From Marginalization to National Sensation: The Phenomenon of Disability in Victorian Popular Culture

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Other Europes

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When people today think of the Victorian era, perhaps while watching a popular film or television show, they often tend to focus on the Victorians' seemingly otherworldly obsession with all things grotesque, macabre, and 'unnatural.' Staple fiction such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or virtually any work by Charles Dickens usually come to mind, or grimey urban centers with intense class divisions, or scientific innovation. However, arguably the most exemplary embodiments of the Victorian era in Britain and its values that epitomizes many of today's popular conceptions of the era were the pop-culture phenomena surrounding disabled people that exploited their bodies in human exhibitions, supported by the public's obsession with the 'abnormal.' Historian Lennard Davis discusses the concept of normalcy and disability, making the argument that "... the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society."[1] He goes on to say that "disabling" was a "social process," pointing out the shifting ideas and attitudes in the nineteenth century that essentially resulted in the concept of disabled people as being "disabled," rather than merely being different in some way.[2]

It is easy for many people today to gloss over the issues lying at the heart of this popular memory, and write it off as nothing more than another instance of Victorians being weird or eccentric. When one takes a deeper look, it does not take long to discover the amalgamation of serious societal problems that escalated into this phenomenon, turning disability into something that was commercial and recreational, to be capitalized on by business people and authors and

[1] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995), 24.
[2] Ibid.

taken advantage of for public entertainment. It is not the case that this phenomenon came out of nowhere and just happened to occur in the nineteenth century; there are several primary reasons as to why disability pervaded Victorian popular culture. Ultimately, the Industrial Revolution and the ability-based distinctions that arose from it, the rise of workhouses, and the surge of public interest in topics surrounding medicine all were circumstances that fused together to create the phenomenon that focused on disabled people, leading directly to disability being at the center of popular culture in Victorian Britain, emerging most prominently in the form of human exhibitions and popular literature.

The Industrial Revolution led directly to the rise of a new kind of stigma surrounding disabled people that had not been present in the pre-industrial era in the way that it placed a new spotlight on them by bringing more public attention to the ability-based distinctions between disabled and non-disabled people in industrial, rather than domestic, work environments. It is not that disabled people had never struggled to be completely accepted into society prior to the Industrial Revolution; rather, differences between disabled and non-disabled people became increasingly evident as the primary types of jobs changed, as this shift brought more attention to them as individuals who often had more difficulty working in industrial settings. Historian Brendan Gleeson explains how the pre-industrial economy was primarily domestic, giving people more freedom when it came to how they worked. The home was a significantly more flexible environment for those individuals who might struggle in an industrial work environment.[3] Gleeson argues that, in the case of domestic industry, "households … managed to configure their internal work regimes to match the diverse bodily capacities of members."[4] Historians Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes build upon this argument, explaining how domestic

[3] Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 96.
[4] Ibid, 101.

work in pre-industrial society "did not preclude people with impairments from economic activity," and that the rise of industrial capitalism led to the exclusion of disabled people from workplaces as they were deemed to be "unable to keep pace with the … new mechanized, factory-based production system." The Industrial Revolution practically leveled the domestic work structure that allowed many disabled people to work around their impairments, replacing it with rigid and harsh work environments void of any domestic flexibility and freedom, leading to their labeling by society as a "social … problem" due to their struggles with conforming to industrial work norms.[5] This new focus on disabled people as a societal group consequently led to more prejudice and marginalization, as they were deemed as being unable to contribute to society if they were unable to perform industrial jobs.

One of the more concrete consequences of the Industrial Revolution was the widespread establishment of workhouses for those who were unable to financially support themselves, which often included those individuals who were disabled. The general concept of the workhouse had existed in England for some time prior to the nineteenth century, but it wasn't until the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 that they were ushered into the Victorian era and expanded as a system, in an attempt by Britain to 'alleviate' the new wave of poverty that resulted from the Industrial Revolution. The new law was an attempt at reforming the existing inhumane charitable institutions that claimed to be taking part in the effort to reduce poverty amongst the lower classes. In 1834, shortly prior to the Poor Law Amendment Act, there was an official investigation into the old poor laws that still remained from the Elizabethan Era. The commissioners report communicated the following:

> It is now our painful duty to report, that in the great part of the districts which we have been able to examine, the fund, which the 43d of Elizabeth directed to be employed in

[5] Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes, *The New Politics of Disablement* (New York: Red Globe Press, 2012), 55.

