

# Exploring The Characters In The Elephant Man Through Two Disability Lenses

Fatimah Alzughabi

**Abstract:** The play is eye opening and shows the inhumane treatment Merrick and other “disabled individuals” must endure because mainstream society finds them to be outside the range of normal. Through the interactions between the characters in the play, the audience sees how disability is understood and responded to by the medical community and mainstream society. This research will try to shed light on the text by analyzing it through two different lenses – comparing and contrasting the social disability and medical disability models and the concept of staring and its implications.

**Index Terms:** Disability, The Elephant Man, Merrick, Model.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The play *The Elephant Man* by Bernard Pomerance is centered on a man, Joseph Merrick, who suffers from severe bodily deformities and social isolation. An English physician and surgeon, Frederick Treves, is fascinated with Merrick’s condition and seeks to study it further. After learning of the horrific physical and mental torment Merrick has to undergo on a regular basis, Treves is determined to help this unfortunate man live as normal of a life as possible although, ultimately, Merrick dies. This paper will analyze the play through two different mechanisms– comparing and contrasting the social disability and medical disability models and the idea of staring and its consequences.

## 2 The Elephant Man and the Social and Medical Disability Models

The Social **Disability Model** views the concept of **disability** as a consequence of environmental, social, and attitudinal barriers that impede an individual from participating, fully, in their society. Specifically, Disabled Peoples’ International defines it as: “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others, due to physical or social barriers” (Michigan **Disability** Rights Coalition 1). Under this **model**, **disability** is directly linked to the society an individual lives in, and is not the consequence of one’s actions or even limitations. Rather, it is culturally derived, and can only be altered by manipulating the general society’s worldview, standards, and norms (Michigan **Disability** Rights Coalition). In *The Elephant Man*, there are countless examples of how people with disabilities are socially discriminated against and excluded from society. The Pinheads, for example, are mentally challenged people who are unable to live a normal life because society views them as unnatural and unworthy of human dignity and respect. Therefore, they are placed in a “Freak Show” and forced to endure harassment and grueling hours of torment. They are not viewed as their own, individual people with rights; instead, they are subject to the realm of abnormalities and simply viewed as sources of entertainment. Their “master” – Ross – makes them sing demeaning songs with lyrics, such as: “our niggers are bigger” (Pomerance 8). **Merrick**, too, is the victim of social discrimination. Like the Pinheads, he must perform and serve Ross who treats him as sub-human, puts him on display for others to mock and jeer at, and, ultimately, steals his money (Pomerance 10). Ross speaks to him cruelly and calls him names such as “bloody donkey”

(Pomerance 4). Then, when **Merrick** boards a train and interacts with mainstream society, he is physically and mentally abused. The conductor of the train states: “They [the people on the train] wanted to rip him to pieces” (Pomerance 11). Treves recognizes the social component of **Merrick’s** disabilities and states “his [**Merrick’s**] terror comes from being held at arm’s length from society” (Pomerance 24). Even the doctor recognizes the Social **Disability Model** and its role in contributing to **Merrick’s** disabilities. Unlike the Social **Disability Model**, the Medical **Disability Model** does not focus on social and environmental factors. Instead, it maintains that **disability** is the result of individual physical and mental limitations and not social norms and worldviews. The World Health Organization defines impairment, **disability**, and handicap only in terms of physical and biological shortcomings or abnormalities that plague an individual (Michigan **Disability** Rights Coalition). Furthermore, the Medical **Disability Model** sheds light on Pinheads as well. The Pinheads are described as “morons” with “small brains” (Pomerance 7). Probably, they suffer from mental retardation or Down’s syndrome. These two medical conditions are physical in nature and alter the brain and system in a way that limits the afflicted party’s ability to learn and process information. Additionally, many sufferers display physical characteristics indicative of these disabilities. The reader, therefore, can make sense out of the Pinheads by understanding their physical and biological limitations and shortcomings. Yet, the Medical **Disability Model**, too, is pertinent to understanding **Merrick’s** condition and disabilities. Probably, the most detailed physical description of **Merrick’s** oddities is given by Treves in the third scene. The doctor never uses appropriate words to describe **Merrick’s** **disability**, but he describes him as having “striking features” to include an enormous head with a mass projecting from the brow like a loaf of bread (Pomerance 5). From **Merrick’s** upper jaw projected yet another “mass of bone.” His nose was just a “lump of flesh” and his back “was horrible because it hung, as far down as the middle of the thigh.” **Merrick’s** right arm was disproportional – “enormous in size and shapeless,” and he had skin growths that emitted a “sickening stench.” Treves concludes that he had hip disease that left him permanently disabled and in need of a walking aid. (Pomerance 5-6). Here, the readers are given a vivid description of what physically differentiates **Merrick** from other people. He is biologically different and his disabilities are physical in nature and can be labeled by medical professionals and not sociologists. Additionally, the reader sees how Treves represents the Medical **Disability**

