Choosing Humanity: The Evolution of the Elephant Man

Asia McIntosh

April 25, 2014
Introduction:

When Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, he sparked an intriguing conversation amongst the intellectual community worldwide. Darwin’s theory of natural selection suggested that the human population was becoming a more viable species due to genetic variation. “Owing to this struggle, variations, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding… will tend to the preservation of such individuals, and will generally be inherited by the offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving.”¹ Overtime, the human population has been able to create variation through sexual reproduction and migration. “A great amount a variability, under which term individual differences are always included, will evidently be favorable.”² I agree with Darwin that genetic variability leads to a population that is fit for survival; however, there are always pitfalls to theories. The question that I am most interested in is how could a population that has experienced an immense amount of variability produce offspring that are unfit for survival? When I use the term “unfit for survival” I am referring specifically to those who have deformities due to genetic abnormalities or birth defects. What I find interesting is that in an age in which people looked to science for answers, there were no answers that were related to science regarding freaks.

The best example of a freak trapped in a time in which science had answers for only the majority is Joseph Merrick who is known as the Elephant Man. Joseph Merrick sustained deformities to his body due to an overgrowth of tumors that could not be explained by scientific evidence at that time. Before there were advances to explain phenomena like Merrick, doctors attribute diseases like his to distress of the mother during pregnancy which is interesting because

² Darwin, 62.
Merrick was born in a period in which I would expect people to look to science for a justification.

Merrick’s condition puts society into a quandary not only because there is no answer to explain his state, but Merrick forces society as a whole to change their perception of their surroundings. When one looks at Merrick, he must accept that humans are nowhere near perfect, that there will not always be answers, and that we are slaves to uncontrollable circumstances. The reality that a person once knew changes when they come in contact with someone like Merrick, and I am interested in this change in perception. Specifically, I want to examine the perception changes that accompanied Merrick’s condition because those who were close to Merrick or came in contact with Merrick experience a change in how they view the world around them.

First, I delve into the theory of monstrosity and how monstrosity is connected to women. In order to understand Merrick’s plight, one must have a background of monstrosity and perceptions. Next, I address Merrick’s self-image in order to reveal how his thoughts about himself are shaped by his experiences living within a society that did not know how to deal with him. Merrick’s state is shocking to everyone he comes in contact with including his family and medical professionals. I am interested in how he was affected by his circumstances, and how he comes to terms with the permanence of his grotesque state. The most important source that will reveal Merrick’s feelings is his autobiography that is rich with descriptions of himself and his home life. Next, I investigate the photos of Merrick because the photos reveal different dimensions to Merrick’s self-image in addition to uncovering how society views him. Exclusively, I will analyze photos of Merrick clothed and unclothed because these images of Merrick are not only the most popular, but the most revealing of his experiences. Once I have a
sense of who Merrick is and what he thought about himself I want to examine those who are around him or similar to him.

The most significant period in Merrick’s life is when he is in the circus. In the late 1800s, sideshows are extremely popular, and being a freak is a way to make money because someone as grotesque as Merrick could not sustain a normal job. I examine circus culture and how living in the circus world could have affected Merrick. In addition to revealing more about how people viewed Merrick I compare him to other freaks in order to highlight similarities and differences in their stories to reveal a common bond amongst all freaks. Lastly, I address his relationship with Dr. Treves and the discrepancies between Treves and Norman’s accounts. Ultimately, through the study of these different dimensions of Merrick I will humanize him, and show that society’s perceptions are what cause us to try to categorize Merrick in the first place.

Monstrosity and the Fascination with the Other:

One of the most memorable moments in the life of Joseph Merrick is the time he spent as a sideshow. His grotesque appearance on circus ads attracts large crowds with an insatiable curiosity: “This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare.”\(^3\) When the showman reveals Merrick, faces of shock and horror plague everyone who catches a glimpse of his features. He even shocks Dr. Treves when he sees Merrick for the first time:

There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I have ever seen. In the course of my profession I had come upon lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as mutilations and contortions of the body

---

depending upon like causes; but at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed.\textsuperscript{4}

Treves’ utter repugnance he displays by his language emphasizes the extent of Merrick’s extreme deformities. Interestingly, people continue to view Merrick in the circus although his deformities are beyond disturbing. What nurtures the curiosity in these crowds and why are they fascinated with viewing or understanding another dimension of humanity? In the minds of all humans, there is a standard of what is “normal” regarding how people look, and that standard of “normal” comes from a universal culture that places sameness on a pedestal:

As Lennard J. Davis has argued, the word “normal,” denoting conforming to the common type, didn’t emerge in the English language until around 1840; it derives from “norm,” “normality,” and “normalcy” followed shortly afterward. It is thus possible, argues Davis, “to date the coming into consciousness in English of an ideal of ‘the norm’ over the period of 1840-1860.\textsuperscript{5}

When something comes along that breaks the norm, a sense of confusion occurs because one must alter his/her view of what he/she may consider “normal.” In the end, “normal” does not exist, and when a world without the social construct of “normal” opens, the experience is fascinating, perplexing, and addictive.

Coming to terms with the unknown or the different can be an unsettling experience. When one’s view changes drastically a paradigm shift occurs which entails achieving a different level of understanding: “A grotesque philosophy should be understood, first of all, as a philosophy opposed to any system of ontological thought that configures reality as unchangeable, static, well-ordered and highly defined, or that calls for homogeneity.”\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{4} Frederick Treves, 3.

Understanding the “grotesque philosophy” is unavoidable once someone comes in contact with something or someone that displays the philosophy such as Merrick. At first one may attempt to mentally block out what they have encountered, but an image as horrifying as Merrick never leaves: “The excessive (grotesque) body cannot be absolutely contained, that is, it cannot be disconnected from the rest of the world or from its others. It finds itself in a constant and intensive intertwining and intermingling with the outside” When one begins to accept that his/her view of humanity must change, one embarks on an arduous mental journey that causes self-awareness.

When one begins to understand that humanity can be illustrated in different ways, there are certain topics one must contemplate: “The grotesque leads to representation and knowledge only by means of deformation, intersubjective hybridity, and excess.” Importantly, the change in how one perceives the representation of humanity could prove to be dramatic because acceptance of a completely different outlook is a hard feat due to the aversion to change. When one accepts a certain view for a long period of time, an exception to the rule could seem intrusive and without merit. For example, when Treves first encounters Merrick he is clouded with a preconceived notion of humanity, and he referred to him as simple because he did not realize that Merrick was intelligent. Just like Treves, society has to change their perception of humanity to understand Merrick, or the grotesque.

When the perception of humanity changes, one must challenge what society has always thought to be correct or normal:

---

7 Shabot, 59.
8 Shabot, 61.
9 Treves, 17.
A supplementary representation of reality points to a fragmentariness where parts are added on to each other, integrated into each other, without ever truly completing each other...The grotesque, in sum, deals with difference in the sense of correctness, specificity, and irreducibility to general principles.\(^{10}\)

The modification of a social norm, especially in a time where being different did not come with broad acceptance, must have been beyond challenging, and the reason relates to society’s emphasis on sameness. The term “sameness” refers to how society makes an attempt to unify everyone by using a strict criterion that everyone must follow in order to be accepted. Society uses the model of sameness in order to prevent conflict or a collapse of society, but promoting the idea of sameness does the exact opposite because of the differences that innately lie in humans: “There is no way to deal with difference, heterogeneity and otherness except by renouncing the aim of reaching an absolute, a-historical, universal, and abstract knowledge.”\(^{11}\)

No matter what efforts society makes in order to make everyone the same, they cannot achieve normalcy.

When dealing with the idea of sameness and the plight of monsters such as Merrick, one must look outside the idea of sameness in order to examine monsters: “At the very simplest level, the monster is something beyond the normative, that stands against the values associated with what we choose to call normality and that is a focus of normative anxiety.”\(^{12}\) Confronting a monster means one must extinguish that the term “normal” and a new perception must emerge.

Society has a strong reaction to freaks because they stand outside of the norm, and society is forced to confront the reality that differences exist. When one’s perception of humanity is set by social constructs for an extended period of time and he/she comes in contact with a freak for the

---

\(^{10}\) Shabot, 62.