> setting to work children and persons capable of labour, but using no daily trade, and in the necessary relief of the impotent, is applied to purposes opposed to the letter, and still more to the spirit of that Law, and destructive to the morals of the most numerous class, and to the welfare of all.[6]

In seeking to reform these old and inhumane laws, Parliament passed the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which did practically nothing to change these horrible conditions. By the 1830s, it was standard for at least one workhouse to be established in most parishes.[7] While some people supported the idea of workhouses, believing them to be a necessary 'charity' that would only have positive effects for society, there were still many who objected to the institutions and sought to bring attention to their depressing conditions. Cruelty and mistreatment were common in these places, as well as grim living conditions and overall poor quality of life. In 1889, the journalist Margaret Harkness, who was known for her social commentary during the late Victorian era, wrote about the conditions inside workhouses, using the Whitechapel Union workhouse as an example:

> The Whitechapel Union is a model workhouse … it is the Poor Law incarnate in stone and brick. The men are not allowed to smoke in it … the young women never taste tea, and the old ones may not indulge in a cup during the long afternoons … The young people never go out, never see a visitor, and the old ones only get one holiday in the month. … A little gruel morning and night, meat twice a week, that is the food of the grown-up people, seasoned with hard work and prison discipline. … what shall we say of

[6] "Poor Law Commissioners' Report of 1834," OLL Liberty Fund, accessed March 28, 2023, https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/chadwick-poor-law-commissioners-report-of-1834.
[7] Jessica Brain, "The Victorian Workhouse," Historic UK, accessed April 13, 2023, https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Victorian-Workhouse/.

> the woman, or man, maimed by misfortune, who must come there or die in the street? Why should old people be punished for their existence?[8]

Harkness brings attention to the inhumane environment that awaited those individuals who unfortunately had no other choice but to enter into a workhouse to support themselves, commenting on their unjust treatment. She was one of many who protested the consequences of the 1834 Poor Law and sought to bring attention to the deplorable conditions within the institutions. Fig. 1 shows a poster produced in 1837 that criticizes the conditions and treatment of workers housed in the workhouses. It shows scenes of workers, both adults and children, being whipped, bound and strung from the ceiling by hooks, and being held in shackles. This poster makes it clear that, following the passage of the act, there were members of the public who disapproved of the workhouses and advocated for reform. However, it would be a long time before there was any significant change in the system.

Unfortunately, it was often the case that those who could not support themselves and were forced into these workhouses were disabled individuals who either could not get hired due to prejudice or were unable to work; they had no other choice. Cindy Lacom describes the Poor Law as "mandating that those who couldn't support themselves commit themselves to the workhouse–a prisonlike place where conditions were purposely made so bad that they encouraged people to starve rather than live there."[9] Because of this, there were many disabled people who made efforts to avoid the workhouse at all costs. In 1851, Henry Mayhew wrote the book *London Labour and the London Poor*, in which he published interviews with poor individuals he encountered on the streets of London. One person in particular was a disabled man

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[8] Margaret Harkness, *In Darkest London* (1889; reis., Cambridge: Black Apollo Press, 2003), 143, https://books.google.com/books?id=4ln7k5V9L6oC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=incarnate%20in%20stone%20and%20brick&f=false.

[9] Cindy Lacom, "'The Time Is Sick and out of Joint': Physical Disability in Victorian England," PMLA 120, no. 2 (2005): 547, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486182.

who had taken to selling nutmeg-graters on the street in order to support himself. In his interview, he described his experience in the workhouse as a disabled person:

> All my friends was dead, and I had no one to help me ... I was took into the workhouse … If I could have worked … I could have had tea; but 'cause I couldn't do nothing, they gave me that beastly gruel morning and night. … They would have kept me there till now, but I would die in the streets rather than be a pauper.[10]

This interview attests to the fact that disabled people not only were often forced into the workhouses when faced with no other option, but that they were also treated worse than the non-disabled people housed there. This man experienced the workhouse environment, and decided that he would prefer selling wares on the street.

