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Space for the Savant: An Update on Henry Higgins's Autism

Abby Zwart

Discussion of representation in literature often begins with the metaphor of mirrors and windows. Introduced by Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) as an argument for providing young people with diverse literature, this metaphor states that if stories are to be a true tool of empathy, they need to function as both a mirror and a window: readers should be able to look into some texts and see themselves reflected, and they should be able to peer through the glass of others and learn about different ways of being. In recent years, the neurodivergent community (which includes people with autism, ADHD, OCD, dyslexia, and other mental variances that do not strictly exist as disabilities) has increasingly been recognized by mainstream culture, and individuals in the community have begun to sound the alarm about the lack of representation of neurodiverse characters in mainstream literature, film, television, and more.

In response, some artists have prioritized creating characters specifically with these traits. Additionally, a trend of “retrospective diagnosis” of mental health conditions or neurodivergence in historical figures (both real and fictional) has also begun (see Stuart Murray for much work on retrospective diagnosis). Though the conditions were certainly present in the past, words for and formal diagnoses of things like depression, bipolar disorder, autism, and ADHD did not exist until the twentieth century in many cases, so the historical record appears to ignore or even erase individuals with these mental variances. Many scholars have therefore dedicated their energy to locating and interrogating representations of neurodivergence in media that, due to scientific and psychological limitations, were not labelled as such when they were created. There are those in the neurodivergent and critical community who believe that this retrospective diagnosis is unethical, and this paper will touch on that below, but in general, this identification of neurodiverse characters in the canon of literature is a net positive because it provides more mirrors and windows for readers to identify with and learn from.

Bernard Shaw's character Henry Higgins, one of the leads of the play *Pygmalion*, is often referenced as one of these fictional characters who, though it's not explicitly stated, may have Autism Spectrum Condition. This hypothesis has been made primarily by lay scholars and online communities and has not been debated thoroughly in scholarly papers. Two essays on the topic do exist, but one (Rodelle Weintraub's 2006 entry) is sorely outdated, and the other (by the autistic scholar Sonya Freeman Loftis in 2014) actually sees this retrospective diagnosis as a mistake that encourages stereotypes like savantism.

This addition to the conversation will argue that while Loftis's hesitations about the savant stereotype are valid, Henry Higgins does show clear signs of autism—as outlined by Weintraub—and he can be embraced as a neurodivergent character because today, a decade after the last publication addressing his neurostatus, society has a much more nuanced understanding of autism that can easily make space for his inclusion in the retrospective canon of neurodivergent characters.

First, a note regarding language. As the field of neurodivergence and Critical Autism Studies continues to develop, and those in the community begin to speak up, it has become clear that there is not one right way to talk about neurodivergence. Some researchers and community members advocate for person-first language (“a person with autism”) while others prefer to use the neurodivergence as an identifier (“an autistic person”). Some see autism as a disability while others do not. Some accept terms like “high-functioning” while others prefer to emphasize the spectrum nature of the condition. Even the idea of a linear spectrum has been debated—the most up-to-date explanations of the condition ask people to imagine each individual as a pie chart with different size “slices” of pie rather than as a point on a line between “severe” and “mild,” highlighting the fact that each individual with autism displays their various characteristics in a variety of ways and levels of severity.

With all this in mind, this paper will use the terms neurodivergence, autism, Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), and autistic person (this journal's preferred term) to represent the wide variety of preferences in the academic and lived community. This paper will not, however, use the term Asperger's (as both Weintraub and Loftis do). Both “Asperger's syndrome” and “infantile

autism” were first identified in 1943-44, but “autism” was not included in the DSM until DSM-III in 1980. In 1994, DSM-IV included “Asperger’s syndrome,” but in 2013’s DSM-V it was removed (Hosseini and Molla, 2023). This is due both to its similarity to autism spectrum condition and to its association with Hans Asperger, a scientist who worked for the Nazis. (Asperger’s legacy is hotly debated, though—Steve Silberman, in his history of the condition, *Neurotribes*, suggests that Asperger simply paid lip service to the Reich’s politics in order to avoid persecution and continue teaching at his university while studying, treating, and even saving the lives of his young patients with autism). While some people do still use and identify with the term, “Asperger’s syndrome” is no longer diagnosed and won’t be used here unless it is found in quotations.