\(^{11}\) Shabot, 65.

first time, the change in perception of human life can be quite a dramatic experience. One must not only be self-aware, but one must be aware of what is different.

In addition to society having a strong reaction to what is different, society cannot get enough exposure to that which is different: “Although freak shows themselves had largely disappeared by the 1950s, the widespread investment in the monstrous as a matter of ambivalent repulsion and attraction remains powerful.”13 No matter how much society progresses, there will always be an interest in what is different because man’s curiosity is always prompts him to look for answers. Society as a whole may look at monsters or freaks as an avenue to rise above nature or prevent what may go wrong. But one must realize that freaks represent that there are no preventative measures that one can take to avoid that which is different.

Ultimately, Crockford best confronts monstrosity and Merrick in the following statement: “In examining the complex attitudes and reactions toward Merrick in first-hand accounts, it has become clear that Merrick’s contemporaries felt threatened by his unknowable, unclassifiable representation of humanity.”14 The problem people have with Merrick’s “representation of humanity” is attempting to classify what he represents. The best way to combat that is to accept that some things are not meant to be classified, and to realize that that which is unclassifiable serves the purpose of revealing that man is a slave to nature regardless of his futile efforts at trying to control his environment.

Gender and Monstrosities:

When discussing monstrosity, one cannot neglect the strong connection with women:

13 Shildrick, 25.
That link between the monstrous and the feminine runs as a thread throughout the varied historical accounts and explanations, in more or less explicit terms, and forms a nuanced but consistent motif in my theorization of what is at stake in our understanding of monstrosity.\textsuperscript{15}

In the 1800s, the general public along with doctors truly believes that deformities were caused by trauma of women during their pregnancies. Although participation of a male and female is necessary to bring a child into the world, the fathers escape blame while the mothers take on the complete burden of having a deformed child. The issue of perception runs deep within the topic of women and monstrosity because the perception of women makes them an easy target for a male dominated society.

In a broader context, society blames women for any shortcomings of society: “Both women and non-white peoples were seen as regressive agents capable of dragging down white civilization by feeding off the precious resources, both economic and bodily, accrued by right-living men.”\textsuperscript{16} Since women are held accountable for a variety of faults within society, it is not surprising that males attribute deformities of children to women. When a child is born without deformity or disease, the father is praised, but when something is wrong with the child, the mother is condemned:

In a remarkable reversal of the accepted relationship of influence in reproduction, in which the father’s part was held to be the dominant factor, the propensity of the mother- herself an innately deviant model of humanity- to produce the monstrous marks the potency and danger of unbridled female imagination.\textsuperscript{17}

Essentially, women are considered to be weak not just physically, but mentally to the extent that they could be influenced by the outside world so greatly that their internal chemistry could be altered during pregnancy: “The threat of monstrous births was a real and disturbing danger, but

\textsuperscript{15} Shildrick, 28.
\textsuperscript{16} Shildrick, 30.
\textsuperscript{17} Shildrick, 31-32.
what they testified to was not the power of women, but their inherent weakness.”

The display of ignorance during the time period is very shocking because of the many scientific innovations that were occurring at this time. Darwin is writing on how humans biologically progressed, yet medical professionals use an outrageous excuse in order to explain birth defects. An additional reason why women are blamed is the fear within men:

Whilst the capacity of women to transmit impressions, both mental and physical, to their unborn children, provides a plausible answer to the puzzle of monstrous birth, it also plays right into a deep-seated human anxiety about proper origins, and into a masculine fear of women’s procreative power.

Making women the scapegoat for birth defects is used as a tool by men to continue to keep women powerless. People in power positions will do whatever is necessary to stay in power, and this was another scare tactic devised by men to keep women from rising above their control. Blaming women for deformed children was a widespread practice, and there are examples of such.

Although there are studies being conducted in order to find a more concrete reason as to why birth defects manifested, the studies are unpopular and not trusted. Until legitimate proof is shown, society continues to blame the mother for deformities due to her mental weakness. If a woman has a traumatic experience or is horrified by something in a sideshow, it was believed that her baby would endure the consequences: “Warning pregnant women against entering the sideshow tent, freak lore posited a direct connection between the freak’s anomalies and flights of maternal fancy. The very sight of a freak might be enough to deform the gestating fetus.”

In the case of Joseph Merrick, the trauma his mother sustained is the reason he uses to explain his extreme condition:

18 Shildrick, 37.
19 Shildrick, 36.
The deformity which I am now exhibiting was caused by my mother being frightened by an Elephant; my mother was going along the street when a procession of Animals were passing by…and unfortunately she was pushed under the Elephant’s feet, which frightened her very much; this occurring during the time of pregnancy was the cause of my deformity.21

Interestingly, Merrick does not convey feelings of animosity towards his mother, but he views her as a victim of uncontrollable circumstances. His view is admirable because in other examples people do not view mothers as victims, but perpetrators of birth defects. For example, a woman named Elizabeth Spencer is charged with shoplifting, and at the time of her sentencing to Australia, she is pregnant: “Sadly, the resultant infant was born congenitally deformed, reputedly having two noses, unjointed arms, no lower limbs, and only the rudiments of feet joined directly to the lower part of the body.”22 As a result of the birth defects, she is accused of “unnatural” and “unlawful” activities. The fact that men blame her for the birth defects of her baby without any regard for what emotional trauma she faces after she births the baby is absurd. There is no way that she expects her child to be deformed. Her excuse is that the animals that she saw during her sentence in Australia caused the changes in her pregnancy. The fact that she believes what she saw caused birth defects illustrates the deep engraving of “maternal imagination.” Her statements also show that women did not question the judgment of men at the time, even if there was no concrete evidence available to justify their thoughts. Regarding reproduction, Shildrick attributes the questioning of women and the superiority of men to past influences that were not questioned or phased out:

Any understanding of the widespread popularity of maternal imagination as an explanatory model for birth defects in the early modern period must relate in part to a broader intellectual history. Through the ubiquitous influence of Aristotle in particular, an assertion of the male seed…23

21 Merrick, 168.
22 Shildrick, 32.
23 Shildrick, 34.
Essentially, men subject women to criticism for birth defects beyond their control due to misconceptions of the past. The belief in emotional trauma causing birth defects is ridiculous, but it could be easy to believe back then because there was no concrete scientific evidence to prove otherwise. Once genetics is able to reveal that both men and women contribute to deformities, a major change in perspective toward women and men occurs. Involving men causes women to seem less weak, and men appear less powerful. All in all, women and monstrosity share a common bond that society perceives differently throughout time.

Merrick’s Self-Image:

One of the most unusual sources relating to the life of Joseph Merrick is his autobiography. The source is intriguing because he reveals a great deal about himself using few words. The autobiography is indeed brief, but crucial in understanding exactly how Merrick views himself. He is a product of his circumstances, but he is not necessarily a slave to his condition. Merrick attributes most of his characteristics/circumstances to his condition; however, he demonstrates how he works to overcome his disease.

When he begins to describe himself, he does not focus on his personality, hobbies, or aspirations, but he dwells on his disease. In the description, he illustrates his body in a precise manner by noting measurements and the appearance of his extremities:

The measurement round my head is 36 inches, there is a large substance of flesh at the back as large as a breakfast cup, the other part in a manner of speaking is like hills and valleys, all lumped together, while the face is such a sight that no one could describe it. The right hand is almost the size and shape of an Elephant’s foreleg, measuring 12 inches round the wrist and 5 inches round one of the fingers.²⁴

---

Merrick mentions specific measurements in order to highlight his deformities because he wants his audience to recognize the importance he places on his condition. Being extremely disfigured takes a toll on his self-esteem and self-worth. There was no way for him to escape his own body which is why the description of his condition is at the forefront of his autobiography. Merrick’s self-image seems to be obstructed by his deformities, but when examining his writings more closely, he begins to reveal different layers regarding how he deals with his ailment.

In the beginning of his autobiography, Merrick discusses his reason for his deformity: “The deformity that I am now exhibiting was cause by my mother being frightened by an Elephant; my mother was going along the street when a procession of Animals were passing by…she was frightened very much.” His reasoning for his disease is interesting because although he spends a lot of time with Dr. Treves, he does not come to a conclusion that is medically related. However, many doctors during the time period believe that mental trauma of the mother could cause extreme deformities which will be discussed in more detail later. Also, he does not blame his mother for his deformities, but he views her as a victim because his description of the event makes her appear vulnerable. The fact that he does not harbor animosity against his mother because of the result of her trauma reveals that he has come to terms with the state of his body. His life experiences force him to accept what he could not alter. Merrick’s ability to move forward from a devastating situation shows that he is able to have somewhat of a positive outlook.

