

The Elephant Man:  
The Representation of Joseph Carey Merrick and His Disabilities and Deformities in  
Film and Society

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) 3D Design, Modelmaking & Digital Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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## Abstract

This study will analyse the treatment of Joseph Merrick and how his disabilities and deformities have had a profound effect on his life. It will explore the life of Joseph Carey Merrick and his representation in film and society. It will look at books, articles, films, and tv shows.

Joseph Carey Merrick was born in 1852 and began to show signs of abnormal growths at the age of 5. He had a hard time finding employment and eventually entered a freakshow, where he became known as the "Elephant Man". Merrick endured a lifetime of struggles up until his death in 1890.

Merrick, suffered from Proteus Syndrome, and is remembered today largely due to the film *The Elephant Man* directed by David Lynch. Its use of special effects makeup (SFX makeup) was used to recreate Merricks features and plaster casts of his arms, feet, head and shoulders were made post-mortem to create the SFX.

Character archetypes are important to discuss as it will show how disabilities and deformities are treated in modern society through television. Joseph Merrick is often portrayed as an inspirational hero and helpless victim, which can evoke empathy in the audience. However, *The Year of The Rabbit* portrays Merrick as a villain, which can be seen as tasteless and inaccurate. It is important for individuals with disabilities to receive proper representation within the media for them to access their human rights and be treated with dignity.

The mistreatment of people suffering from varying disabilities and deformities still impacts individuals lives, even in the 21st century. Merrick's body is still on display in the Royal London Hospital Museum, which shows a lack of respect for him even in death. *The Year of The Rabbit* and *The Elephant Man* film is both examples of how Merrick has been represented in media. The research showed how Merrick's character had been exploited and defamed in television and film, which brings up the question of whether disabled and deformed people today will suffer a similar fate.

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Joseph Carey Merricks life by viewing his representation in film and society from the year 1852 up to now. Merrick has been represented through many different sources, mainly books, articles, films and television shows. A book written by Fredrick Treves who had first-hand experience with Merrick and a film directed by David Lynch will be significant sources in this thesis. This thesis will explore freakshows in the 1800's and how the birth of "The Elephant man" began. The use of special effects (SFX) and how it was used to represent Merricks appearance will be discussed and compared to his real life looks. Character archetypes will also be an important discussion to show how Merrick has been placed in a box for most of his life.

Joseph Merrick was born in 1852 in Leicester England. Merrick was a man who lived with a very rare genetic disease called proteus syndrome. Proteus Syndrome caused Merrick to have physical abnormalities that made life exceedingly difficult. The Elephant Man was a nickname given to Joseph Carey Merrick in 1884 when he joined a freakshow. It is also a very popular film; this is what most people think of when they hear "The Elephant Man" not the person Joseph Merrick. The aim is to teach the reader about Joseph the man and the life he led and how his deformities and disabilities have been viewed in society and film. Merrick was afflicted with proteus syndrome a very rare condition caused by a gene mutation before birth, symptoms of this condition usually begin to show between the ages of 6 to 18 months. Merricks condition meant that his bones, skin and other tissues would overgrow, they would also grow asymmetrically so the right and left sides would vary in growth.

These growths created large pieces of spongy skin on the front of his face and the back of his head, they were so large they reached an almost three feet circumference, his jaw was also deformed in such a way that rendered him incapable of facial expressions, a bony growth on the roof of his mouth also

prevented him from having clear speech there are descriptions of him speaking with slurred speech that only Fredrick Treves could understand. Merrick only had one good arm as the other one was so deformed his hand looked almost finlike, and his legs and feet were also deformed in the same way this along with a hip injury he suffered from at a young age made Merricks walk look more like a limp.

During the period that Merrick was alive, his condition had never been seen before, this meant Merrick would often be mobbed if he went out in public, even when he wore a disguise in an attempt at hiding his deformities, when he had escaped the life of a freakshow he was still treated as though he was one. While there are cases of people suffering from Proteus Syndrome having neurological effects it is well documented that Merrick was a very intelligent and empathetic person, he was however judged very quickly, and people often assumed at first glance that he was an imbecile due to his lack of facial expressions, Merrick also did not speak much while he was part of a freakshow as people did not have the patience to understand him.

The purpose of this is to show how Merrick was treated on and off television and film and how people with very similar issues as him are still mistreated to this day. The purpose of Chapter 1 is to explore Merricks biography and how he became the person he was. It is important to understand Merrick as a person so that it is possible to understand the representation of the real man from the film and television depiction. This way Merricks personality and life are well known before continuing with chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 1's aim is to shed light on Merricks mistreatment by the society he lived in and how he first became a curiosity by becoming involved with a freakshow, which led to the birth of his nickname the Elephant Man. This will lead into his friendship with Fredrick Treves and how he lived out the rest of his life in the Royal Hospital London.