In considering whether the retrospective diagnosis of Henry Higgins is ethical or helpful to the field of autism and literary studies, it is first necessary to provide evidence that Shaw’s Henry Higgins can be read as a neurodivergent—specifically an autistic—character. Much of the work here has been done by Shaw scholar Rodelle Weintraub. Her paper “Bernard Shaw’s Henry Higgins: A Classic Aspergen” was published in 2006 and remains one of only two articles specifically on the topic. She outlines in great detail many of the markers of autism that Higgins displays. Though Weintraub did not have access to the most recent version of the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V, 2013) while writing, the features she highlights in Higgins still fit well into DSM’s most recent diagnostic criteria for autism.

Before outlining Weintraub’s argument for Higgin’s autism, it is important to note two shortcomings of the article. First, as a fairly new and developing field, the study of autism and society’s discussion of it has changed significantly over time; this means some older scholarship can sound outdated. To a modern and socially aware reader, Weintraub’s vocabulary is sorely lacking and even offensive, and her biases show through loud and clear. Though she was writing fewer than twenty years ago, the perception of autism by the psychological community as well as by laypeople has changed drastically; what was once strictly a disability to be overcome has transformed into a display of neurodiversity that should be celebrated. The following examples of discriminatory language are not offered in order to blame Weintraub for something she could not have known at the time, but

simply to show the significant shift in language and ideology surrounding autism.

A phrase in Weintraub's final sentence of the article is a small but excellent example of this change. She writes that Higgins is a person "afflicted with Asperger's," as if Asperger's is an affliction with no hope for solution (p. 396). Her piece is riddled with other phrases and ideas that would today be considered antiquated at best and discriminatory at worst. First, her use of the word "Aspergen" in the title and throughout the article is unfortunate and nearly unique—it is found almost nowhere online, and its clinical sound and similarity to words like "alien" makes autistic individuals sound othered. Additionally, Weintraub has a limited imagination for what autism might look like in everyday life, writing that "Aspergens may lead productive lives, living independently, working effectively, and marrying and having a family" (p. 390). To modern readers, her tone here is patronizing, and phrases like "may lead productive lives" are insensitive and imply that a productive life is groundbreaking and unusual rather than common and attainable. Weintraub also makes sweeping generalizations ("An Aspergen is unable to tell a lie") that today would be interpreted as unfair stereotypes and pigeon-holing (p. 391).

A second shortcoming of an article like Weintraub's is that it relies almost exclusively on the medical model of disability. In comparison to the social model and the biopsychosocial model, the medical model claims that disability is primarily a result of biological malfunction. This model believes that disability is individual (in fact, it is also known as the individual model), intrinsic, and that it lowers the quality of life of the disabled individual (Chown & Beardon, 2017 p. 4811). However, this model has been criticized. Chown and Beardon explain:

The main criticism of the medical model of disability is that it equates disability solely with impairment, ignoring the involvement of social, cultural, and environmental factors in the construction of disability. The medical model has been said to attach blame to the individual for their disability" (p. 4812).

An alternative model, known as the social model, does just what the medical model misses—it considers the sociocultural aspects of disability

and separates those from the disability itself. The social model recognizes that disability, in many cases, is actually a social construct (p. 4812). In the case of a disability like quadriplegia, the medical model would explain that the individual lacks the ability to walk and so must use a nontypical form of mobility like a wheelchair. The model would certainly have compassion for the individual and would invest resources in curing the disability and improving the individual's functioning and quality of life, but it would likely stop there. The social model, on the other hand, would acknowledge that the quadriplegic is not able to walk like an able-bodied person, but it would also call attention to the lack of wheelchair access in public buildings and the stares, whispers, and patronizing treatment the individual might receive due to society's discomfort with those who are different.

When considering autism, the medical model relies on diagnosis according to a set of descriptors like those in the *DSM* and claims that the individual's brain functions outside of the norm. The social model would claim that "normality" is a social construct to begin with and would focus on the ways society creates barriers for the autistic person through things like cryptic communication and overstimulating sensory environments. Neither model is strictly sufficient: using only one of them to explain the cause and effect of the limiting factors associated with autism ignores the complex reality of the condition.