In addition to his optimistic viewpoint, he displays a surprisingly high level of education. When examining his writing style, he is able to construct complicated sentence structure,

---

25 Merrick, 168.
properly use punctuation, and invoke an emotional response in the reader. For example, when he discusses the death of his mother, he clearly illustrates his sorrow and devastation:

I went to school like other children until I was about 11 or 12 years of age, when the greatest misfortune of my life occurred, namely- the death of my mother, peace to her, she was a good mother to me; after she died…henceforth I never had one moment’s comfort.]

Shockingly, he is able to convey his thoughts quite well although he lives most of his life in solitude. He states that he attends school until he was about twelve years of age, but a child that young would not have the skills to write as eloquently as he does in his autobiography. Since he stops attending school after the death of his mother, she could be the motivating factor for him to obtain an education. The death of his mother pushes him to educate himself in her honor because he held her to such a high standard. Possibly, he continues his education through reading books in private in order to enhance his writing skills. His efforts are admirable because he triumphs over is disability by studying independently.

Merrick values his mother beyond measure, but only two other people give him the attention that he needed: “The best friend I had in those days was my father’s brother, Mr. Merrick, Hair Dresser, Church Gate, Leicester.” Oddly enough, Merrick devotes only one sentence to his uncle who he describes as his “best friend,” but the mere mention of his uncle definitely draws attention. The fact that Merrick demonstrates the importance of his uncle by calling him “best friend” speaks for itself. He does not associate anyone else with that title in his autobiography which means that his uncle makes a lasting impact on his life. More than likely, his uncle supports him after the death of his mother. Merrick also mentions Mr. Ellis who takes him in at some point after he left his family home: “He recommended me to Mr. Ellis, Bee-hive

26 Merrick, 168.
27 Merrick, 168.
28 Merrick, 169.
Inn, Nottingham, from whom I received the greatest kindness and attention.”\textsuperscript{29} Merrick mentions Mr. Ellis once also, but he takes the time to show his appreciation which is significant because he does not show appreciation for many. The mention of his uncle and Mr. Ellis brings an element of happiness to Merrick’s life. The spark of positivity is important because his life is usually portrayed in a very dark light, and the fact that he has someone there to comfort him in his time of need makes him seem less alone.

Although his uncle was present in his early life as a support system, Merrick faces most of his emotional trauma after his mother’s death because of the neglect and animosity of his father and step mother. Interestingly, Merrick spends a great deal of time describing how they treated him in his brief account of his life. He provides specific details of these events because they are the most traumatic of his life. Experiencing rejection as a young child by those who are there to protect you in addition to being awfully deformed affects someone forever. His description of his stepmother is demoralizing: “Unfortunately for me he married his landlady; henceforth I never had one moment’s comfort, she having children of her own, and I not being so handsome as they, together with my deformity, she was the means of making my life a perfect misery.”\textsuperscript{30} Ultimately, his stepmother makes his life a living hell, and his father does little to nothing to stop her. His father must have been ashamed of Merrick, and would have rather moved on with his new family. Merrick’s description of this point in his life demonstrates a perpetuating theme of seeking acceptance in his life that he further explains once he leaves his father and his stepmother.

\textsuperscript{29} Merrick, 169.  
\textsuperscript{30} Merrick, 169.
When Merrick describes his experiences outside of his family home, they mirror the rejection that he experienced at home: “I was sent about the town to see if I could procure work, but being lame and deformed no one would employ me…My deformity had grown to such an extent, so that I could not move about the town without having a crowd of people gather round me.” Merrick is a spectacle before he begins working in the circus which must have been very exhausting. Subjection to ridicule inside and outside of the home adds unnecessary emotional pressure. Rejection by most of the people that he came in contact with pushes him into the isolation that he describes at the end of his autobiography. Ultimately, he deals with this kind of negative attention for the remainder of his life.

Living a life of rejection in addition to having an uncontrollable disease is nearly unbearable. Merrick’s autobiography changes how he is perceived. He is not a victim of his circumstances, but he makes the best of the cards he is dealt. His perseverance though the death of his mother, abuse, and rejection shows though his efforts to educate himself which is respectable beyond measure.

Photography of Joseph Merrick:

When examining Merrick’s self-image, analyzing his photos is very crucial in order to gain complete understanding of him. Photos of Joseph Merrick reveal more than what he writes in his autobiography because he does not have the opportunity to embellish or hide his reality. In addition to revealing more about his self-image, his photos illustrate how society views him because most if not all of his interactions with people are affected by his grotesque appearance. I limited this study to two sets images because they are well-known images of him.

---

31 Merrick, 169.
The first image I visit is the last known image of Joseph Merrick (See Appendix A). In the photo, he is fully dressed in a suit and tie. His posture is at the best it can be given his condition with his back straight and his head held high. I find the image interesting because Merrick’s posture suggests confidence which must have been difficult to muster given his circumstances. The setting of the photo suggests that he sets up a photo shoot and presents himself in the best way possible. Since this picture was taken later in Merrick’s life, he has gone through volumes of rejection and teasing by society. Maybe his confident posture signals that at this point in his life he had come to terms with his condition. A more confident Merrick would have lived the remainder of his life more content with his situation, and society would have been more receptive to Merrick if he presented himself as he does in the image. Another possibility could be that the image represents Merrick assimilating into society. He wears clothing and poses just as those who are accepted among society, and this is an effort to gain acceptance in a world that rejects him. Since the photo is taken close to his death, there is no way to gauge the amount of acceptance he received other than what Dr. Treves describes. Ultimately, Merrick should not have force himself to conform to a society that has no intention of approving him, but his efforts are understandable because extensive rejection could cause someone to long for acceptance.

The next series of images I address are featured in the British Medical Journal upon the death of Joseph Merrick (See Appendix B). These pictures are worth discussing because they display Merrick in the way that doctors view him. In the photos, Merrick is completely nude when he is photographed from the side to show the extent of his tumors on his right. In the second photo shown in the article, he is shirtless only wearing his undergarments in order to show his deformities on the ventral portion of his body. Analyzing Merrick’s facial expression in
the frontal photo, he appears to be quite uncomfortable because of the tension in his eyes. His uneasiness is understandable because he is completely exposed. These images are the most dehumanizing because the fact that he is a human being is taken out of consideration. Merrick is photographed as if he is a test subject in a lab because his modesty or pride is not as important as properly displaying his extreme deformities. The side view is extremely disturbing as the large tumors that hang off of his back which are usually covered by a cloak are completely exposed. Basically, doctors force him to display what he usually conceals from the world which must be painful and embarrassing. As someone who takes an interest in the sciences and the human body in particular, I cannot help but to find these images intriguing, and understand why Dr. Treves would have these photos taken of Merrick. If I was studying the human body and encountered an exception to the rule, I would be inclined to immediately bring attention to the rest of the medical community. Making the medical community aware of oddities that one may stumble upon because other people could be suffering from the same condition or another doctor could be working on solve for the cause or cure for the disease. Most doctors would not be concerned with how a patient feels about being put on display for their deformities which is why I question the ethics of the image. Dr. Treves does not mention any consent forms that Merrick signs in his account. There is a possibility that he did not want his photos published because he is completely exposed:

In other words, there emerges a contradiction between consent to take and consent to use. In maintaining normal appearances, photographs downplay the intrusion or threat a camera represents. A practice clearly at odds with the discussion would ensue were any subset of the potential outcomes of publication to be understood by photographer and subject.  

There is no way that Merrick would have known that these intimate photos would be on display to all after his death. Also, Dr. Treves reaps the economic benefits of exposing the photos to the public, and Merrick would receive no form of payment:

Current practices are unfair. This is because the ordinary person does not share in subsequent increases in the economic value of the photo as professional models do via residuals…When you have your photo taken, you are probably not considering the full implications of the release.33

Essentially, Merrick probably had no idea that his photos would be placed in a medical journal for all to see the extent of his deformities. In the 1800s, there are few laws to protect the privacy of those who are photographed, but as time has passed, there are strict laws in place that ensure patient privacy in the field of medical photography: “The law requires consent to be obtained prior to the taking of photographs of a patient if they are taken for any purpose other than to illustrate the case history of the patient’s condition…Once consent is granted, it cannot be extended to other times or places.”34 These consent laws could have helped Merrick conceal his deformities from the general public. Ultimately, Merrick’s self-worth is sacrificed in order to better the medical community.