Having learned what Merrick lived through, chapter 2 can be better understood. Chapter 2 carries on by showing how special effects (SFX) makeup in The Elephant Man film represented Merricks features and how accurate it was to his real-life features. This chapter will also explore the use of his death mask to create the SFX makeup, this will be an example of how he was mistreated in death as well as in life. The television show '*Dinner and Dissection*' will also be discussed as another example of Merrick's exploitation after death. Comparisons will be made with other

people who have suffered from life-altering injuries or deformities, such as a Civil War veteran and an individual suffering from syphilis.

This will lead into the final chapter of this study where character archetypes will be discussed. Character archetypes are important as they will show how people with deformities and disabilities are often stereotyped and have a character archetype placed on them. Television shows such as *'The Year of the Rabbit'* and *'Ripper Street'* who have Merrick as a character are a great example of how people like him are often placed into boxes rather than having Merrick be a normal person. This chapter will investigate how Merrick's character is being taken advantage of in some television shows, in contrast to other famous figures who often do not have their characters twisted and changed unlike Merrick.

These chapters will explore Merrick's life and how he was represented through film and society. This thesis will highlight the issues society has with disabilities and deformities throughout Merrick's life and how this will have a possible effect on people living now with similar issues. It will also highlight Merrick's representation in film and how he is often placed in a box as a common character archetype.

## Chapter 1: Joseph Carey Merrick

It is important to explore Merricks biography to have a better understanding of the characters portrayed as him in television and film, it also provides a better understanding of the person that Merrick was. Merricks abnormalities will be discussed so that it is acknowledged in its severity, this will provide a better understanding of how Merrick struggled to go about daily tasks. Freakshows and the involvement of Merrick play a pivotal role in his life as it is where the nickname the Elephant Man began that has stuck with the public for a lifetime.

Joseph Carey Merrick was born in Leicester England on the 5th of August in 1852 to Joseph Rockley Merrick and Mary Jane Merrick. Joseph did not begin to show signs of abnormal development until the age of five, it was also at this age that he took a hard fall, permanently damaging his hip. His head began to grow at an unusual rate, with spongy skin beginning to hang from the back of his head. His jaw was deformed in a manner which severely limited his facial expressions and ability to speak. His family believed these developments were due to an elephant fright his mother suffered while pregnant with him.

Merricks mother died eleven years after his birth he called this the “greatest misfortune of my life”<sup>1</sup>. Merricks mother was a very important figure in his life so when she died, he was devastated. Merricks father remarried their landlady less than a year later after Merricks mothers’ death. His father and stepmother treated him cruelly, Merrick recalls being “taunted and sneered at”<sup>2</sup>, because of his inability to secure a job as a result of his deformities, this resulted in him running away from home quite often. Out of desperation needing to work, Merrick entered the Leicester Union Workhouse at the age of seventeen. However, as his deformities worsened with age along with his hip injury, he was unable to complete his work tasks.

By 1884, -Merrick approached showman Sam Torr to inquire about participating in a freakshow. Merrick did this to escape the workhouse, where his deformities has worsened, and he was suffering with a hip injury he had acquired at a young age. This

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<sup>1</sup> Merrick, Joseph. ‘The Autobiography of Joseph Carey Merrick (1884)’. *PUBLIC DOMAIN TEXTS*, 1884, <https://publicdomainreview.org/pd-texts/the-autobiography-of-joseph-carey-merrick-1884>.

<sup>2</sup>Merrick, Joseph. ‘The Autobiography of Joseph Carey Merrick (1884)’. *PUBLIC DOMAIN TEXTS*, 1884, <https://publicdomainreview.org/pd-texts/the-autobiography-of-joseph-carey-merrick-1884>.

marked the birth of the derogatory nickname “Elephant Man”. Merrick was subject to insults and abuse by the public wherever he travelled. Fredrick Treves writes about his first encounter with Merrick in his book entitled ‘*The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*’<sup>3</sup> and how he was so shocked by his appearance “There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I have ever seen,”<sup>4</sup> Further he wrote that - “at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed”<sup>5</sup>.

Fredrick Treves was a British surgeon who took interest in Merrick after seeing his posters., - Treves was horrified and curious about the ‘Elephant man’. After his initial inspection of Merrick, Treves believed he was an “imbecile”<sup>6</sup>. This belief was likely due to Merricks lack of facial expressions and ability to speak, which was compounded by Merricks shyness due to his continued abuse by the public, this shyness is described by Treves as “shy, confused, not a little frightened and evidently much cowed,”<sup>7</sup>. It is therefore important to understand that Treves’ judgement of Merrick was not merely due to the culture at the time, but rather due to several factors which supported his belief. Even today, these same factors are utilised by some to place judgements on those of us who appear different than others.