The shortcoming of Weintraub's argument, then, is that it uses only the standard pathological features of autism to identify Henry Higgins as an autistic character. This reliance strictly on the medical model is insufficient, but again, Weintraub cannot be faulted for using only the resources available to her in 2006 (the other models of disability are relatively new concepts). With all of these shortcomings acknowledged, it's appropriate now to delve into Weintraub's case for Higgins as an autistic character, using the descriptors in the *DSM-V* as an organizational schema. First, *DSM-V* requires that in order to be diagnosed with autism, an individual must display deficits in all three of the following areas of social interaction and communication:

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.

2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.

3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022)

Higgins struggles throughout the play with social reciprocity, often ignoring Eliza's questions and failing to mirror her mood and language when she shares personal information with him. He interrupts everyone in the play frequently and causes chaos at his mother's at-home by sitting on tables, bumping into furniture, and swearing (Shaw, Act III). Higgins also has an "abnormal social approach" of talking to himself: Weintraub notes that at the beginning of the play, as he listens in on conversations in Covent Gardens, Higgins is caught speaking aloud, exclaiming the names of neighborhoods each crowd member must hail from. The other theatergoers become frustrated with his perceived rudeness, but he defends himself with "Did I say that out loud? I didn't mean to" (Shaw, Act I). Weintraub calls these actions "extreme and inappropriate to the situation" (p. 391). Higgins also shows evidence of descriptor (2), regarding deficits in nonverbal communication. At the end of the play, after he has been rejected by Eliza, Shaw writes that Higgins "roars with laughter as the play ends," and Weintraub observes that this is "hardly an appropriate response to rejection" (p. 391).

Descriptor (3) requires that a person struggle with "developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships" in order to be diagnosed with autism, and Higgins hits the marks here as well. This is particularly apparent in Act V when he seems to assume that Eliza will stay on with him and Colonel Pickering, working together as "three old bachelors" (he doesn't even ask her; he just states what will obviously happen). This is a ludicrous suggestion in the mind of Eliza and any neurotypical reader because Higgins has just spent most of the play belittling, insulting, and mistreating Eliza. Higgins, though, seems shocked that Eliza would not want to continue

the relationship. Another potential autistic marker is Higgins's frequent swearing, which certainly qualifies as "failure to adjust behavior to suit various social contexts." Weintraub notes that even when several characters (his mother, Mrs. Pearce, Colonel Pickering) ask him to stop, he continues swearing both in private and in public in the presence of ladies and high society (p. 392-394). Of course, this is an interesting place to pause and consider what Weintraub did not—the social model of disability. At this point, the model would ask: "To what degree is 'unacceptable' language [e.g. swearing] determined by society?" British high society is a particularly rigid environment that demands its members fit into social norms or be shunned. Perhaps Higgins's status as an outcast is a result not of his autism, but of society's refusal to accept neurodiverse states of being.

Along with the social interaction/communication deficits, DSM-V requires that a person display at least two of the following four restrictive/repetitive behaviors.

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).
3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement). (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022)

Higgins displays many of these characteristics as well. He is often seen pacing and jingling keys and coins in his pocket—both repetitive behaviors called stimming. In Act II he is shown “walking up and down the room, rattling his keys and his cash in his pockets.” In Act III when he is at his mother’s at-home, Shaw shows him “rising abruptly and walking about, jingling his money and his keys in his trouser pockets,” so much so that his mother has to ask him to stop.

Higgins also has a specialized and restricted interest in phonetics and language. At the beginning of the play, he is standing in the rain “wholly preoccupied with a notebook in which he is writing” as he takes notes on the accents of the people around him (Act I). Weintraub calls him “consumed by an obsession at which he is highly adept” (p. 391). At the beginning of Act II, Shaw describes Higgins’s desk, listing all of the instruments found there: “a phonograph, a laryngoscope, a row of tiny organ pipes with a bellows, a set of lamp chimneys for singing flames with burners attached to a gas plug in the wall by an indiarubber tube, several tuning-forks of different sizes, a life-size image of half a human head, ... and a box containing a supply of wax cylinders for the phonograph.” The rest of the room is also cluttered with what Weintraub calls a “highly organized collection of objects of interest, especially mechanical objects”—the accouterments of Higgins’s obsession (p. 393). He is so particularly obsessed with his work, in fact, that Mrs. Pearce notes, “When you get what you call interested in people’s accents, you never think or care what may happen to them or you” (Act II).