All in all, the photos of Merrick illustrate the side show and the human being. The medical journal photos have him on display just as he is in the circus which is just as detrimental to his self-esteem if not more. His portrait represents society’s standard of humanity that Merrick will never fit. Neither society nor medical professionals view him as a human being because of false societal norms which leave Merrick in a realm of uncertainty

Circus Life:

33 Gross, 138-139.
A significant fixture in the life of Joseph Merrick is his time spent as a traveling sideshow. Through the study of many sources regarding his time spent in the circus, I am curious of the life of a sideshow. My findings support that the circus created common ground among sideshows. The circus represents a place of acceptance that the outside world could not offer. Often, the circus presents a family atmosphere where members thrive and support one another. However, not all have a pleasant experience, and at some point the traveling circus does not provide a safe-haven for any freaks.

More often than not, families own circuses, and the acts within the circuses contain close-knit family units:

Traveling as a family is a characteristic not only of families which own a circus, but also of the travelers employed by these families or by individual circus owners. Almost all circus performers I have met travel with their families: couples with or without children, often constituting part of some form of extended family, often together in the same show with other relatives. Traveling life makes living on one’s own difficult, as it is hard to establish relations of any permanence or significance.35

According to Carmeli, circus performers travel with their families because of the difficulties of traveling alone in addition to the pressure of supporting a family afar. Having the family assessable allows for economic stability: “Circus people travel with their families because in most cases they cannot support their families outside the circus on circus wages alone. Also, in many ways the family is necessary in order to make a living from the circus. This has much to do with the economic and social conditions.”36 In addition to economic benefits, the circus families could aid in the performances to bring in larger sums of income. Members could either participate or promote acts: “Performers do not travel with their families just to cope with and

ameliorate their conditions of employment. Rather, family members also serve as a tool in establishing one’s own performing unit.”\(^{37}\) The families not only use the circus for financial support, but the acts become their lives. The performances are not something to be taken lightly:

> For the actual family, the performance of the act is a ritual constituting its relations to the world, and thus constituting itself. In the formation of its act the real family reifies and embodies the ‘family,’ and thus its own demand. Everything is done ‘for the show.’ Any breach in family cooperation spoils the ritualized reified family by which the real family makes a living and formations are often protected by aesthetic arguments.\(^{38}\)

The importance of the circus runs deeper than just an occupation, but Carmeli describes the performance as a “ritual” that keeps these families connected. The Swan and Bates are an example of a couple that meets in the circus. They connect because of their impressive height:

> “Fate finally brought the giants together during her travels. Swan and Bates met at a party in New Jersey...they fell in love. They were married in London shortly afterward.”\(^{39}\) The Fischers are another tall couple: “In the late 1930s, Gottlieb and Elfrieda Fischer were exhibited as the World’s Tallest Married Couple.”\(^{40}\) An example of a successful circus family is the Doll family of midgets: “While the Dolls enjoyed success on the big screen, their bread and butter was on the stage. The midget family spent decades starring with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Baily show.”\(^{41}\) Ultimately, family units are the key to the success of travelling circuses, and the circus tents are the only place where they can be accepted.

Carmeli discusses how circus performers could not assimilate into the public because they simply do not fit in: “Circus nomads cannot stay in town to become ordinary strangers: they

\(^{40}\) Hartzman, 151.
\(^{41}\) Hartzman, 139.
cannot last in real time without falling into pitfalls of self-deconstitution, self-deframing, contradicting and irrelevance.”\textsuperscript{42} The only contact that freaks and sideshows had with the general public is during a performance or for publicity. Performers have to publicize their own acts with their own funds/efforts:

For the circus people every routine encounter with townsfolk serves as a means of publicity. In the local café or launderette, in the bookmaker’s office or near the fish & chips shop, circus people will often display themselves, maintain the liberties traditionally granted to these travelling performers of the ‘one and only’ and both expose themselves to and isolate themselves from the community.\textsuperscript{43}

The irony of the “exposure and isolation” is an interesting take on the lives of the performers. They use a world that they cannot truly access to ensure the stability of their lives under the circus tents. Surprisingly, performers make enough money to hire managers or even produce their own advertisement:

Ads frequently stated that the costs of traveling on tour- whether by train or in “comfortable wagons”- would be paid by the manager, that freaks were responsible for their own posters (or “flash,” as they were called in trade), and that they were required to send their publicity photos to prospective employers. This suggests that experienced freaks generally had enough capital to invest in the production of good-quality photographs and attractive posters and that they took responsibility for securing their own appearances on their own terms.\textsuperscript{44}

Ultimately, performers have complete control over how the public perceives them because they must use their own funds for promotion. The success of the performer rests in their hands not the owner of the circus. Possibly, the circus world gives performers financial and emotional security that they cannot access beyond the tents.

\textsuperscript{43} Carmeli, \textit{European Journal of Sociology}, 273.
\textsuperscript{44} Durbach, 11.
Although the circus provides a refuge for performers and families to survive, not all receive the same treatment. In the 1800s, a noticeable trend is the underpayment and mistreatment of black performers: “In the mid-1880s, the Turtle Boy was earning $75 a week, less than the fortunes other freaks were making, but still a decent wage.” In addition to Turtle Boy, the conjoined twins, Millie and Christine, do not get to capitalize on their earnings because they are enslaved while they are sideshows: “Not sure what to do with such a curiosity, Mckay sold them for $1000 to a South Carolinian named John C. Pervis, who planned to exhibit his newly acquired sensation. Before they turned four, the twins would be sold again, to a Mr. Bower…for $10000…. and stolen twice.” Essentially, the owners of the conjoined twins take the earnings, and treat them as commodities instead of human beings. Ultimately, black sideshows do not have the best experiences under the circus tents, but more than likely, their lives are better than what awaits them outside of the tents.

By the end of the 1800s, the security and stability that the circus provides for freaks diminishes:

The Freak Show no longer exists in Britain as a cultural institution. There is no equivalent to the Sideshow by the Seashore at Coney Island, which has kept the tradition alive in the United States. In fact, by the late twentieth century, the British public had deemed the exhibition of human anomalies inappropriate, indecent, and indefensible.

Freaks as grotesque as Joseph Merrick can no longer have a place of acceptance because of the changes in societal perceptions. The only place that would shelter monstrosity is the hospital:

In an article titled “Doctors Buy Freaks,” he maintained that “nowadays people don’t seem to care about looking at monstrosities, and unless you are a giant and can get a job outside a public-house as a chucker out, or a dwarf, who some kind

45 Hartzman, 101.
46 Hartzman, 65.
47 Durbach, 171.
lady will adopt as a page-boy, it seems to me that the only way for a freak to earn a living now is with the doctors…by selling yourself to the medical profession, in order that they may study your deformity.\textsuperscript{48}

The fact that freaks resort to becoming test subjects in order to survive is a disturbing reality. At least in the circus they are part of a supportive community. Being a test subject implies isolation which is not a life worth living. Merrick’s reason for going to Dr. Treves could be that he could no longer thrive as a sideshow, and the hospital provides a place for him to survive in peace. All in all, those who are grotesque are doomed to disappear into the shadows.

Overall, the circus does justice to sideshows because it provides shelter from the pressures of society. Those who are different can have families, and exist in a world without judgment or persecution. Even if there are pitfalls, at least the circus was available to provide some sort of consolation for the struggles outside of the tent. The gradual decrease in the interest in monstrosity is unfortunate because the lives of freaks suffer a downgrade in quality, and freaks like Merrick fade into the background.