Treves’ initial reaction and description seems cruel; however, it is important to keep in mind that the individuals during this time period had never seen a man as remarkable as Merrick. To Treves, Merrick was a remarkable individual for him to study and further his knowledge. Treves later describes the poster which-drew people into the freakshow and gawk at the ‘Elephant man’. Treves recounts that the poster is more man than beast<sup>8</sup>, perhaps in an effort to make him appear -more monstrous: “Painted

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Treves. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Treves. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Treves. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

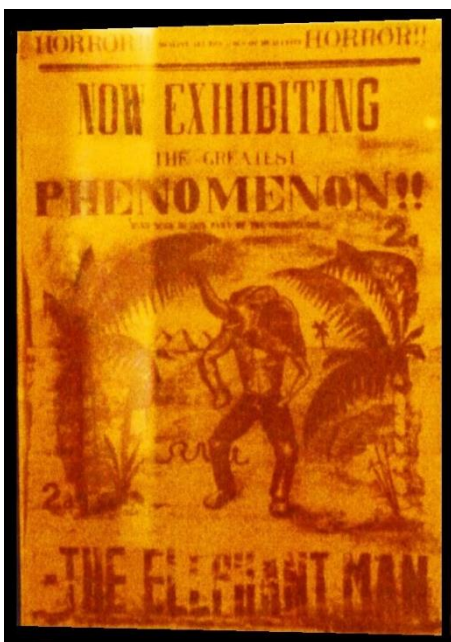
<sup>6</sup> Frederick Treves. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/05/07/this-author-may-have-solved-year-old-mystery-about-elephant-man/>

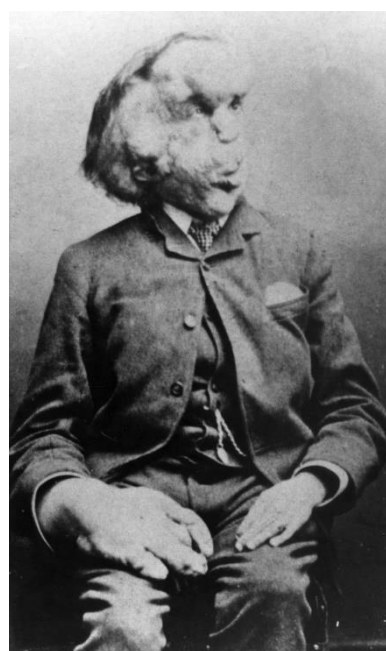
<sup>8</sup> Frederick Treves. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

on the canvas in primitive colours, a life-size portrait of the Elephant Man. This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare.... the figure of a man with the characteristics of an elephant.”<sup>9</sup> In Treves opinion, Merricks ‘transfiguration’ was not far advanced, labelling still ‘more of the man than of the beast’. It was precisely this fact, that ‘it was still human’ that made Merrick so repellent to the public.

This poster which is shown below is a very dehumanising advertisement in reference to Merrick. The words “HORROR!”<sup>10</sup> displayed on the top of the poster shows that Torr wanted the public to be horrified by what they saw. Using words like “Phenomenon”<sup>11</sup> also makes it clear Merrick was not seen as a normal person by Torr. Merrick was advertised as something to be observed and as something to evoke extreme emotions in an audience. The landscape the elephant man figure is displayed in depicts Merrick as an individual from a different land where palm trees grow with mountains in the distance and waves on a beach, when Merrick is from Leicester England. The poster is painted with aged looking colours making it seem as though it is old and to further push the idea of Merrick being from somewhere exotic.



*Figure 1: Whitechapel Elephant Man Poster Used by Sam Torr 1884.*



*Figure 2: Joseph Merrick dressed in his 'Sunday best' for a portrait photograph in 1889.*

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Treves. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Figure 1 White Chapel Elephant Man Poster Used by Sam Torr1884

<sup>11</sup> Figure 2 Joseph Merrick Dressed in his 'Sunday Best' for a portrait photograph in 1889.

Freakshows began to rise in popularity among the public during this period. The morbid curiosity of the public dehumanized the individuals acting as the ‘freaks’ within these human zoos. The book ‘*Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and ‘Enfreakment’*’<sup>12</sup> writes about how the public during this period saw these ‘freaks’ as “erroneous creatures offensive to nature, as intruders which have to be eliminated from man’s orderly world.”<sup>13</sup> This gives a clear insight of the treatment towards people with disabilities and deformities from the public at the time.

