

Writing on a play



A thorough exam answer on a play will show awareness that the text is a script meant to be acted. Take special note of any stage directions in the passages and explain the significance of at least some of them in your response.

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Sample answer on Shaw's *Pygmalion*

The following sample response is based on three passages from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*:

- In Act 1, from The Gentleman (Pickering): 'How do you do it, if I may ask?' to The Note Taker (Higgins): 'I could pass you off as the Queen of Sheba.'
- In Act 2, from Higgins: 'Pickering: If we listen to this man another minute, we shall have no convictions left' to Liza: 'Wish they could see what it is for the like of me!'
- In Act 5, from stage direction: '*Eliza enters, sunny, self-possessed*' to Liza: 'I should never have known that ladies and gentlemen didn't behave like that if you hadn't been there.'

Introduction

This response opens with a broad statement, then moves directly into *textual details* from Passage 2. Quotations from this passage are used to open up wider ideas which the discussion can explore in a close reading of this and the other two passages; these ideas also form the basis for a *relevant and plausible interpretation*. The introduction briefly indicates ways in which *views and values may be suggested in the text*.

While Eliza's elevation from flower girl to middle-class lady is the main story of *Pygmalion*, Shaw weaves numerous other ideas through the play. Even when Eliza's metamorphosis is foreshadowed (in Passage 2) by her appearance as an 'exquisitely clean Japanese lady in a simple blue cotton kimono', the limited social and domestic roles available to her as a woman are implied and unquestioned. Similarly, the deceptive nature of appearances is suggested by the gap between Eliza's elegant dress and her working-class language and accent: 'Gam!' she exclaims to her father. Yet it is Eliza, whose appearance and behaviour are so thoroughly transformed in the course of the play, who most clearly sees the truth of her situation: that 'ladies is so clean' because 'washing's a treat for them'.

Introduces ideas of female identity and roles, and of appearances, which the response can further explore in relation to the set passages.

Paragraph 2

This paragraph continues the discussion of Passage 2, continuing on smoothly from the introduction through the focus on Eliza and taking up the idea of gender roles as they are presented in the passage. Linking words such as 'yet' and 'in contrast' give the discussion *coherence*, and a wide vocabulary is used *expressively*.

Good use of textual material in stage directions – these are an important part of the text and should always be included in the analysis of a play.

Short quotations are smoothly incorporated and the effects of particular word choices discussed, ensuring a close focus on the language of the passage.

Eliza's identity as a woman is as central to the play as her identity as a lower-class flower girl, but of course it cannot be transformed in the same way. From the moment of her appearance as a 'Japanese lady' who walks across the room 'with a fashionable air' it is clear she is capable of learning the conventions of middle-class behaviour. Yet Shaw's stage direction, and Eliza's costume, make clear that she will remain relatively powerless. She is described as 'dainty', while her kimono has 'small white jasmine blossoms' suggesting vulnerability and innocence. In contrast, her father establishes an immediate rapport with Higgins and Pickering, negotiating 'payment'. For Higgins the amount of money is trivial (he offers to double it from five to ten pounds); for Doolittle, Eliza's wellbeing is almost as inconsequential. He displays 'fatherly pride' in her attractive appearance, suggesting that regardless of her class, as a woman Eliza's appearance is of utmost importance in this society. The three men join together in solidarity, reacting with shared surprise and pleasure when Eliza enters newly washed and finely dressed. Each claims a form of possession or control over Eliza which she is almost powerless to resist; Higgins pays her father, Pickering pays for her lessons.

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 3 moves onto Passage 3, continuing the discussion of Eliza's transformed identity. The discussion includes a *close reading of textual details* which are drawn from both dialogue and stage directions. This paragraph also considers the importance of the passage in the wider text, and analyses how it contributes to the interpretation of Eliza's transformed identity.

Shows knowledge of the wider text and the significance of this passage within it.

A strong statement that draws together the ideas of transforming identity, and appearance versus underlying reality; idea of a costume links back to the previous paragraph.

In Passage 3, however, Eliza does find a way to assert her identity in a more positive way, with the assistance of Mrs Higgins. Once again her appearance is crucial: she enters 'sunny, self-possessed, and giving a staggeringly convincing exhibition of ease of manner'. The description 'convincing exhibition' suggests Eliza's new confidence and composure, as well as the possibility that she is not entirely at ease – and her situation, meeting Higgins and Pickering for the first time after her departure from Wimpole Street, is certainly not easy. It could also suggest, as Higgins does, that Eliza's lady-like appearance (including a work-basket and needlework) is a sham: 'now she pretends to play the fine lady with me', he protests. Yet this 'fine lady' is the person Eliza is becoming; by this point in the play it is much more than a costume she wears, or a performance she enacts, and her exchanges with Pickering display real charm and verve.

Paragraph 4

This paragraph continues the discussion of Passage 3, shifting the focus from Eliza to Higgins, and then back to Eliza. The myth on which Shaw's play is based is introduced to highlight one way in which *views and values are suggested*. The discussion continues to explore ways in which Eliza has been genuinely changed, contrasting Higgins' ideas with the reality of Eliza's behaviour – which clearly shows she does have ideas of her own, and an acute awareness of her situation.

