, plays this lovable main character.

Eliza's perfections are more than can be expected from any person. Although she has a terrible accent and a low upbringing, she is gorgeous and has a beautiful voice. Although regular people should be able to relate to Eliza, Audrey Hepburn is way out of



the league of even the most attractive and well-bred women of this world, and Marni Nixon's lovely voice is no small thing either.

Professor Henry Higgins, played by Rex Harrison

Description

Henry Higgins is a misogynistic, forceful man. He believes that his way is the right way and that everyone else should live up to his way. No one is smarter than he and everyone should be constantly reminded of this fact. It is no surprise that he is a confirmed old bachelor, given his actions toward everyone he encounters, including Eliza.

Higgins especially hates women, although he seems to get along decently with his housekeeper Mrs. Pearce. Even his mother becomes angry with his grumpy and cynical attitude towards life. However, Eliza brings a new spark, a breath of fresh air, into Higgins' home and life.

Higgins is not an outstanding man as far as looks go, but he makes up for this lack with brains and dominance. He is a man who is always in charge and always knows exactly what will happen next. He claims to rely on no one, but could not survive without Mrs. Pearce.

Rex Harrison is the perfect Higgins. His deep, brusque voice is romantic and commanding throughout the film. He fills out the character and creates a character that has lasted and become an icon throughout the years. Everyone knows and loves Higgins despite his quirky, frustrating nature.

Analysis

Higgins' falling in love with Eliza is an interesting twist. Although many a confirmed old bachelor has fallen in love further along in life, few have fallen in love with a woman as beautiful and, eventually, charming as Eliza Doolittle. Despite Higgins difficult and demanding personality, he becomes "accustomed" to Eliza, and eventually realizes that he does not want to live his life without her. Although his attitude toward Eliza in particular and women in general has changed, Higgins keeps his brusque, demanding attitude until the end.

Higgins spends his time studying, turning everyone away from pursuing personal relationships with him. He is a brilliant man who is well aware of that brilliance. He is also handsome in the way that a brilliant and fit man can be. Although many a young woman would go after Freddy rather than Higgins, Higgins has a certain diamond -in-the-rough charm about him that Eliza sees and loves.

Additionally, Eliza has lived and worked with Higgins. He helped her become a lady. Although Pickering is the real instigator of the plan, Higgins goes along and drives Eliza



until she gets things right. Some consider him to be a rude "slave driver," but in the end, Eliza appreciates his tireless prodding and training.

Alfred P. Doolittle, played by Stanley Holloway

Description

Eliza's father, Alfred P. Doolittle, is one of the most interesting and entertaining characters in the movie. Alfred is the stereotypical slacker father who has left his daughter out on her own to make her way in the world. When he finds out that Eliza has moved into Higgins' home, he is not worried about her, but rather tries to cash in on her new situation.

Alfred also refuses to marry the woman he has lived with for years, whether out of fear, laziness, or selfishness. Even on the eve of his wedding, he desires to avoid marriage at all costs. However, he is still caught by Eliza's mother, because he cannot take care of himself.

Alfred is constantly coming around to borrow money from Eliza. When he approaches her in the beginning of the movie, we see that his demands are a normal event, resulting primarily from a lack of funds due to drinking and gambling all night. When he becomes a middle-class man, he is forced to reevaluate himself and make his woman respectable by marrying her.

Analysis

Alfred represents any man or father who slacks off. He is a selfish man, but not a brute. As far as we know, he has never physically harmed Eliza, but he has also not helped her in any way. He even tries to "sell" her to Higgins after Higgins brings her into his home. No father should try to make money off his daughter, but this is just what Alfred does.

Alfred has spent his life trying to avoid commitment and responsibility, but after taking a well-paid speaking job in America, Alfred has no choice but to start taking responsibility for himself. He still has no intention of helping Eliza, partly because she is already doing quite well for herself, but the woman who has been acting as his wife for many years does demand that he care for her; he holds to this responsibility at last as he heads to the church to be married.

Colonel Hugh Pickering, played by Wilfred Hyde-White

Description

Without Colonel Pickering, none of the play's action would occur. Pickering has an interest in linguistics and has come from his post in India to stay with Professor Higgins



and learn from Higgins' linguistic expertise. When Pickering sees a chance to observe Higgins' expertise in action through Eliza, he takes advantage of the situation. A rich man, he tells Higgins that he will pay for all expenses incurred in this little project.