Treves gives an example of Merricks treatment, wherein he describes a showman shouting at Merrick: ‘...as if to a dog, [the showman] called out harshly: ‘Stand up!’”<sup>14</sup> Treves discusses his first encounter with Merrick in his ‘cold and dank room’: “The showman pulled back the curtain and revealed a bent figure crouching on a stool and covered by a brown blanket. In front of it on a tripod, was a large brick heated by a Bunsen burner”<sup>15</sup>. Merrick was not afforded the dignity of clothes during some winter month, wearing nothing but “threadbare trousers”<sup>16</sup>. He- was given no choice but to drop his blanket during a freezing winter in London, for the sake of the crowd who had travelled to gawk at him. The showman did not care for Merrick, treating him more as an object than an individual.

Treves writes about Merrick in ‘*The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*’ and what he claims to have seen when first confronted with Merrick and how he was treated like an animal in this freakshow. Treves was a lecturer on anatomy at the time and so goes on to write “I was anxious to examine him in detail and to prepare an account of his abnormalities.”<sup>17</sup> Nadja Durbach author of ‘*Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and ‘Enfreakment’*’ writes about Treves and his

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<sup>12</sup> *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and ‘Enfreakment’*, edited by Anna Kérchy, and Andrea Zittlau, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1133106>.

<sup>13</sup> *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and ‘Enfreakment’*, edited by Anna Kérchy, and Andrea Zittlau, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1133106>.

<sup>14</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

use of Merrick in this instance when reading ‘*The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences.*’ Durbach writes “It was not merely that medicine borrowed the language of monstrosity from the freak show; it also borrowed its monsters.”<sup>18</sup> Durbach is pointing out that while Treves criticizes freakshows and their treatment of Merrick, he also seeks to use Merrick to his advantage just in different manner, this quote also shows that Treves uses repellent words to describe Merrick, such as referring to him as the “most disgusting specimen of humanity”<sup>19</sup>. Here Treves refers to Merrick as a ‘specimen’ this is an instance of Treves borrowing the language of ‘monstrosity from the freak show’ to describe Merrick.

Treves had a goal when visiting the freakshow to view Merrick. The goal was to bring Merrick to the Medical College he worked at. Rather than Treves asking Merrick himself to pay a visit to the medical college he “arranged with the showman”<sup>20</sup> so that he “could interview this strange exhibit in my room at the college”<sup>21</sup>. This is another instance of Treves using distasteful language when writing about Merrick, he calls him an ‘exhibit’. This is when it can be seen Merrick is treated like a curiosity by people who claim to be against freakshows but still want to use Merrick to their own advantage. Merrick was a medical phenomenon for Treves, making Treves eager to examine and learn about his condition, it is beginning to become apparent that Treves’ book is biased.

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<sup>18</sup> Durbach, Nadja. *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, University of California Press, 2009. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=470936>.

<sup>19</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.



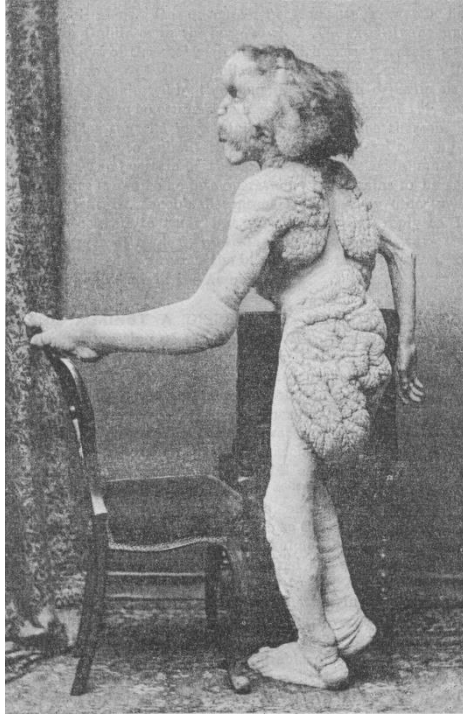


Figure 3 Joseph Merrick photographed at London Hospital 1888.