While there were those who turned to selling goods on the street to earn money, there were a great number of disabled people who instead turned to the world of public entertainment to make a living. This decision would be supported by a large paying audience, given that, by the mid-nineteenth century, there were significantly more people, compared to years past, who could afford to enjoy leisure time and participate in recreational activities. Writing in 1886, the English journalist Thomas Hay Sweet Escott noted the following about this new wave of economic comfort and stability amongst the middle and lower classes:

> A social movement quite as remarkable as that which has been going forward among the better portion of the English middle class, has been taking place and is now steadily in progress on a lower social stratum. This class would once have been called the small shopkeeping class, and its present position is almost the growth of yesterday. … Only the

[10] Henry Mayhew, "The Street-Seller of Nutmeg Graters," in *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: 1851), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/55998/55998-h/55998-h.htm#Illustration_THE_STREET-SELLER_OF_NUTMEG-GRATERS.

> commercial prosperity of England could have generated the new order from which the chief patrons of theatres and outdoor amusements are drawn.[11]

As Escott describes, much of the middle and lower classes, with their newfound free time and economic stability, frequently attended various entertainment attractions, such as traveling shows, fairs, and more. During this time, some of the most popular attractions were the human exhibitions that put disabled people on display. These exhibitions would highlight the differences by which Victorian society defined disabled people.

One particularly famous case of an individual who made the decision to earn a living by putting himself on display in front of this new abundance of paying audiences, rather than enter into a workhouse, was that of Joseph Merrick, popularly remembered by his stage name, the "Elephant Man." In his autobiographical pamphlet, Merrick explains how his disability interfered with his ability to work, and how he consequently had no choice but to turn to human exhibitions to support himself:

> I obtained employment at Messrs. Freeman's Cigar Manufacturers, and worked there about two years, but my right hand got too heavy for making cigars, so I had to leave them. … I was sent about the town to see if I could procure work, but being lame and deformed no one would employ me … Being unable to get employment my father got me a pedlar's license to hawk the town, but being deformed, people would not come to the door to buy my wares. … so thought I, I'll get my living by being exhibited about the country.[12]

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[11] Thomas Hay Sweet Escott, *Society in London by a Foreign Resident*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1886), 166-7, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=PXREAQAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PP7&hl=en.

[12] Joseph Carey Merrick, "Autobiographical Pamphlet," 1884, in *The True History of the Elephant Man*, ed. Michael Howell and Peter Ford (London: Allison and Busby Limited, 1980), 168-9.

Merrick, like many others, found that the only way he could financially support himself and avoid the workhouse was through putting himself on display for a paying crowd. This unfortunate reality is a large part as to why human exhibitions were so popular in the Victorian era: disabled people often had no other choice, and there were large crowds willing to buy tickets just to look at them.

Another key feature of the Victorian era that led to the phenomenon was the popularization of science amongst the public; more specifically, an increased interest in medical knowledge. Historian Charles Roseberg describes public interest in medicine as having experienced a "modest explosion" in England in the nineteenth-century. He argues that part of the reason why this surge of interest happened when it did was due to the public's acknowledgement that "the real and contemporaneously perceived deterioration of health … was a consequence of urbanization and industrialization…"[13] New ways of life in overcrowded cities and work in dangerous settings, in comparison to the largely rural and domestic lifestyles that the majority of the population had enjoyed prior to the Industrial Revolution, brought public attention to health and medicine in a way that had not occurred before.

In addition to the health consequences of the Industrial Revolution causing a surge of interest in medical studies during the Victorian era, the medical field and knowledge pertaining to health became less exclusive to the upper classes, and more accessible to the general public. Historians Louise Penner and Tabitha Sparks argue that nineteenth century medical developments were "related inextricably to two phenomena: the growing professional class of medical workers and the popularity of general knowledge, trade and self-help print venues for

[13] Charles E. Rosenberg, "Medicine and Community in Victorian Britain," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11, no. 4 (1981): 677, https://doi.org/10.2307/203150.

lay writers."[14] Medical knowledge was no longer something restricted to the elite of society. Historian Roy Porter describes this new public accessibility as being a case of "reciprocity," using the popular publication *Gentleman's Magazine* as an example. He argues that, in this publication, "medical knowledge enveloped both lay and professional … it was not a journal aimed at the popularization of knowledge … Neither was it a journal in which doctors taught the people their medical duties. Rather, free and open exchange of information within the circle of contributors and readers was the rule."[15] Newfound public awareness brought about by the Industrial Revolution, combined with the expansion of medical professionalism and accessibility of popular medical information and print materials, forged a new and widespread popular interest in medical science amongst the general public.