Although some people try to say that Higgins and Pickering were lovers, this is totally unfounded based on both the play and the movie musical. Higgins was simply a confirmed bachelor whose peer, Pickering, had come to visit for a few months while in England.

Analysis

Pickering seems to be a nice chap. However, we must remember that he is the one who convinces Higgins to toy with Eliza's life by training her to be something that she is not. One must wonder whether he had any clue the problems his insistence would cause.

Although Pickering is fairly important and often comforts Eliza through many trying times, he disappears 20 minutes before the end of the movie. Many viewers find this to be a frustrating flaw in the movie, but in reality there is no time to deal with him as the two main characters fight and reconcile.

Mrs. Higgins, played by Gladys Cooper

Description

Mrs. Higgins is Professor Higgins' wealthy and powerful mother. She holds sway over a large portion of high society, and thus, Higgins can get away with something as dreadful as Eliza's actions at the Ascot Races. Mrs. Higgins is a woman with prestige and power who is appalled by Eliza but remains kind just the same. Despite her somewhat snobbish attitude, Mrs. Higgins shows an interest in other people.

Mrs. Higgins obviously dotes on her son, but when he treats Eliza badly, she is quick to take Eliza's side. Mrs. Higgins believes her son is a fool to treat Eliza this way, and she tells him so. Mrs. Higgins becomes Eliza's champion against her son and the rest of mankind. As she leaves to go to a suffragette meeting, we see that she has substance and is not just the rich and uncaring woman we first suspected.

Analysis

Although Mrs. Higgins seems as if she would not be any help to Eliza, she proves that she is more willing to see justice than to blindly agree with her son's actions and choices. Mrs. Higgins proves to be a remarkable woman with a penchant for tact and forthrightness who helps to empower Eliza in her final declaration that she does not need Higgins.



Freddy Eynsford-Hill, played by Jeremy Brett

Description

Freddy is a delightfully clueless and impulsive boy; he is also very attractive and sought after by the ladies. He sees the good in everyone and falls hard for Eliza even when she makes serious social blunders at the Ascot Races. Freddy is young and in love and has difficulty seeing beyond his feelings.

Analysis

Freddy is quite a shallow character. Within one afternoon, he decides that he is madly in love with Eliza although he knows almost nothing about her. His obvious lack of insight allows him to believe that she is of his station and makes mistakes that are amusing and childlike. He seems to have little faith in the female sex if he can truly believe that a woman would be so simple as to make those mistakes without realizing it or being ashamed.

Zoltan Karpathy, played by Theodore Bikel

Description

Zoltan Karpathy is a Hungarian linguistics specialist. He is hired by heads of state and other wealthy people to point out frauds and to cover up that they are frauds as well. He is a scoundrel who tries to find people in mistakes and then blackmail them so that they will pay him to keep the truth quiet.

Analysis

Zoltan is an all-around bad guy who turns out to be mostly an insipid rather cocky man. He is like a bully who marches into a party ready to get everyone in trouble if he does not get his way. So far he has everything in order, but if Eliza's true identity were ever revealed, he would be out of a job.

Mrs. Pearce, played by Mona Washbourne

Description

Mrs. Pearce is a calm, caring woman who has apparently taken care of Professor Higgins for years. When Eliza enters the scene, Mrs. Pearce takes responsibility for her as well. Mrs. Pearce is responsible and keeps the entire house running smoothly throughout the film. Without her care and understanding, Eliza might have left far sooner.



Analysis

Mrs. Pearce helps the characters and the audience take a break. Her scenes are generally funny and delightful breaks during dramatic parts of the movie. She is best known for the scene where she and the maids try to get Eliza to bathe. The tone sets the mood for seeing how far Eliza has come in her treatment of Mrs. Pearce in the final scenes.



Themes

Social Class

Throughout the movie, we see social classes taking two forms, either high class or low class. In the time period in which the movie is set, middle class is not an option. Higgins' experiment is primarily focused on the possibility that social class has less to do with money or connections and more to do with proper education, training, and manners.

By using low-class Eliza as his pupil, Higgins (and Pickering) can prove once and for all that anyone can become a lady if only she has the proper information and training. By being trained as a lady and having lived on the streets, Eliza is able to transcend the requirements and standards of both classes, but that sadly leaves her in a "no-man's land" from which she has little ability to escape.

Love

Love comes in many places and at unexpected times. Higgins and Eliza are the most unexpected and unexplained couple of all time. He, the take-charge, strong, demanding man, and she, the kind, feisty, diligent woman, find themselves falling in love throughout their ordeal together.