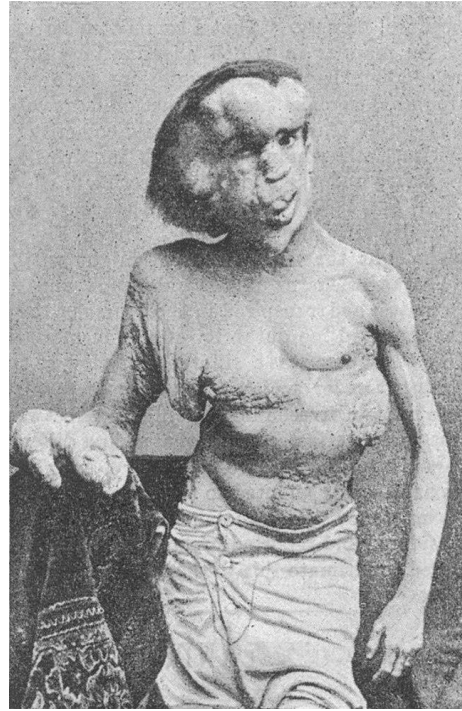


Figure 4 Joseph Merrick Photographed at London Hospital 1889.

When the show shop where the freakshow run by Sam Torr was shut down by police Merrick was approached by another showman whose name is believed to have been an Italian man by the name of Joe Ferrari, but this has not been proven. Ferrari had plans of bringing Merrick to Europe and placing him on display for the public as they travelled. This did not go to plan as “unfortunately for this showman and his new property, the police forces of Europe proved as resistant to the exhibition of Joseph’s deformities as those in England”<sup>22</sup> Merrick was unwelcome wherever he travelled, because of this, in 1885 Merrick was robbed and abandoned in Brussels.

Ferrari left him only with his disguise, - “a black cloak which reached to the ground”<sup>23</sup> and “bag-like slippers”<sup>24</sup>. “-On his head was a cap of a kind that never was seen. It was black like the cloak, had a wide peak and the general outline of a yachting cap. As the circumference of Merrick’s head was that of a man’s waist, the size of this headgear may be imagined. From the attachment of the peak, a grey flannel curtain hung in front

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<sup>22</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account Of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

of the face. In this mask was cut a wide horizontal slit through which the wearer could look out.”<sup>25</sup> With only a disguise to hide his appearance from the public, Merrick needed to find a way out of Brussels.

With great difficulty Merrick raised enough funds to pay for a train ticket back to London by pawning what few possessions he had left.

Merrick began his journey back to London; Merrick was no longer part of a freakshow, but the public still acted as though he was part of one. Michael Howell and Peter Ford mention in their book *'The True History of The Elephant Man'* that to Merrick “it must have seemed that he was on the road to crucifixion.”<sup>26</sup> Once on the train, Merrick kept to a dark corner. Individuals gaped at Merrick and would try to peer under his hood to get a better look at his face all while whispering.

On the morning of 24 June 1886 Merrick finally arrived at Liverpool Street Station. Merrick's figure drew immediate attention, a crowd had gathered around him “murmuring comments, the fingers pointed, the eyes stared”<sup>27</sup> Merrick was trapped in an ever-growing crowd of people. The police eventually stepped in and guided Merrick into a “third class waiting room”.<sup>28</sup> According to Treves he rescued Merrick from the train station waiting room only because Joseph had never parted with a card that had Treves' details on it.

The 1979 film entitled *'The Elephant Man'* recreated Merrick's struggle in Liverpool Street Station., - The audience observes Merrick being chased by a crowd through the station and then having his hood ripped from his head, a woman in the crowd screams in terror and the public are frightened by him. This struggle in real life, while it was dehumanising, was not so dramatic. Merrick did not have his hood ripped from his head like in the film, he was crowded but not chased through the station. Merrick's walk was more of a shuffle due to the abnormalities on his leg and due to his hip injury, this would have made even a jog difficult for Merrick. Treves writes about Merrick

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<sup>25</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man The Definitive Account Of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man The Definitive Account Of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man The Definitive Account Of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

hobbling “along the quay”<sup>29</sup> and how people “would run ahead to get a look at him”<sup>30</sup>. While Merrick would have loved to have been able to run, he simply could not. This evidence therefore highlights how the media was willing to exaggerate Merricks story for the sake of the audience. This scene merely feeds the narrative that Merrick was a monster.

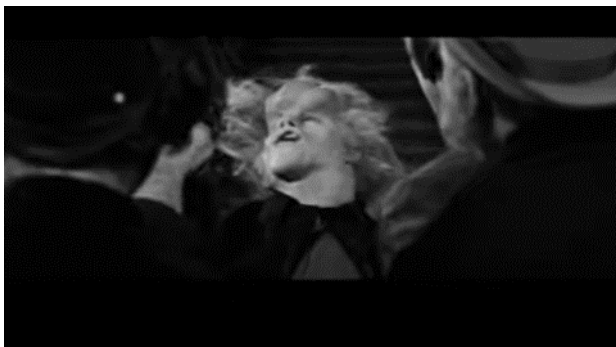


Figure 5: Film still from *The Elephant Man* 1979. Merricks Hood Being Torn off His Head