**Model** in a negative manner. His colorful use of words to describe **Merrick's** ailments is condescending and focuses on the "grotesqueness" of **Merrick's** condition. He chooses to use words like "stench" and "horrible" to describe a man who is suffering. This description is inhumane and degrading. Treves provides him with a home in the London Hospital where **Merrick** is getting good care but he also uses him for fund-raising from the English public. Thus, **Merrick** is totally isolated from society, first in the freak show and then in the hospital; even his friendship with Mrs. Kendal is ruined by Treves when they become too close to each other. Treves mostly treats **Merrick** as a subject to study "I would be curious to see him if there is some genuine disorder" (Pomerance 4). Also, he uses **Merrick** to advance his own medical job by introducing him to the members of the royal family. Miss. Sandwich, who works as a nurse, employs these same types of words to describe afflicted individuals. In describing her African patients, she states: "In Africa, I have seen dreadful scourges quite unknown to our more civilized climes. What at home could be worse than a miserable and afflicted rotting black?" (Pomerance 35). Like Treves, she lacks compassion and fails to take into account the harm she is doing by using such insulting words. Even when she sees **Merrick** for the first time, she yells "Oh my good God in heaven " then she runs away from the room.

### 3 The Elephant Man and the Concept of Staring

Staring is a powerful way in which humans respond to something or someone that appears out of the ordinary. Garland-Thomas notes that "staring is a vivid form of human communication" (1). It is what we are programmed, as humans, to do when we encounter the unexpected. It serves to communicate to the inner feelings of the person doing the staring, namely that the object being stared at is extraordinary, in some manner. Garland-Thomas adds that, in Western society, monsters and freaks are the exemplar of that which is not expected (1-2). Humans that are placed into this category, therefore, are subject to stares by complete strangers wherever they go. These individuals know that their differences make them objects of fascination and are constantly reminded of their abnormalities. With each new stare, a forced, once more, to acknowledge their physical abnormalities. With this in mind, it is easy to see why **Merrick** was so bothered in *The Elephant Man* by people staring at him. He was well aware of the social implications of "staring," and knew that it was indicative of people thinking he was a freak and a monster. It placed him outside of the range of normality and into the category of "other." **Merrick** expresses his dislike of being stared at to Treves. He even requests to be sent to a home for the blind "I would prefer it where no one stared at me "(Pomerance 18), so that he might be surrounded by people who would not judge him based on his physical attributes. This testifies to how deeply being stared at affected him and the social repercussions a stare can have on an individual. Garland-Thomas also adds that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century, freaks and monsters were used as profitable performers. People would pay money to stare and gawk at their abnormalities (Garland-Thomas 3). Clare recalls, in his article "Gawking, Gaping, Staring," that he has come from a long history of stage performers – "freaks and drag queens,

court jesters and scientific experiments" (257). He notes that sometimes he and his kin work for money and are proud and other times, just desperate (Clare 258). In other words, he and his ancestors served as objects for society to stare at and muse over. Their very purpose in life is to be objects of fascination for strangers to marvel and laugh at. The characters in *The Elephant Man*, too, are depicted as objects (not people) to be stared and gawked at. As previously stated, **Merrick** and the Pinheads, for example, are part of a freak show and their only contribution to society is to entertain the public at circuses and carnivals. This is shown in the play when Ross refers to **Merrick** as, "This freak of nature, **the Elephant Man**" (Pomerance 3). People pay in order to stare at their abnormalities and physical differences. At these shows, people laugh and jeer at their oddities. Of course, this entertainment comes at the expense of the "freaks" dignity and self-worth. Even Treves pays money in order to stare at **Merrick's** abnormalities. He and the medical community wish to study **Merrick's** body. To do so, they must closely examine (i.e. stare at) his unique characteristics. Then, once these characteristics are identified, the medical community can catalogue them and add their findings to the collective medical knowledge base. Staring and gawking, therefore, in the play, serve as both a means of entertainment and a means of scientific inquiry. Despite the various intents of staring, the results are the same. The target is humiliated, degraded, and confirmed to be "other."

### 6 Conclusion

In sum, all three **models** help the reader to understand the ways in which some of the characters, most notably **Merrick**, suffer – emotionally, physically, socially, and culturally – from their disabilities. By looking at the play through various lenses, it becomes apparent that disabilities affect people in numerous ways and are largely culturally driven phenomena. Even if disabilities are physical in nature, the ramifications of these disabilities have painful social consequences. With this in mind, there is a hope for improving the lives of disabled people. Of course, medical breakthroughs and discoveries can help cure the physical side of disabilities, but, arguably, the more devastating aspect is social. Therefore, if society, as a whole, is able to shift its overarching opinions and reactions to people who are different, then most, if not all, of the social aspects of disabilities can be mitigated. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone to try to rethink what it means to be disabled and try to change the status quo so as to allow disabled people to participate, fully, in society.

### REFERENCES

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