These are simply some highlights of Weintraub’s observations about Higgins—interested readers should engage her article in full to observe the many ways Higgins’s behaviors are beyond just rude or out of touch—they seem truly neurodivergent. Oddly though, Weintraub’s article does not settle on the *meaning* or overall effect of Higgins’s autism. The piece does a thorough overview of the plot, characters, and themes; lists dozens of markers of autism in Higgins; and then ends, simply, “Shaw has given us a remarkable presentation of ... Higgins as [a person] afflicted with Asperger’s Syndrome. And he did so thirty years before the syndrome was identified and over seventy years before its criteria were established” (p. 396).

Perhaps Weintraub stops at simply identifying Higgins as autistic because her piece was the first to formalize the idea, and she did not find it necessary

to comment on the ramifications. This paper will, later on, claim that there are important effects of diagnosing Higgins as autistic, but for now, readers should consider the medical model evidence Weintraub offers as a strong case for retrospective diagnosis.

The other academic contribution to the discussion of Henry Higgins as an autistic character comes from Sonya Freeman Loftis in 2014, almost a decade after Weintraub's contribution. Loftis, who is autistic herself, generally agrees that a reading of Higgins as autistic is valid; she cites many places online where autistic communities have claimed Higgins (as well as Shaw himself) as autistic, but she argues that this labeling "actually threatens to reaffirm damaging stereotypes of people on the spectrum, perpetuating the erroneous idea that all autistic people are geniuses and savants" (p. 60). Loftis worries that a stereotypical version of an autistic character is not actually helpful representation at all. She picks up the concern of scholars like Douwe Draaisma (2019) who, in his survey of texts featuring autistic characters, concluded that "media representations of talent and special abilities can be said to have contributed to a harmful divergence between the general image of autism and the clinical reality of the autistic condition" (p.1475). Draaisma references films such as *Rain Man*, *Mozart and the Whale*, and *Mercury Rising* and novels such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* as examples of autistic characters who are reduced to their savant-like skills and indicated with obvious traits like extreme literalism.

Savantism is indeed over-represented in media portrayals of autistic individuals. Though it's difficult to research, scientists estimate that only about ten percent of autistic people display some sort of savant-level skill, often in memory, art, music, math, or calendar calculation (Treffert, 2009). Pinchevski and Peters (2016) also express concern over the simplistic portrayal of autism in the media, noting that it runs the risk of "neglecting the wide margins of the less glamorous, less functional, and more miserable variants" (p. 2517). All of these concerns about stereotyping are valid when considering characters who have been specifically written as autistic.

However, Loftis's concern about Higgins as a stereotype breaks down when one considers the fact that labeling him autistic is a retrospective diagnosis. Because readers are applying a label that didn't exist when the character was written (autism wasn't formally described until 1938 in a speech by Hans

Asperger and then in writing in 1943), any retrospective diagnosis of autism will necessarily use stereotypes to recognize the neurodivergent character. Modern readers are likely to look for the most common and recognizable traits of autism when searching for neurodivergent characters from the past—otherwise, how would they be able to recognize one at all? What are the “nonstereotypical” traits of autism, and would they be recognizable if present? The fact is that stereotypes have to start somewhere. In this case, autistic people are most recognizable by their common symptoms: social/relational unawareness and repetitive/restricted behaviors—behaviors that do sometimes express themselves as savantism.