Treves brought Merrick back to London Hospital with him where he secured a room for Merrick to live in. It became apparent that Merrick had suffered a great deal “every knock on the door of the room.... provoked a reaction of startled anxiety”<sup>31</sup> Merrick had become accustomed to being to the abuse from the people that had previously surround him that he struggled to settle in his new home. After many days Merrick became familiar with the doctors and nurses and seemed to settle into a comfortable routine. As Treves got to know Merrick, he found him to be “remarkably intelligent”<sup>32</sup> and “a gentle, affectionate and lovable creature”<sup>33</sup>. Treves is writing about Merrick in a positive manner, it is clear Treves cared for Merrick, however Durbach’s point about Treves using monstrous language can be seen at play here again as Treves calls

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<sup>29</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account Of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

Merrick a ‘creature’ rather than a man or a person. Treves repeats this language a third time when writing about learning how to understand Merricks speech by calling him a “primitive creature”<sup>34</sup>. While Treves seems to care for Merrick it is clear he views Merrick as being below him.

As time continued it became apparent that Merrick had an adoration for women, this stems from the memory of how his mother treated him as a child. Treves recalls a nurse taken by surprise by his appearance, causing her to shriek and run from the room, unfortunately this experience “was not new to him”<sup>35</sup>. Treves found it to be important that Merrick interact with a woman that was not terrified of him or working for him as a nurse, so he organized for a friend of his to visit Merrick and make a point of shaking his hand with a smile. This interaction brought Merrick to tears. Treves wrote that this was the “first woman who had ever smiled at him, and the first woman, in his whole life, who had shaken hands with him.”<sup>36</sup> This moment in Merricks life seemed to provoke a change in him.

Merrick seemed to no longer be shy and would strike up conversation with anyone “who paused to acknowledge him”.<sup>37</sup> He had taken up the habit “to sit at his window to have a word with whoever happened to pass”<sup>38</sup>. The prince and princess of Wales at the time were closely associated with the London Hospital since 1864 and were due for a visit. It was during this time that the Prince and Princess of Wales were first introduced to Merrick, it is recalled that the princess greeted him with “grace, smiled and”<sup>39</sup> had “taken the introduction with perfect serenity”<sup>40</sup>. Merrick treasured this memory for the rest of his life and soon received a gift from the princess of Wales

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<sup>34</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account of The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account of The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account of The Tragic and Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account of The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

herself, he was so beside himself with happiness that he wept. Joseph wrote her a letter of thanks which Treves recalls being “so touched that he let it go as stood”<sup>41</sup>. Merrick had become quite famous, among the staff at the hospital and among the royal family at this stage. The Duke of Cambridge writes about Merrick and how he was “such a gentle kindly man”<sup>42</sup>. It was clear that Merrick was making quite the impression on the people around him, people were no longer seeing him as a monster but as a kind, gentle soul.

Merrick wanted nothing more than to be seen as a normal person, that was equal to everyone else around him. This became apparent when it came to Christmas and Treves had asked him what he would like to buy with the money that had been donated to him. Merrick had requested a ‘gentleman’s dressing case with silver fittings’<sup>43</sup> the set consisted of a comb, a hat brush, silver backed hairbrushes, a shoehorn, toothbrushes, and ivory-handled razors.<sup>44</sup> The purchase of the gentleman’s case was mostly useless to Merrick as the tools inside were not practical for an individual with the abnormalities Merrick had, but Merrick wanted them regardless because they made him feel like everyone else.

It was from this desire to be like everyone else that Merrick unfortunately passed away. Merrick would usually sleep sitting up, his back supported by pillows, with his knees drawn up so that he could rest his head on them.<sup>45</sup> Merrick slept like this because his head was too heavy for him to sleep lying down. However, on the night of Merrick’s death it is presumed Merrick had decided to try sleeping lying down like other people, so when he tried to lie down the weight of his head caused his head to tip back and dislocate his neck. Treves found Merrick dead in bed in April 1890 at the age of 27.

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<sup>41</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account of The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

While Treves used distasteful language at times when speaking about Merrick, he was also a good friend at times, and did help Merrick in receiving a somewhat normal life which Merrick so desperately wanted. Freakshows were very popular at the time, and for a while it was a way of life for Merrick because of the kind of society he lived in. He was given no other choice but to seek out a freakshow for work as he could not find employment in any other place. Merrick was treated unkindly by the society he lived in; he had never known kindness until he found residence in the London Hospital. It was here where people learned that regardless of his looks Merrick was a good, kind-hearted man, who wanted to be just like everyone else.