Higgins, however, insists that Eliza is still, in essence, a 'thing' he has created from a 'squashed cabbage leaf', a 'fool' who knows no better than to obediently follow his instruction to 'get up and come home'. This brief speech reveals that Higgins is much more of a fool than Eliza; she knows she has changed, whereas Higgins thinks she is simply repeating a performance of which he has taught her every word. In contrast to Ovid's version of the Pygmalion myth, in which the sculptor wishes his statue to come to life, Higgins wishes his 'creation' to remain fixed in her place – or rather, in his place, ordering the cheese and buying his clothes. It is Higgins who is unable to adjust to change, to see past appearances, and Eliza who is now 'working away deftly', not only on her needlework but also on Higgins and Pickering. Her thanking Pickering for showing her the value of 'really nice manners' is witty and full of deeper meaning, reflecting her new awareness and sophistication; once again Shaw uses the contrast between appearance (Eliza is apparently talking to Pickering) and reality (her comments are really directed at Higgins) to simultaneously create humour and explore serious ideas.

Shows knowledge and understanding of how the play re-works an earlier text, and the significance of some differences; also shows knowledge of the wider text.

Effective use of a quotation from a stage direction, identifying a double meaning that supports the argument about Eliza's development and growing sophistication.

Shows awareness of the text as constructed and how the playwright uses textual features to create meaning for the reader/audience.

Paragraph 5

In this paragraph the main ideas of transformation and appearances are considered in relation to Passage 1, presenting a *coherent and detailed interpretation*. The discussion works closely with Higgins' language, which reveals his views and values – and which the text in turn subtly critiques, as the analysis shows. Eliza's retort crystallises one of the text's central concerns and gives the paragraph a strong final sentence.

Higgins' success as a linguist exposes the underlying superficiality and pretentiousness of the class system, yet Higgins too is partly a target of Shaw's satire, particularly in the opening scene which places Higgins and Eliza in comic juxtaposition. In Passage 1 the three main characters are alone together for the first time, establishing key relationships and attitudes. For Higgins, class mobility is simply a business opportunity in 'an age of upstarts'; he sees his work as enabling a kind of performance, rather than a genuine transformation or education. He can teach men from Kentish Town to speak as if they were originally from Park Lane but,

Notes the humour of this passage; the effect of humour in all three passages could have been more closely considered.

Shows understanding of the significance of this key passage.

A close reading of the language which unpacks the meaning and effect of a repeated phrase.

Brief quotations support the discussion of juxtaposition and contrast of Higgins and Eliza.

at least in Higgins' mind, they will always be from Kentish Town. His own power and authority, and not Eliza's capacity for learning, would be demonstrated by taking her from being a 'squashed cabbage-leaf' to 'a duchess at an ambassador's garden party'. This transformation is merely a form of deception that also maintains the class distinction between a true duchess and the inferior one whom he will 'pass ... off' – a phrase which he repeats, emphasising the superficiality of his work and also suggesting his indifference to Eliza's fate. Those who lack his cultural (and cultured) context – his knowledge of 'the language of Shakespear and Milton' – are, in his eyes, far from his equals: a notion that is challenged from the start by Eliza's insistence on people's essential equality: 'I've a right to be here if I like, same as you'.

Paragraph 6: conclusion

The conclusion draws together the main threads of the discussion – Eliza's transformed identity, as well as the limits her society places on her; the tension between appearance or performance and a deeper reality. The quotations from Passage 1 link the conclusion strongly to the previous paragraph, ensuring that the final two sentences, while offering broader *views and values* comments, flow logically from the discussion and the *close reading of textual details*.

Effective quotation from Passage 1 that supports the argument about the social constraints on Eliza's transformation, and leads into strong concluding statements.

Higgins is proved right in his boast that he 'could pass that girl off as a duchess', but he never thinks beyond this as a kind of experiment or performance; he doesn't see that, in the process, Eliza's identity will be forever altered, in ways that are both challenging and liberating. In another way, though, he sees exactly the limits of his power: that Eliza might be, at best, a 'lady's maid or shop assistant'. Her identity is transformed, but the opportunities available to her remain limited by class and, perhaps more powerfully, by conventional gender roles. Shaw's play questions the constraints these place on human endeavour, suggesting that education and opportunity, while essential, are only the beginning of real social reform.
(1067 words)

Assessor comments

This response shows a good knowledge of the text, focusing on the passages but also drawing in elements from the wider text where needed, as well as showing understanding of Shaw's re-working of the Pygmalion myth. It develops a plausible and coherent interpretation through close reading of the set passages, beginning with key ideas in one passage and threading these through the discussion. Short quotations with relevant supporting textual details and examples of the characters' language use are incorporated throughout.

The writing is expressive and fluent; the key ideas are logically developed. Each new paragraph either continues a discussion of a passage from the previous paragraph, or continues discussion of a character or idea in relation to a new passage, ensuring continuity and coherence.

The response fulfils the criteria well, drawing strongly on the passages as the basis for an interpretation and providing a close focus on specific moments, such as Eliza's entrance in a kimono, or Eliza's conversation with Pickering about manners. It draws on stage directions in several places, showing an understanding of their importance both in the play script and to the play's performance. The role of humour as a key feature of the text is identified, though its effects (particularly as a way in which the text suggests views and values) might have been analysed in more depth.

Note that all three passages are considered in some detail, but you do not need to write on all three to obtain a high grade. This response would address the assessment criteria at an A to A+ level.