A Close Comparison of Other Freaks:

At this point I address Joseph Merrick in comparison to other freaks. Merrick should be compared to other freaks because their similarities will reveal a common bond amongst all freaks in addition to revealing more about how freaks perceive one another. In the following, I analyze the similarities and differences between Joseph Merrick, Sara Baartman, and The Bunker Brothers. The reason why I chose Baartman and the Bunker brothers to compare to Merrick is because all of them are considered freaks, yet they have different experiences as freaks. Although they go through unique walks of life, they find common ground beyond the grave. In death, they are not viewed as people, but anomalies that are studied by the scientific community.

\textsuperscript{48} Durbach, 181.
First, I address the experiences of Sara Baartman as a freak. Showmen entice her to leave Africa in order to work in England where they promise her fame and freedom: “It is not hard to see how she was persuaded to exchange interminable domestic servitude for the enticements of a regular wage, the hope of greater freedom in England, and even the possibility of fame and fortune.” Unlike Merrick, showmen do not display her for a genetic deformity, but her body type was uncommon to the European eye. Baartman has wide hips, large breasts, exaggerated labia, and large buttocks which was common to women of her descent. In order to highlight these traits, her showmen made sure that her costume revealed just enough of her body: “Saartjie’s Venus costume was critical to the success of the show. Above all, it was necessary to create the illusion of her semi-nakedness. Her ensemble, though not strictly typical of a Khoisan woman ‘in her natural state, was at any rate suggestive of South Africa.’” Chiefly, they display her because of her sexuality, but she receives harsh treatment from her showmen which is comparable to the harsh treatment that Merrick received from society: “Sara mostly followed the order; if not, he brought her behind the screen and threatened to hit her.” Basically, the showmen mistreat and leave her for dead. Baartman’s unfortunate plight is characteristic of a freak with a dark complexion (See Circus Life section), and in comparison to Merrick, they are both subjected to harsh conditions. Dr. Treves’ describes Merrick’s conditions as exposing and dirty: “Although he was already repellent enough, there arose from the fungous skin-growth with which he was almost covered a very sickening stench… A dozen times a day (in the circus) he would have to expose his nakedness and his piteous deformities before a gaping crowd.”

---

50 Holmes, 63.
52 Treves, 6-16.
Merrick’s deformities are grotesque and Baartman’s skin tone is dark they are treated like second class citizens, but the Bunker Brothers have a completely different experience with the circus.

Next I address the Bunker Brothers because they have a positive experience with the circus as opposed to Merrick and Baartman. Chang and Eng Bunker are Siamese twins conjoined at the chest. Chang and Eng able to marry and have children which are joys that Merrick and Baartman would have never had the opportunity to experience: “We were careful not to break other laws. In North Carolina, a free white woman could not marry anyone with Indian, Negro, mustee, or mulatto blood…the hisses we caught let us know that there may soon have to be an addition to the court ledger.” Although they are non-white Siamese twins, they are able to marry two white women at a time when racial discrimination was prevalent. Chang and Eng are accepted by society unlike Merrick and Baartman. Wu states that “the Bunker’s marriage to Adelaide and Sarah Yates marked their entrance into the Southern slaveholding elite. The wedding gift their father-in-law presented them was a woman, called Aunt Grace, who eventually served as a nursemaid to their children.” Basically, Chang and Eng are able to obtain the acceptance that Merrick and Baartman want. The reason why Chang and Eng are able to gain society’s approval is because of how they are presented to society. The Bunker Brothers perform in the best of conditions, and showmen present them in formal attire. They are able to blend in with society through their outward appearances. Another factor could be that the twins live in the United States rather than England because freaks could receive better treatment in the U.S. The Bunker Brothers even die financially stable: “Chang and Eng Bunker did not die in poverty. They settled in rural North Carolina and led a rich and prosperous life as plantation

---

owners, respected citizens, husbands, and the fathers of twenty-three children.” Ultimately, Chang and Eng live comfortably unlike Baartman and Merrick, but their treatment in death unifies them.

Regardless of the variance between Merrick, Baartman, and The Bunker Brothers, in death, they all have the same experience. Each one of these freaks is dissected, body casted, and put on display. Holmes comments on Baartman’s situation stating that “the professorial board had discreetly indicated their interest to Reax following Saartjie’s appearance before them. Should she happen to die, they would be pleased to pay a sum of money for the delivery of her corpse for the purposes of anatomical dissection.” Even in death, Baartman is a commodity. Crais comments on the specifics of Baartman’s dissection and bodycasting: “Before dissecting Sara Baartman, Cuvier had made a full cast of her body, fixing the new, eternal Hottentot Venus to a small, heavy platform. Artists painted the cast so that it seemed as close to what they saw as possible.” Like Baartman, Merrick and the Bunker Brothers are on display forever. Concerning the Bunker Brothers, Wu states that “although the death of the Bunkers effectively retired them as performers, it did not retire them from public life all together. It simply opened up new possibilities for display- this time in the medical sphere.” Essentially, the Bunker Brothers never retire from show business: “The incisions from the autopsy were sutured, and the twins were suspended upright so that postmortem photographs—one full length and another close-up of the incised areas—could be taken. Next, a sculptor and artist John Casani was hired to do a

---

56 Holmes, 152.
57 Crais, 139.
58 Wu, 40
plaster cast of the twins.” The previous quotation describes the specifics involving the body casting of the twins. Unfortunately, they are not treated as humans, but only an exhibit for display. Merrick knew that he would be on display forever:

If ‘the Elephant Man’ could no longer be scrutinized by doctors, his body nevertheless remained the property of the hospital. Merrick had clearly understood the case: as Grenfell recalled, he ‘used to talk freely of how he would look in a huge bottle of alcohol- an end to which in his imagination he was fated to come."

Maybe Merrick coming to terms with being immortalized signals that he accepts his fate, and he is correct in suspecting what would happen to him in death: “But ‘the Elephant Man’ also had an afterlife in the show world. Like Treves, Tom Norman continued to commercialize Merrick’s freakish body long after his death, displaying a bust of him in his waxworks which operated in various venues through the First World War.” Ultimately, society will not allow these freaks to rest because they are exhibits instead of human beings. When encountering that which is different, one should realize that there is humanity present, and that humanity deserves to be respected no matter what form it presents.

Doctor-Patient Relationships, Estrangement, Bonding, and Motive:

More often than not, doctors distance themselves from the personal lives of their patients. Doctors purposefully create distance in best interest of the patient because becoming emotionally invested in a patient could have a deleterious effect on the treatment: “It is also possible that being very close to a patient will make you less skillful in your medical care, even in performing

59 Wu, 58.
60 Durbach, 56.
61 Durbach, 57.
the simplest procedures, and in the following case."62 On the other hand, a personal relationship with the patient could allow a doctor to clearly understand the pain and suffering that he/she endures on a daily basis. The issue of whether doctors should or should not become personally involved with their patients is important because of the debates surrounding the relationship between Dr. Treves and Joseph Merrick. The issue presents in the relationship of Dr. Treves and Joseph Merrick due to the long period of time that they spent together and the effect that Merrick had on Dr. Treves. In the following, I argue that Dr. Treves’ personal relationship with Merrick was necessary in order to treat him.

Before Dr. Treves knows Merrick personally, he draws conclusions about Merrick from his superficial observations. In the beginning of his book on Merrick, he describes the full length posters that illustrated the Merrick’s deformities: “This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare.”63 Dr. Treves assumes that Merrick is “simple” or uneducated because of his advanced deformity. Treves states, “I supposed that Merrick was imbecile and had been imbecile from birth. The fact that his face was incapable of expression, that his speech was a mere spluttering and his attitude that of one whose mind was void of all emotions and concerns gave grounds for this belief.”64 Treves’ negative view of Merrick could have caused him to reject him as a patient, but Treves’ curiosity prevails. His first impression of Merrick is understandable considering the circumstances of their encounter, but as Treves spends more time with Merrick his view of Merrick changes.