Loftis worries that readers, after encountering characters like Higgins, will begin to assume that every autistic person is extraordinarily gifted in a particular field. She quotes Stuart Murray, who calls this the “compensation cure,” which he defines as “skills [that] act to compensate for the disability with which they are associated” (Murray p. 66). Loftis fears that portraying autistic characters as “savant figures suggest[s] that people with disabilities are worthy only if they overcome or overcompensate for characteristics that may form an integral part of personal identity” (Loftis p. 69). Is it fair, however, to minimize someone’s strength (great skill in phonetics, in this case) by labeling it “compensation”? Or should society be able to both appreciate someone’s skills in an area while still acknowledging their shortcomings?

Notably, Higgins does not actually “overcome” his condition in the course of the play. By the end, he is still summarily rejected by and annoying to nearly everyone in his life. In the last scene, he and Eliza fight because Higgins is convinced that Eliza cannot maintain her new identity without his help. He still takes credit for the entire transformation, and he assumes that she will continue to live and work with him and Pickering. He continues to be socially unaware and out of touch. The very last stage direction shows him chuckling (odd behavior after an intense fight) and rattling cash in his pocket (stimming). His autistic tendencies have not been “solved” by the success he had in transforming Eliza, and Shaw is not asking the audience to be sympathetic or ignore Higgins’s negative traits. Loftis worries that a savant character will become a caricature, but Higgins is actually complex—both admirably intelligent and incorrigibly rude all at once. Both of these traits are certainly rooted in his neurodivergence, but he must face the real

consequences and rewards of them regardless, just as neurotypical people must manage their own strengths and weaknesses.

Furthermore, is Higgins even a savant to begin with? Worries about stereotypes break down when readers consider that there is no evidence in the play that his skill is beyond what one might expect from a middle-aged professional who has studied phonetics all his life. Phonetics is undoubtedly his autistic special interest, and so it makes sense that he would be talented in the field where he specializes. It's not a stereotype at all to observe that an autistic person has a special interest and that they excel there. It should, in fact, be something to celebrate. "To recast exceptional figures as autistic," write Pinchevski and Peters, "is to celebrate their quirkiness rather than to disparage it" (p. 2517).

Ultimately, there is space in the neurodivergent canon for the savant. The critiques of autistic scholars like Loftis are valid because stereotypical portrayals of autism can be harmful if they are the only representations that exist. However, in the modern era, media representations of neurodivergence—some of which are even created by neurodivergent authors—are much more common, much more purposefully created, and much more nuanced. The mirror and window effect is beginning to make everyone feel more seen, and these more modern texts are working to educate the general population about the many forms neurodivergence can take. Those who are worried about stereotypical representation should, of course, still call out simplistic or erroneous portrayals in modern media, but they would do well to give readers—particularly progressive, academic readers—some credit: audiences can spot genuine or stereotypical representation when they see it.

Loftis's criticism of Henry Higgins's autism remains warranted and helpful. But ten years later, when a richer and more varied canon of neurodiverse characters now exists, we can move beyond evaluating which historical characters the neurodivergent community retrospectively diagnoses and claims as their own. Some of those characters may be stereotypical—that is necessarily so, else they would not be recognizable—but that does not diminish the fact that they existed at a time when neurodivergence was ignored or scorned. As the autistic community seizes the chance to write

their own history, there is no reason to sanitize that history and require that it only include perfect representations.

Henry Higgins is one of those imperfect autistic characters, and it is his complexity that has made him a compelling character for audiences over the last century. Though he is often rude and misogynistic and severely unpleasant, Higgins is not merely an antagonistic caricature of autistic awkwardness. Through stage directions, Shaw attempts to show how Higgins is sometimes genuinely confused about how his actions are received. Two such stage directions come at the beginning of Act II. Along with several paragraphs of description of what the setting should look like, Shaw also spends several sentences describing Higgins's motivations and character. He is described as "careless about himself and other people, including their feelings" and readers are told he acts like "an impetuous baby" who needs to be watched all the time to stay out of trouble. That trouble, though, is described as "*unintended mischief*," (emphasis mine) and that single word sheds light on the way Shaw is attempting to portray Higgins not as evil or completely uncaring, but simply ignorant and naive. Higgins participates in "genial bullying" and "stormy petulance," but Shaw ends the description by writing that "he is so entirely frank and void of malice that he remains likable even in his least reasonable moments." Whether an actor chooses to portray Higgins in this way is up to them, but readers of the play can clearly see that Shaw is not writing a black-and-white villain. He is more sympathetic and less stereotypical than he first appears.

