English 117B summer 2017 **Shaw’s Pygmalion: Discussion Questions**

1. **Class Identity and Language** This story focuses primarily on the way social class affects identity. More specifically, it shows how speech affects both our own self-image and (more dramatically), how it affects the way others treat us. How do you think this affects us in Silicon Valley? Do you think Henry Higgins could make a living here?
2. **Pygmalion Effect:** A famous educational study from the 60s seemed to prove that students’ progress in any given class was strongly affected, for better or ill, by what their teachers were led to expect about the students’ potential. Even among completely random samples of students, those who were expected to be smart and do well far outperformed those who were expected to be less smart. (I posted an article about this if you want to read more.) Can you see why they decided to name this discovery after Shaw’s play?
3. **Feminist play?** Many of Shaw’s women characters are much stronger than was typical for his era, which some said reflected his Irish heritage. What do you think of Eliza in this context? By the end do you think she is really an equal to Higgins, a “consort battleship,” or is he just flattering her when he says that? Also, do you see this as a story about the relations between the sexes, or is that just a side issue? [Note: in the musical version adapted in 1956, filmed in 1964, a song called “Why Can’t a Woman be more like a Man?” was added.]
4. **Adaptations:** Many, *many* adaptations of Shaw’s play have been written. If you were asked to pitch an idea for a new one, what might it look like? Who would be the person whose speech needed “fixing”? Who would be the teacher? What would be your point about language, social class, and identity?