62 Aldrich, C. Knight, The Medical Interview: Gateway to the Doctor-Patient Relationship, (New York: Parthenon Publishing Group, 1999), 81.
63 Treves, 1.
64 Treves, 8.
Once Treves becomes acquainted with Merrick, he realizes that Merrick is quite intelligent: “Those who are interested in the evolution of character might speculate as to the effect of this brutish life upon a sensitive and intelligent man.”\textsuperscript{65} The fact that Treves refers to Merrick as “intelligent” after deeming him an “imbecile” when he first meets him signals that Treves spends a considerable amount of time with Merrick. Becoming a friend to Merrick was necessary to treat him because Merrick needed a friend more than a doctor since there was not much Treves could do about his disease. If Dr. Treves’ intentions were helpful instead of harmful, then his intervention in to Merrick’s personal life could be justified:

Another important element is intentionality. The intention for which the physician enters into a relationship with the patient is important. Whether he enters for goods internal or goods external will determine his/her self-individuation…Only ‘care’ therefore understood as entering the relationship to achieve the heath and good-in-general of the patient will the doctor truly benefit the relationship in the name of the profession.\textsuperscript{66}

Mallia’s statement regarding intention demonstrates that a doctor can become involved with a patient as long as the relationship is healthy, and the doctor must have good intentions. Also, Mallia outlines how a doctor-patient relationship develops:

One enters with a concern for the other; one enters with a concern for oneself. The special bond is provided by the trust one puts in the other to act on his/her behalf. For this trust do develop, good communication and constancy on the part of the physician are necessary. But foremost it is the trust in beneficence by one and the seeking of internal goods by the other (the beneficence itself) which defines the phenomenon of the relationship.\textsuperscript{67}

Essentially, the relationship revolves around the needs of the patient. As long as a doctor can fulfill the needs of a patient with integrity and skill, the closeness of the relationship should not be of concern. Treves’ goal was not only to study Merrick’s condition, but to introduce him to

\textsuperscript{65} Treves, 17.
\textsuperscript{67} Mallia, 35.
the life of a human being: “I had no great difficulty in ridding Merrick’s mid of these ideas. I wanted him to get accustomed to his fellow-men, to become a human being himself and to be admitted to the communion of his kind.” Merrick comes to Dr. Treves without self-esteem or self-worth:

At last, with much hesitation, he said to me one day: “When I am next moved can I go to a blind asylum or to a lighthouse?” He had read about blind asylums in the newspapers and was attracted by the thought of being among people who could not see. The light house had another charm. It meant seclusion from the curious. There at least no one could open a door and peep in at him. There he would forget he had once been the Elephant man. There he could escape the vampire showman.

The fact that Merrick communicates that he wants to live without people judging his condition illustrates his insecurity. Since Merrick is not afforded the opportunity to live as if his ailment did not exist, Treves attempts to give him the life that every person deserves. First, Treves notices that Merrick feels undesirable to women due to his deformity. In order to boost his self-esteem, Treves enlists the help of a friend:

Feeling this, I asked a friend of mine, a young and pretty widow, if she thought she could enter Merrick’s room with a smile, wish him good morning and shake him by the hand. She said she could and she did. The effect upon poor Merrick was not quite what I had expected. As he let go her hand he bend his knees and sobbed…He told me afterwards that this was the first woman who had ever smiled at him, and the first woman, in the whole of his life who had shaken hands with him.

After Merrick is moved by a woman showing him kindness, he begins to gain popularity amongst the upper class in England. He receives frequent visits from the Queen: “With that kindness which has marked every act of her life, the Queen entered Merrick’s room smiling and shook him warmly by the hand. Merrick was transported with delight. This was beyond even his

---

68 Treves, 20  
69 Treves, 19.  
70 Treves, 22
most extravagant dream.” Other women began to follow the Queen’s example: “Other ladies followed the Queen’s gracious example and sent their photographs to this delighted creature who had been all his life despised and rejected of men.” Clearly, the special treatment by numerous women gives Merrick a sense of self-esteem/self-worth. Dr. Treves not only helped Merrick with his self-esteem, but he was able to give him the gift of happiness:

Later on another longing stirred the depths of Merrick’s mind. It was a desire to see the country, a desire to live in some green secluded spot and there learn something about flowers and the ways of the animals and the birds... His letters to me were the letters of a delighted enthusiastic child. He gave an account of his trivial adventures, of the amazing things he had seen, and of the beautiful sounds he had heard.

Even if most of the special treatment is solicited by Dr. Treves’ connections, the outcome of the attention enables Merrick to feel better about his condition which is the only way that the doctor could treat him. Although not a complete cure, the doctor’s intentions and actions help Merrick to become more content with his predicament.

He concludes his study of Merrick with the following statement:

He had been ill-treated and reviled and bespattered with the mud of Disdain. He had escaped the clutches of the Giant Despair, and at last had reached the “Place of Deliverance,” where “his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back, so that he saw it no more”. As a specimen of humanity, Merrick was ignoble and repulsive; but the spirit of Merrick, if it could be seen in the form of the living, would assume the figure of an upstanding and heroic man, smooth browed, and clean of limb, and with eyes that flashed undaunted courage.

Remarkably, Treves develops respect and admiration for Merrick. Treves gives him not only a permanent home, but he is able to fulfill Merrick’s need for feeling like a human being.

Alternatively, Treves’ closing statements could be viewed as conceited. He gives himself all of

---

71 Treves, 24.
72 Treves, 25.
73 Treves, 33-35.
74 Treves, 37.
the credit for housing and creating an all-around better quality of life for Merrick. Although Treves’s relationship with Merrick seems to have positively impacted the both of them, some would argue otherwise.

In *Articulating the Elephant Man*, Graham makes a thought-provoking claim regarding the relationship between Merrick and Treves by suggesting that Treves is misleading. Graham states:

> It is no accident, then that Treves turns next to giving an account of Merrick’s history, an account that is as remarkable for what it omits as for what it contains. Treves makes no mention of Merrick’s own characteristic explanation of his deformity…As a scientific man, Treves no doubt found this story absurd, but it is nevertheless curious that he would omit such an important part of Merrick’s self-understanding."75

Graham has a valid concern because if Treves is omitting important details about Merrick, then his entire account is questionable. Graham also addresses the fact that Treves refers to Merrick as “John” instead of “Joseph” which is his actual name: “Perhaps it is as well to mention here as elsewhere Treves’ persistent habit of referring to Merrick as John rather than Joseph, as he is called in most other documents…It seems hardly likely that Treves was unaware of Merrick’s actual Christian name.”76 The fact that Treves does not refer to Merrick by his legitimate name is peculiar because that signals that they may not have been as close as he claims. Also, Durbach cites Thomas Norman, a prominent showman, making claims about Treves merely using Merrick to climb the social ladder: “Who, then, ‘really exploited poor Joseph?’ Norman asked. Norman insisted that Treves was ‘also a Showman, but on a rather higher social scale.’77 Thomas Norman’s accusations are worth considering because of the involvement of the Queen with Merrick as mentioned above. Treves does not mention any benefits he may have been receiving.

---

76 Graham, 53.
77 Durbach, 55.
by allowing those of high social status to have contact with Merrick. Norman makes Treves appear as if he is a showman with the title of “doctor” attached to his name. The discrepancies regarding Treves’ account diminish Treves’ credibility, but there should be other considerations before deeming his account completely unreliable.

When analyzing Durbach’s presentation of Thomas Norman’s criticism, one must take into account the year in which *Spectacle of Deformity* was published. Since the late 1800s, the dynamics of the physician-patient relationship have drastically changed:

Third, the doctor-patient relationship has changed in that patients have come to expect a more active role for themselves. When the patient’s needs, capabilities, and expectations conflict with the doctor’s treatment plan, the two parties are now more likely to negotiate a compromise than in earlier years, when doctor’s orders were essentially non-negotiable.78

According to Aldrich, as time has passed, patients have gained more control over their relationship with doctors who could explain why Dr. Treves may seem abrasive and intrusive. Clair makes similar statements about the evolution of the doctor-patient relationship:

The physician-patient relationship in American society is undergoing fundamental change. The physicians’ role in the health care encounter is evolving from that of an all-powerful, dominant figure to one emphasizing greater partnership with the patient. For most of the twentieth century, this has not been the case. Parsons (1951) perhaps explains it best in his concept of the sick role where he describes the traditional physician-patient role relationship as asymmetrical, with an imbalance of power and technical expertise extremely favorable to the doctor. The power of physicians rests in medical expertise that the patient lacks but needs to alleviate a health problem; thus, the patient has typically occupied a dependent and subordinate status.79

Essentially, the recent developments of the doctor-patient relationship allow the patient to have more control than in earlier years. Durbach could have been using a recent perspective when

---

78 Aldrich, 80.
examining the exchange between Treves and Merrick which could explain why his view makes Treves look more opportunistic than helpful. In the end, Durbach presents valid concerns that should be framed in terms of the medical relationship in the 1800s.