## Chapter 2: The Representation of Merrick

Joseph Merrick has been known as the *Elephant Man* for much of his life, it is what most people today know him as. The main reason why Merrick has been remembered this way by the society lived in now, is largely due to the film '*The Elephant Man*' directed by David Lynch. This film will be discussed and how its use of special effects makeup (SFX) makeup was used to recreate Merricks features. The use of SFX makeup is important to discuss as it was used to create a true likeness to Merrick, it will also highlight how plaster casts of Merricks arms, feet and head and shoulders were made post-mortem. These plaster casts are important to bring to the reader's attention as they record what happened to Merricks body immediately after death. It also leads into bringing to light the display of Merricks skeleton and diagnosis of his syndrome. '*Dinner & Dissection*' will be an important source to show modern day exploitation of Merricks looks and to show that while the public may not go to freakshows in person anymore, the media has created a new kind of freakshow on television and online.

Merricks facial and body abnormalities are what gathered so much attention from the public, that after 90 years of Merricks passing, the film '*The Elephant Man*'<sup>46</sup> was released. This film gathered a large amount of attention and became very famous for its story and representation of Merrick. Something that is very noticeable in this film is how the actor wearing the special effects makeup to represent Merrick looks exactly like him. This is because a plaster cast of Merricks real face was used to recreate the prosthetics accurately.

Special effects (SFX) makeup within the film industry involves the production and application of prosthetics and small-scale skin effects. One such example is '*The Elephant Man*'<sup>47</sup> film, which utilised extensive SFX makeup to mimic Merrick's condition. Christopher Tucker, who worked as lead makeup artist for the film was granted access to the extremely fragile plaster cast of Joseph's face by the Royal London Hospital Museum., - Tucker took a mould of this cast to portray Merricks facial structure as accurately as possible.

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<sup>46</sup> Lynch, David. *The Elephant Man*. Brookfilms, Paramount Pictures, 1980.

<sup>47</sup> Lynch, David. *The Elephant Man*. Brookfilms, Paramount Pictures, 1980.

An important point to take from this is the possession of the 'Death Mask'<sup>48</sup> plaster cast the Royal London Hospital Museum had taken of Merrick. Once Merrick had passed, a plaster cast termed a 'death mask'<sup>49</sup> was taken off-his face., -While this was not an entirely uncommon practice in the 1800's, Merricks cast was not taken for similar reasons. Treves performed an autopsy on his body after his death and after his funeral determined that Merricks skeleton should be placed on display in the hospital museum. For Treves to conclude that Merrick who considered Treves to be a close friend should be placed on display to remain a spectacle shows the lack of respect Treves held for Merrick. Treves spoke about Merricks wish to be 'like other people'<sup>50</sup> and regardless treated him like an object. It was also Treves who decided Merricks head, shoulders, and limbs should be moulded and cast in plaster.<sup>51</sup> Merricks death mask was not made for the same reasons as other peoples, this is apparent when they are placed in display cases for students at the hospital to view and while death masks was not an uncommon practice during this time it was uncommon to paint them and to have a full head and shoulders cast which Merricks death mask had both things.<sup>52</sup>



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<sup>48</sup> Campbell, Hayley. *How Death Masks Blur the Lines Between Art, Mourning, and Remembrance*. 24 Aug. 2022, <https://lithub.com/how-death-masks-blur-the-lines-between-art-mourning-and-remembrance/>.

<sup>49</sup> Campbell, Hayley. *How Death Masks Blur the Lines Between Art, Mourning, and Remembrance*. 24 Aug. 2022, <https://lithub.com/how-death-masks-blur-the-lines-between-art-mourning-and-remembrance>

<sup>50</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>51</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Figure 6: Joseph Merricks Death Mask on Display at The Royal London Hospital Museum <https://findadeath.com/john-the-elfphant-man-merrick/> April 2011





*Figure 6: Joseph Merricks Death Mask on Display at The Royal London Hospital Museum.*