We see that love does not necessarily depend on such things as looks or long knowledge of one another, but rather that anyone can fall in love as they spend time together. Since Eliza and Higgins spend intense, focused time together over several weeks, they know one another well: both the good and the bad.

Additionally, the film shows that love comes from working together to conquer an outside force. As they try to pass Eliza off as a lady, Higgins and Eliza become partners in trying to prove that social class does not completely determine the type of person you are in life. Through their fight against the outside world, they are able to come together and appreciate one another, until eventually they discover they have fallen in love.

Teacher/Student

My Fair Lady is completely about the teacher and his student. As teacher and student, Higgins and Eliza are at odds. Eliza is excited to have good meals and wear pretty clothes, while Higgins simply wants to prove to Pickering that he can change her life by helping her learn the appropriate manners and actions for a lady. Although Higgins and Eliza have different motives, they learn to work together in a powerful teacher/student relationship.

Eventually, the student surpasses the teacher as Eliza realizes that Higgins treats her unfairly. After weeks of being treated in a demeaning manner, Eliza finally realizes that



not only has she trained to become a lady, she now is a lady. Her first move after becoming a true lady is to exert her independence by telling Higgins that she can do quite well on her own. Although she is grateful for his help and training, Eliza now knows that she can take care of herself on her own and that she no longer has to bow and scrape at his every calling.

Individual Improvement

Throughout the film, we see a common theme of individual improvement. The nature-nurture debate has been going on for centuries, and *My Fair Lady* takes up the debate once again. To some extent, the film seems to take both sides of the debate.

Higgins argues the side of education (nurture) in the nature/nurture debate. With education, a common flower girl can become a lady. We see that a low-class, rude woman who has never had an ounce of education can improve her entire standing in life by improving her speech and manners.

Higgins proves to be correct, but he underestimates the power of Eliza herself. Personal power (nature) is applauded in this film. Eliza spends hours of practice and learning in order to speak correctly. It is her persistence that allows her to meet her goal and become a lady in the end.



Style and Cinematography

My Fair Lady was a throwback to happier times in the world of movie musicals. Companies were trying to cash in on the former popularity of musicals with such shows as *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Mary Poppins*. Needless to say, the strategy worked. These blockbuster musicals along with others brought in the crowds that had been missing in recent years for some of the studios.

Musicals offer the advantage of being able to play out life with added musical commentary and asides. The music enhances the emotion behind the words and actions of the characters. Additionally, the characters can express themselves through their unique songs and dances.

Although this musical is based on the stage play *Pygmalion*, much of the movie's power relies on the musical numbers. Expressions and emotions are portrayed through music, lyrics, and dancing. We see that the musical is back to life and making the way for others of its genre.

The style of *My Fair Lady* is stunning, and it is a film that cannot or will not be produced again. Gorgeous outfits and sets, an amazing cast, and beautiful cinematography set *My Fair Lady* apart from all other films before or after. In this romantic comedy, where love is never mentioned overtly, love and romance come to life. *My Fair Lady* is the most memorable and loved film of all time.

In 1965, *My Fair Lady* won the Oscar for Best Cinematography. Cukor was an absolutely fabulous director. He was famous for his 90-degree pans that allow viewers to see characters move from one place to another. These pans are especially prominent in scenes in Higgins' home and when Eliza is in the marketplace in the beginning of the film. Not only are these the most memorable scenes, but they are also imaginative and exciting.

Another characteristic shot used by Cukor was the backward track. He commonly uses the backward track to move the camera back toward the audience so that more of the scene is in view. When this happens, a new character generally arrives from some corner of the screen and all attention is focused on that person. By using this technique as an introduction, Cukor shows viewers how important a new character is to the film.

The amazing cinematography in *My Fair Lady* gives viewers a pleasure that is not possible with many current movies. The camera angles and techniques are subtle yet powerful tools to express the meaning and emotion of the characters in the film.



Motifs

Competition

Competition is seen in several ways throughout this movie. Almost every character is attempting to win some type of competition, either with themselves or with another person or force.

Higgins is trying to win the competition and a wager put to him by Colonel Pickering. He seeks to make Eliza into a lady in just a few short weeks. In order to prove that he is truly the best in his field, he must meet this ultimate challenge. However, he is also competing against himself to see if he really is as smart and determined as he believes himself to be. If he fails in this task, he has failed in his profession and in his life.