Ultimately, there are different conclusions regarding Dr. Treves and Merrick’s relationship, but all depend on perception. One side depicts Dr. Treves as a savior helping Merrick realize his self-worth and his humanity. The other side portrays Treves as a greedy showman who displayed and confined Merrick within the walls of a hospital. More than likely there is truth in both accounts, but only Merrick can extinguish all doubt. No one will ever know his true thoughts on Dr. Treves; however, one can assume that he was comfortable enough to stay at the hospital up until his self-inflicted death. Fortunately, Merrick had the last word, and he left on his own terms.

Discrepancies: Treves vs. Norman:

When assessing Merrick’s treatment in the circus, from Dr. Treves’ account, one could assume that showmen treat Merrick horribly: “Although he was already repellent enough, there arose from the fungous skin-growth with which he was almost covered a very sickening stench which was hard to tolerate.” Treves’ description of his first encounter with Merrick is stomach-turning, and his account definitely influenced how I viewed Merrick’s life in the circus until I found a letter that stated otherwise.

I encountered a letter written by Tom Norman who was a very popular showman in England known as the Silver King. In the letter, Norman speaks out against Treves’ account of the treatment of Merrick:

---

80 Treves, 6.
Your report from the book states Sir F. Treves says ‘His miseries on exhibition continued for 21 years [’] I can prove without a doubt that Merrick’s exhibiting did not last but about 30 months. That is all I wish to state here, with the exception that the big majority of showmen are in the habit of treating their novelties as human beings, and in a large number of cases as one of their own, and not beasts.\textsuperscript{81}

Norman’s statements about Merrick’s treatment are strongly defensive against Treves. In the following, I will examine why there is animosity between Norman and Treves when regarding Merrick’s treatment.

One of the reasons why Norman is hostile to Treves could be that Treves is an outsider. The circus world consists of very close knit groups that comprise family like structures. Norman’s entire family is involved in the circus, and like he says in the letter, he considered those he took in as his own. These circus families care for one another which is probably what dooms Treves from the start. For example, Howell describes the relationship that Norman had with a family of midgets: “One exhibition to which Tom Norman became particularly attached was his family of midgets. It consisted of two midgets, billed as man and wife and always brought into town in a specially constructed miniature coach drawn by ponies.”\textsuperscript{82} The previous quotation mention’s that Norman was “attached” to the midgets, but I question whether he was attached for the purposes of monetary gain or genuine care for them. Howell goes on to say that “[Noman] insisted that their lives as exhibition freaks were both varied and interesting…Nothing could have shaken his conviction that, for the most part, his freaks lead happy and contented lives, or that he was offering the positive alternative.”\textsuperscript{83} Maybe Norman sees himself as a savior to freaks by providing a safe haven that Treves could not provide Merrick. Treves may not have

\textsuperscript{83} Howell, 79.
been able to understand that Norman created an environment in which freaks could identify with other freaks which could ultimately make Merrick more comfortable.

In addition to being an outsider; he openly criticized the circus when it came to Merrick. Norman has such an important role in the circus, and he feels that it was his duty to use his position to make a stand against Treves. Howell suggests that Treves’ attack on Norman is out of misplaced judgment because Norman is not the man that Treves described. Howell states:

The worst that anyone could find to say about Tom Norman was that he could be a bit of a rough and a rascal, but never less engaging one and always a positively rough diamond. He could be disarming, even charming, in self-criticism, as when he remembered as an old man the ‘very lash appearance’…

Since he is well respected in the circus community, people would have to be more inclined to listen to his comments on Treves. Norman thinks Treves overstepped his boundaries, and defended the circus accordingly.

Besides being an outsider, there could be tension between Norman and Treves due to other interactions besides Treves’ comments on the circus in his memoir. Norman appears extremely defensive against Treves, and it may be possible that they could have had some sort of encounter with each other that may not have gone well. A bad encounter with Treves would have given Norman more ammunition against Treves when he condemned him for writing negatively about the circus. Durbach describes an incident in which Norman attempted to visit Merrick in the hospital when he was in Dr. Treves’ care, but he was turned away: “In a reversal of events of 1884, Norman applied to the hospital to visit Merrick (at Merrick’s own request, he implied) but was turned away. He did not attempt to visit again.”

---

84 Howell, 79.
85 Durbach, 55.
animosity between the two. Ultimately, Norman and Treves do not interact well when it come to Merrick.

Alternatively, jealously could have motivated Norman to speak out against Dr. Treves. Norman, the Silver King, was a well-known and respected showman during the time period, and Treves could have posed a threat to his popularity. When Dr. Treves wrote *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, on his experiences with Merrick, Treves gained a great deal of popularity. Treves’ book could have diminished from Norman’s reputation through his account on how poorly Merrick was treated. Since Norman was popular throughout most of his career, I understand that he would be defensive against anyone who threatened his position of authority as a showman.

Ultimately, the discrepancies between the accounts of Dr. Treves and Norman are thought provoking because their accounts are polar opposites. One could view Dr. Treves as a hero or a fame-seeking doctor. One could view Tom Norman as a respected showman or a jealous has-been. The details relating to both men can be given any angle which makes this an issue of perception. The likelihood of both accounts being completely unbiased is slim to none, but I can only hope that Merrick received decent treatment from both men.

Conclusion:

Concerning the previous statements about Joseph Merrick, the discussion has been enhanced by acknowledging that change perception plays a major role in his life. Society scrutinizes Merrick because he cannot be categorized. Societal norms force us to divide people into separate boxes as a way of making everyone comfortable, but when someone like Merrick comes along we discard them because they do not fit. As time has passed, the sideshow is no
longer a fixture of the circus, but a new generation of freaks has emerged: “But what it may see in the future is a new kind of freak. With advances in plastic surgery, and creativity and enthusiasm for radical body modification, we may eventually see performers go beyond the extremes of The Enigma, Katzen, The Lizardman, and others.”  

We see these people on movie screens, red carpets, and magazines. We glorify the new generation of freaks because the media places them on a pedestal. For an additional study, I would like to analyze the transition into the new generation of freaks in comparison with the old generation. Merrick never receives the acceptance that he could have in the new age during his life, but in death he gains respect among the society and the medical community. Ultimately through all of these changes in perception, Joseph Merrick is no longer the Elephant Man; he is a human being.

---

86 Hartzman, 281.
Bibliographic Essay

The following is a bibliographic essay focused on the topic of Joseph Merrick. In my study of Merrick, I attempt to analyze how Merrick’s life involves changes in perception. I obtained sources under the following general groupings: primary sources, other freaks, monstrosity, and Merrick. I find these categories the most important in my study because they address all of the people that Merrick came in contact with. First, Merrick deals with his own self-image and the primary sources deal with how Merrick viewed himself. Second, Merrick comes in contact with other freaks when he is working in the circus, and their lives are comparable to one another because they deal with similar struggles in life and in death. Third, Merrick deals with society placing him under a microscope which is addressed in my sources concerning monstrosity. When society is forced to confront monstrosity or that which is different, a change in perception must occur. Fourth, I address how gender relates to monstrosity in relation to Merrick which is covered in the monstrosity category. Fifth, I address the relationship between Dr. Treves and Merrick which is supplemented by the primary sources in addition to the sources relating to Merrick. In the following, I will analyze the sources used in my study of Merrick in the categories mentioned above.