Later in Act II, when Eliza appears and asks for elocution lessons, Higgins mocks and belittles her. Pickering and Mrs. Pearce come to her defense—Mrs. Pearce says he "can't walk over everybody like this." In another telling stage direction, Shaw writes that "Higgins, thus scolded, subsides. The hurricane is succeeded by a zephyr of amiable surprise." He is clear that Higgins is truly not acting out of animosity or purposefully being rude here but is simply ignorant and is surprised that the others seem to have misinterpreted his intentions. He is forced to defend himself, saying: "I never had the slightest intention of walking over anyone. All I propose is that we should be kind to this poor girl. We must help her to prepare and fit herself for her new station in life." It is here that modern readers might consider Higgins's autism through the social model of disability—something previous scholars have not. Is the problem here simply that the other characters have not taken the time

to understand Higgins's unorthodox methods? Are they unwilling to look past his brusque manner and lack of social niceties to see his true motivation—to help Eliza improve her lot in life? A few moments later in Act II, Pickering asks whether Higgins has considered that Eliza has feelings. Higgins replies, “Not any feelings that we need bother about,” which may seem uncaring, certainly, but astute readers can see from Higgins's next line, in which he considers the difficulty of fixing Eliza's grammar, that he simply has honed in on his special interest of the moment and has disregarded any thought of “feelings” for more useful, scientific matters like his next steps with Eliza. If his friends were more accommodating to his one-track mind, they might be less offended by his approach.

Along with using stage directions to reveal Higgins's true intentions, Shaw gives him a powerful moment of honesty, sweetness, and genuine connection at the end of the play that adds nuance and humanity to his neurodivergence. As they argue about the future in Act V, Higgins expresses a moment of real regret that Eliza doesn't want to stay on and work with him. “I shall miss you, Eliza,” he says, and another of Shaw's telling stage directions indicates it should be said “with sudden humility.” When Eliza retorts that he won't miss her because he can listen to her voice anytime by turning on his gramophone, Higgins responds with one of the play's most touching lines, a poignant and clear understanding of what makes someone human. “I can't turn your soul on,” he says. “Leave me those feelings; and you can take away the voice and the face. They are not you.”

This tender, abstract, socioemotional idea is not something a stereotypical autistic person would express, and audiences can see that there's more to Higgins than meets the eye. He is deeply, bluntly honest with Eliza, explaining to her that he helped her because she is human and deserves goodness, because it was his job, and “for the fun of it.” He clearly thinks of their relationship as a partnership and truly believes it could work, even offering to adopt her as his daughter. Audiences can actually read Eliza as the less sympathetic character, particularly if they are again considering the social model of disability. She makes very little effort to actually hear what Higgins is saying and lets her anger and settled bias against him cloud her ability to empathize. He explains himself clearly (not tactfully, perhaps, but clearly and passionately) and she refuses to see things from his perspective. His autism gets in the way of their future friendship, but her pride does as well.

It is scenes like these that prove Higgins is not just a stereotype—he is a dimensional, imperfect, empathetic neurodivergent character struggling to make his way in a world that does not understand him. Shaw has created a realistic character that the autistic community can be proud to call their own. Though Rochelle Weintraub didn't find it necessary in 2006 to make any claim about the effect of Higgins's autism and Sonya Freeman Loftis was troubled by his stereotypical traits in 2014, readers today—members of a society that is becoming increasingly accepting of neurodivergence in its many forms—should appreciate Henry Higgins for all of his traits, both the unsavory and the admirable. Whether he is gleefully recording the vowel sounds of his fellow Londoners, disturbing the peace of his mother's at-home hours, or making clumsy but earnest attempts to form social bonds, Higgins is a complicated and captivating character who improves society's understanding of neurodivergence. A paper written about him in ten more years will likely have yet another perspective thanks to the scholarship and contributions of academics and the neurodivergent community, but for now, Henry Higgins should be accepted as a valuable addition to the canon of neurodivergent characters because of his flaws, not despite them.

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