This new public interest in health and medicine quickly transformed into a particular interest in disabled people. Fig. 2 shows an example of a pamphlet from the era that pertains to disability, titled *Royalty and the Deaf, with Some Striking Facts About the Deaf and Dumb, their Alphabet, and a Few Signs*, published sometime in the late nineteenth century, which features an art print painted by the author, Henry Ash, titled "Royal Condescension."[16] The fact that Queen Victoria is featured on the cover of the pamphlet and is shown communicating with a deaf person is evidence of how pervasive in popular culture the general public's interest in disability in the context of medicine had become. Queen Victoria, the progenitor of popular culture in the nineteenth century, was seen by the public as someone who took an interest in 'studying' disabilities.

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[14] Louise Penner and Tabitha Sparks, *Victorian Medicine and Popular Culture*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dwst2h.6.
[15] Roy Porter, *Patients and Practitioners: Lay Perceptions of Medicine in Pre-Industrial Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 296, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511563690.
[16] Henry Ash, *Royalty and the Deaf with Some Striking Facts about the Deaf and Dumb, Their Alphabet, and a Few Signs*, late nineteenth century, from the British Deaf History Society Museum Library, https://www.bdhs.org.uk/timeline/queen-victoria-in-a-pamphlet-by-henry-ash/.

The pop-culture phenomenon that surrounded disabled people became one of the defining features of the Victorian era, primarily taking shape in the form of human exhibitions and popular literature. It thrived during this era due to an unfortunate combination of societal factors: the public spotlight placed on disabled people as a result of the Industrial Revolution, the fact that many needed to find different sources of income in order to avoid the workhouse, and the widespread public interest in disability in a medical context in the nineteenth century. What made this sensation so unique was the fact that it was not restricted to one social class; it rose above class divisions. Most notably, Queen Victoria endorsed the phenomenon, often being visited herself by performers in the human exhibitions. Fig. 3 shows a lithograph from 1844 by Henry Calton Maguire, in which Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and their children are being introduced to "General Tom Thumb," also known as Charles Sherwood Stratton. Stratton was an American who traveled with P. T. Barnum. Queen Victoria was the paramount trendsetter of her era, and at the very top of the social ladder as Queen. This image is significant because not only does it prove that human exhibitions were not looked down upon by the upper classes as improper entertainment, but it also partially explains why they were so popular during the Victorian era: it was approved by the Queen herself. If she was taking part in the craze, anyone could.

Despite the seemingly universal popularity of human exhibitions in Victorian Britain, there were still those who recognized the absurdity and illogicality of the sensation. Fig. 4 is a political cartoon that was published in the London-based magazine *The Sketch* in 1898, showing an upper class couple who are simultaneously disgusted and fascinated by the people participating in a human exhibition, and they decide to visit it. The caption reads, "Freaks, Percy!

How dreadful! But it does seem a pity to miss them when they're here."[17] The cartoon highlights the irony that was the public's obsession with and curiosity about disability: they would cast disabled people out of society, label them as unproductive, force them to resort to bodily exploitation in order to support themselves, and have disdain for them as a societal group, and yet they were fascinated by their bodies and derived enjoyment from viewing them, happily exploiting them for the very same reasons that they ostracized them.

Many prominent authors of the Victorian era drew inspiration for their stories from this sensation. Popular novels such as *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886), *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1845), *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883), *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 1850), *The Law and the Lady* (Collins, 1875), *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 1847), and countless others feature characters with disabilities. Literary critic Leslie Fiedler discussed disability in popular Victorian literature, explaining how it was not "until the rise of sentimentalism and the obsession with the excluded and marginal" did disabled people become featured in books "intended for readers who, thinking of themselves as non-handicapped, are able to regard the handicapped as essentially alien, absolute others."[18] Charles Dickens was notorious for how he utilized disability in his stories, with notable characters such as Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol* and Mr. Dick from *David Copperfield*. In one of his earlier works, *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Dickens includes a chapter titled "Greenwich Fair," in which he describes a human exhibition. This chapter is invaluable in the way that it offers a glimpse into how one of the leading authors of the Victorian Era, and consequently one of the preeminent propagators of popular culture,

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[17] "Barnum and Bal Only: Greatest Show on Earth," *The Sketch* 20, no. 260 (January 19, 1898): 529, http://electra.lmu.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/barnum-bal-only/docview/1638088077/se-2.