Primary Sources:

The *Autobiography of Joseph Carey Merrick* by Merrick supplemented by study because it revealed the inner thoughts of Joseph Merrick. I find his reasoning for his disease interesting because although he spends a lot of time with Dr. Treves he does not come to a conclusion that is medically related. I also find Merrick’s level of education interesting. Since he was on his own
from a young age and joined the circus, I assumed that he would not have been educated, but his writing in the short autobiography signals that he was educated. I speculate that he was self-educated, but I was unable to substantiate that claim. Another source that was beneficial to my study is *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* by Dr. Treves, who was Merrick’s doctor. Surprisingly, Merrick does not mention Dr. Treves in his autobiography although Treves spent a long period of time with Merrick. In Dr. Treves account, he details his first impressions of Merrick and how his view of Merrick changed as he was able to get to know him. Interestingly, Dr. Treves describes Merrick’s time in the circus as a horrifying experience, but a letter by Thomas Norman challenges Treves’ claims. Thomas Norman was a famous showman who is referred to as “The Silver King.” Basically, Norman felt that Dr. Treves was representing Merrick’s experiences untruthfully which is why he wrote the “World’s Fair Regarding Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man” in 1923. In my study, I challenge Dr. Treves with Norman’s letter in addition to using other sources to support Norman’s claims about Dr. Treves. The next source I will discuss is *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. I thought that it was crucial to include quotes from Darwin’s book because Merrick serves as a direct contrast to Darwin’s theory. Darwin theorizes that the human population becomes more viable through genetic variation, but Merrick’s situation suggests the opposite or poses an issue to Darwin’s theory. Ultimately, I think that Darwin’s writings open up the discussion about Merrick, and provide an avenue to present the other primary sources.

Other Freaks:

From my readings, I get the sense that the only time Merrick may have fit in with a group was when he joined the circus, but even then he was still in a situation where he was viewed as more of a commodity than a human being. I use sources relating to Sara Baartman and The
Bunker Brothers in order to provide a comparison to the experiences of Joseph Merrick. A source pertaining to Sara Baartman that was of great use was *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A ghost Story and a Biography* by Crais which outlines Baartman’s life as a sideshow in addition to her legacy after death. I chose this source in particular because Crais does a remarkable job connecting the events of Baartman’s life to human rights issues that arise when discussing her treatment during her life and after her death. In order to supplement Crais discussion, I thought a needed a source on Baartman that focused more on specific details on her life aside from arguments. *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman* by Rachel Holmes served the purpose of providing a more detailed oriented account of the life of Sara Baartman. Holmes does a great job at highlighting the minute details that need to be understood in order to understand the extent of Baartman’s troubles in England. Ultimately, the two sources mentioned on Baartman provided sufficient evidence to compare Merrick to Baartman especially when I mention body casting in my study.

Regarding the Bunker Brothers, I found two sources that sufficed in explaining their situation so that I could compare their experiences to Merrick. The first source, *Chang and Eng* by Strauss was useful because it was able to provide insight into the inner thoughts of the Bunker Brothers. Other than their thoughts, I did not find the source useful regarding concrete details and analysis of their lives which is why a second source was necessary. *Chang and Eng Reconnected* by Cynthia Wu did a fantastic job at analyzing the process that The Bunker Brother’s body went through after they died. She systematically describes every point from their time of death, to the two weeks doctors arrived to retrieve the body, to the body casting. Ultimately, Wu’s analysis supplemented my argument about the comparison to Merrick more than Strauss.
Monstrosity:

There has been a fascination with monstrosity throughout history, and I do not think a study of Merrick would be complete without any mention of that phenomena. I found a paper, “Distancing Deformity: Exploring Monstrosity in the Case of Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man,” by Crockford that gave an in depth analysis of monstrosity and Merrick. Crockfords paper gave me the information necessary to evaluate what sources I needed to complete my study of monstrosity and Merrick. What I found interesting about Crockford’s analysis is how the addresses the way people perceived Merrick which helped me narrow down my argument about perception. Another source that heavily supported my arguments about monstrosity was “The Grotesque on Fleshing Out the Subject,” by Shabot. Shabot’s argument about monstrosity was meticulously thought out and fit my thoughts about the theme of monstrosity and Merrick exactly. A book that helped support my argument on monstrosity in addition to women and monstrosity was Margrit Shildrick’s Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self. The reason why I placed emphasis on Shildrick’s text in my study was because she was able to intertwine an argument about monstrosity while including gender. What I found most helpful in her analysis was that she was able to ground her claims with various examples aside from sideshows like Merrick which made my argument seem as if the thoughts about women contributing to monstrosity were not just in the circus world. A source that helped me relate women and monstrosity directly to the circus world was Rachel Adam’s Sideshow U.S.A. Overall, Adams book is a survey of many aspects of the circus, but I liked her arguments relating to Merrick in particular because she was able to mention more circus freaks that attributed their diseases to trauma of their mothers like the Lion Faced Boy for example. Ultimately I think that
Shabot, Shildrick, and Rachel’s writings complemented each other well which is why I use them closely.

Merrick:

This category of sources supplies information that supports Joseph Merrick’s account of his life in addition to giving information about those he came in contact with. These sources were necessary because Merrick’s autobiography was only a page which left me with little information to analyze other aspects of his life in addition to other primary sources. For example, in Dr. Treves’ The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences, I noticed that Treves refers to Merrick as John instead of Joseph which was odd. In addition to the name issue, Treves’ account seems to leave out information that would reveal more about Merrick’s character or feelings towards his stay at the hospital which was interesting because he spent a great deal of time with Merrick in the hospital. A source that was able to fill in the gaps was Nadja Durbach’s Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture. I thought that Durbach’s arguments were helpful because he was able to give a broader perspective on Merrick’s life in addition to addressing monstrosity. Michael Howell’s The True History of the Elephant Man and Peter Graham’s Articulating the Elephant Man were helpful when it came to addressing discrepancies in Dr. Treves’ book. Howell and Graham present information that directly questions Dr. Treves. The information they presented about Thomas Norman was the most useful because Norman and Dr. Treves disagreed when it came to Merrick. Without those sources I would not have been able to obtain accounts about Norman’s encounters with Dr. Treves in addition to Dr. Treves’ true character. Ultimately, the sources concerning Merrick were able to support the primary sources that I previously presented.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:


This source is used to open the conversation about Merrick in a time of scientific innovation. Darwin’s studies were gaining much popularity and the mere existence of Merrick challenges his theory.


This source provides insight into how Merrick views himself. His self-image will be crucial to this study because it is a product of his circumstances.


This source shows a differing opinion regarding the life of Merrick as a sideshow. The fact that Norman claims that Merrick was treated well is an interesting discrepancy because Treves says otherwise.


This is probably the most important source because it offers a study of Merrick through the eyes of Dr. Treves. Dr. Treves gives a detailed account of his interactions with Merrick in the hospital.

Secondary Sources:


This source is useful in examining various sideshows in relation to Joseph Merrick.


This source aids in understanding doctor-patient relationships. This source reveals the appropriateness of a relationship between a doctor and a patient.

   This source is useful in examining various sideshows in relation to Joseph Merrick.


   This source gives insight into the relationships between performers/freaks in the circus.


   This source gives insight into the relationships between performers/freaks in the circus.


   This source aids in understanding doctor-patient relationships. This source reveals the appropriateness of a relationship between a doctor and a patient.


   This source is useful because it gives insight into the life of Sara Baartman. Her experiences as a freak are comparable to Merrick’s experiences.


   This source is useful because it explores the theme of monstrosity in the life of Merrick. Crockford analyzes how Merrick affected those around him.

This source gives further insight into how the theme of monstrosity was carried through the life of Merrick. Durbach also addresses other freaks which is a crucial section in this study.


This source is valuable because it analyzes Merrick’s relationship with Dr. Treves. This source will compare with Dr. Treves’ notes on his interactions with Merrick.


This source aids in analyzing the image ethics regarding Merrick’s photos.


This source is useful in examining various sideshows in relation to Joseph Merrick.


This source is useful because it gives insight into the life of Sara Baartman. Baartman’s experiences as a freak are comparable to Merrick’s experiences.


This source is useful because Howell features criticism on Dr. Treves account of his interactions with Merrick. Howell highlights the discrepancies and raises interesting questions regarding Treves’ text.


This source aids in helping analyze the ethics behind medical photography.

This source aids in understanding doctor-patient relationships. This source reveals the appropriateness of a relationship between a doctor and a patient.


This source discusses monstrosity in a variety of cases. I use this source in order to support the theme of monstrosity in the case of Merrick.


This source discusses monstrosity in a variety of cases. I use this source in order to support the theme of monstrosity in the case of Merrick. In addition to monstrosity, the issue of women being blamed for monstrosity is addressed.


This source provides insight into the lives of the Bunker Brothers. I think that this source does a good job at representing the inner thoughts of Chang and Eng.


This source provides insight into the lives of Chang and Eng. In particular, Wu focuses on the Bunker Brother’s death.
Appendix A

Appendix B

---