Eliza is also competing against herself. She spends her time trying to prove that a lowly flower girl from the streets can indeed become a lady and a successful, thriving member of the community. She wants to prove to herself that she really can meet the challenge, while also proving it to Higgins and Colonel Pickering. Her challenge may be the greatest, as competition with yourself is always more difficult to achieve. In the end, however, we see that she has truly become a lady and has the self-respect and courage to go with her new standing.

Rags to Riches

The Cinderella "rags to riches" story is one of the most famous motifs in literature and in film. Once again it is apparent in *My Fair Lady*. Eliza, a poor flower girl, is dirty and uncouth when living on the streets. A handsome but woman-hating gentleman takes her from the streets to a beautiful townhouse in the best part of London.

Although Higgins does not love Eliza at the beginning, he grows to love her in time. In addition, Higgins becomes Eliza's knight in shining armor, her Prince Charming. One major difference from the original motif, however, is that Eliza goes to him in the end rather than him immediately coming for her. He invited her, but she chose to track him to his home. The change in the motif may be due to the respect given women that had grown since the Cinderella story was first used centuries ago.

Eliza is not a Cinderella who needs a fairy godmother to get her the man; rather, she works hard, meets her goal, and becomes a lady. She also wins her man, Higgins, who has been the one to help her become a lady.

Exploration of Relationships

As with so many films, *My Fair Lady* explores the relationships between men and women and between high and low social classes. Although many films explore these



relationships, *My Fair Lady* does so with a effective sprinkling of humor and fun as well as wonderful musical numbers that enhance viewers' emotional reaction and understanding.

From the beginning, *My Fair Lady* explores the relationships between men and women. Early in the film, we see Eliza as practically one of the men in her dirty rough ways. However, as she learns more and becomes more cultured, her femininity become increasingly evident. Eliza becomes classy and well-spoken, traits that help set her apart even from the crowd at the grand ball.

The film also seems to explore the concept of non-romantic relationships between men and women. Eliza and Higgins spend the entire movie fighting and bickering, only to discover in the end that they have fallen in love. Despite their best efforts to stay unattached and to escape one another, they end up falling in love.



Symbols

Phonograph

The phonograph represents a number of things throughout the movie. In the beginning, the phonograph is the tool by which Higgins examines a number of linguistic patterns. After Eliza moves in, Higgins uses the phonograph to train her in her speech and language habits. After Eliza has learned to speak correctly, the phonograph symbolizes her freedom and independence as well as her achievement in changing her long-standing habits. Finally, in the last scene, the phonograph represents Higgins' desire to have Eliza in his life, as he listens to it after he arrives home from arguing with her.

White Dress

As Eliza goes to the races, she wears a beautiful white dress. The white symbolizes her introduction and inauguration into "polite" society. Although the introduction does not proceed perfectly because she shares too much information and returns to her Cockney accent, the white dress reminds us that she is a virgin of this society and social class.

However, Eliza's innocence in this society should not be confused with an overall innocence. She shows her knowledge of life as she discusses her family and cries out an uncouth statement at the races. In this way, the white dress is almost ironic in that she is anything but innocent when it comes to the ways of the world. In fact, the higher-class people are the true innocents, as they have been sheltered from distasteful experiences throughout their lives.

Flowers

Throughout the film, flowers follow the course of Eliza's transformation. In the beginning, we see her as a poor flower girl who can barely make any money selling flowers to wealthy people on the streets. Later, Freddy buys flowers for Eliza when he becomes enamored of her after their introduction at the races. Finally, when Eliza visits her old haunts she buys a flower from a flower girl who has taken her place. Eliza's transformation is complete, as shown by her change of status.



Essay Questions

Does social class determine a person's character? Why or why not? Give specific examples from the film on which you base your conclusions.

Do you think Eliza is better off at the end of the movie than she was as it began? Why or why not?

In the last scene, why does Higgins sit back and pull his hat down rather than going to greet Eliza?

Eliza's father, Alfred P. Doolittle, says that being in a higher social class (after he lectures in America and becomes a professional speaker) is a bother. Why would this be?

Eliza's speech tends to give her away as an imposter throughout the film. Give two examples of these times and of the emotions tied to her speeches.

How do the songs enhance the quality of the musical? If this were a regular play, how would the emotional climate be different?

Discuss the relationship between Eliza and Higgins. Give specific examples from the film to support your opinions.

How does Colonel Pickering affect the outcome of the story line? What are his contributions?

What was the central theme in this film and discuss it. Give specific examples to support your opinion.

Discuss the relationship between Pickering and Higgins. Is Pickering Higgins' foil in the movie?