[18] Leslie A. Fiedler, "Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled In Literature and the Popular Arts," *Salmagundi*, no. 57 (1982): 58-9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40547499.

perceived disability. In one particular scene, Dickens describes a person with dwarfism performing for a crowd:

> The dwarfs are also objects of great curiosity, and … a dwarf … and two or three other natural curiosities, are usually exhibited together for the small charge of a penny, they attract very numerous audiences. The best thing about a dwarf is, that he has always a little box … painted outside like a six-roomed house, and as the crowd see him ring a bell, or fire a pistol out of the first-floor window, they verily believe that it is his ordinary town residence, divided like other mansions … the unfortunate little object is brought out to delight the throng by holding a facetious dialogue with the proprietor: in the course of which, the dwarf (who is always particularly drunk) pledges himself to sing a comic song inside, and pays various compliments to the ladies, which induce them to 'come for'erd' with great alacrity.[19]

Dickens' language is extremely objectifying of the person, but his description highlights how the human exhibitions and performances were designed to focus entirely on what made a disabled person 'different' from the crowd, which connects back to Lennard Davis' discussion of changing ideas of normality contrasted with 'abnormality' during the Victorian era.[20] As Dickens' description of the human exhibition attests, non-disabled Victorians enjoyed seeing themselves as the 'normal' members of society, which explains in part why these performances were so popular and drew such large crowds.

Today, it is not uncommon for people to make light of the Victorian era's fascination with disability, and to gloss over the factors that lie at the center of the cultural phenomenon. It is sadly often reduced to nothing more than a bizarre aesthetic, or something to laugh at during

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[19] Charles Dickens, "Greenwich Fair," in *Sketches by Boz*, (London: 1836), 4, http://fullreads.com/literature/greenwich-fair/4/.
[20] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 24.

Halloween. But, when one takes a deeper look, it is not difficult to understand the injustices that disabled people suffered during this era, and how they are still being perpetuated. Popular media, with recent examples such as *The Greatest Showman*, *American Horror Story*, and *Nightmare Alley*, while not always set in the Victorian era, has still unfortunately done an exceptional job at morphing today's public conceptions and notions about disability in popular culture, continuing to exploit disability for entertainment purposes. Despite the Victorian era ending over one hundred and twenty years ago, its influence has been long standing, and today's society sadly continues to inadvertently uphold its unjust values and ideas.

Appendix

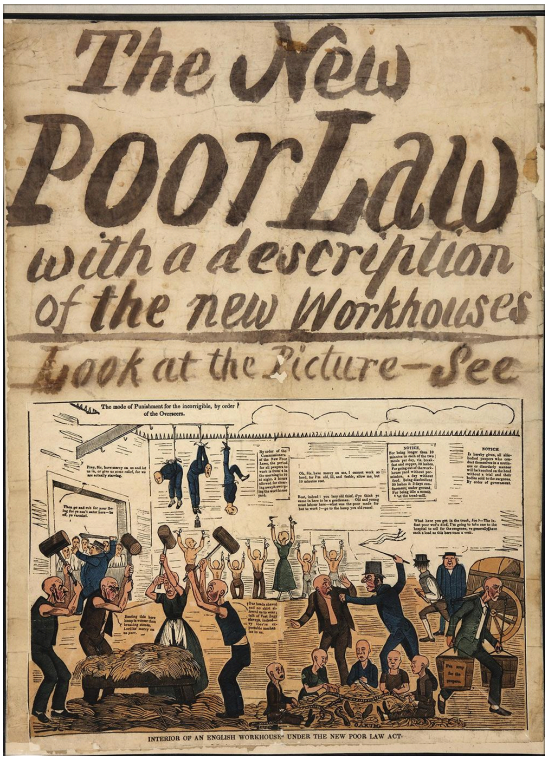

Figure 1. Anti-Poor Law poster, 1837.

Figure 3. Lithograph of Queen Victoria meeting Charles Sherwood Stratton, also known as "General Tom Thumb," by Henry Calton Maguire, 1844.

Figure 2. Pamphlet featuring Queen Victoria communicating with a deaf woman, by Henry Ash, late nineteenth century.

Figure 4. Cartoon published in *The Sketch*, January 19, 1898.

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