*Figure 7: Joseph Merricks Skeleton on Display at the Royal London Hospital*

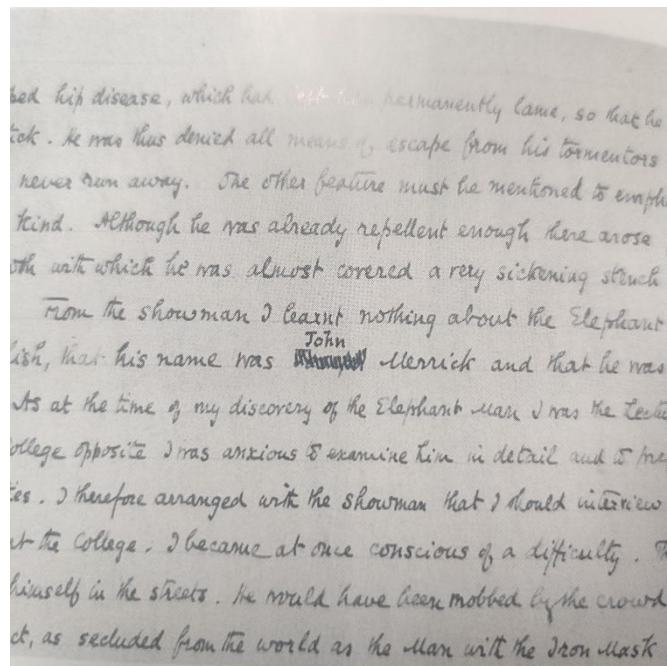
Knowing Merrick wanted nothing more than to be a normal person treated with equality makes it difficult to understand why Treves would encourage the display of his body when he knew this would go against everything Merrick wanted. A showman who worked with Merrick by the name of Tom Norman is quoted saying “who really exploited poor Joseph? I, the showman” or “Dr Treves, the eminent surgeon (who you must admit was also a showman, but on a rather higher social scale)”<sup>53</sup> Norman held a dislike towards Treves and disliked how he handled Merricks death and body, but Treves had a high social status and at the time that is what mattered most.

The display of Merrick’s skeleton and death mask in the museum turned him into a spectacle, even in death. His soft tissue was buried without his body and his bones so

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<sup>53</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man The Definitive Account Of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

highly bleached it became difficult to extract DNA from them (in an attempt to elucidate the condition Merrick suffered with). The SFX for “The Elephant Man” was accurate due to the use of his real death mask. However, the inaccuracies were moreso with Merricks speech, for example is Merrick had an overgrown jawbone and bony growth located on the roof of his mouth. Both growths made speaking difficult and painful for Merrick <sup>54</sup>– in contrast, actor John Hurt spoke more a clearly with some slight slurring. This could be due to the fact that Merricks real speech would be too difficult to understand for an audience and so for the sake of the film Hurt spoke more clearly so he could be understood properly. Another inaccuracy within the film is that they refer to Merrick as John, despite his true name being Joseph, this is mostly Treves’ fault as the movie took inspiration from his writings. Such as in an autograph manuscript where Treves refers to Merrick as ‘John’<sup>55</sup>. It is unknown why Treves did this.



<sup>54</sup> Discovery UK. *Elephant Man's Speech: Meet the Elephant Man*. 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Figure 8: *The Deliberate mistake In Treves's autograph manuscript of 'The Elephant Man' where he scored out 'Joseph' and replaced it with 'John'*. Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account Of The Tragic And Extraordinary Life Of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

Examples as recent as 2021 prove individuals are still attempting to profit from Merrick, such as the proposed television show '*Dinner and Dissection*'<sup>56</sup>. This show planned to exploit Merrick by re-creating his body from silicone, filling it with animal organs, and broadcasting the dissection. While the producers, ITAE productions<sup>57</sup>, (founded by Sam Piri, creator of *Dinner & Dissection*), may argue this is to educate the public on such conditions, it sets a poor precedent for other individuals with disabilities and life-changing conditions such as Merrick's. This show appears moreso as another attempt to profit from Merrick post-humously. His body is consistently studied, observed, re-created, and dissected to the public. Other individuals with similar conditions to Merrick protest against "*Dinner & Dissection*" as it makes them feel as though they could be exploited similar to Merrick, never being left in peace, alive or dead.

The marketing team for the event has gone so far as to use circus imagery and words like "Roll up... Roll up..."<sup>58</sup> with the event itself being held in a 'big top' circus tent

*Figure 8: The Deliberate mistake In Treves's autograph manuscript of 'The Elephant Man' where he scored out 'Joseph' and replaced it with 'John'.*

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<sup>56</sup> Lowbridge, Caroline. 'BBC News'. *Elephant Man Dissection: 'Joseph Merrick Would Be Heartbroken'*, 3 Oct. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-leicestershire-58663776>.

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.itaeproductions.com/thepostmortemlive>

<sup>58</sup> *Figure 9: Poster Used to Market Dinner & Dissection* <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-57901188> 2021

(Fig. 9). They feed into the elephant man narrative and acknowledge how Joseph yearned to live a normal life, while hypocritically exploiting his body for other's entertainment. Jordan Whitewood-Neal, a man- who suffers from Proteus Syndrome, - (the same as Merrick suffered with) described it as "so disrespectfully and disgustingly constructed that I don't quite know how to convey my upset and anger

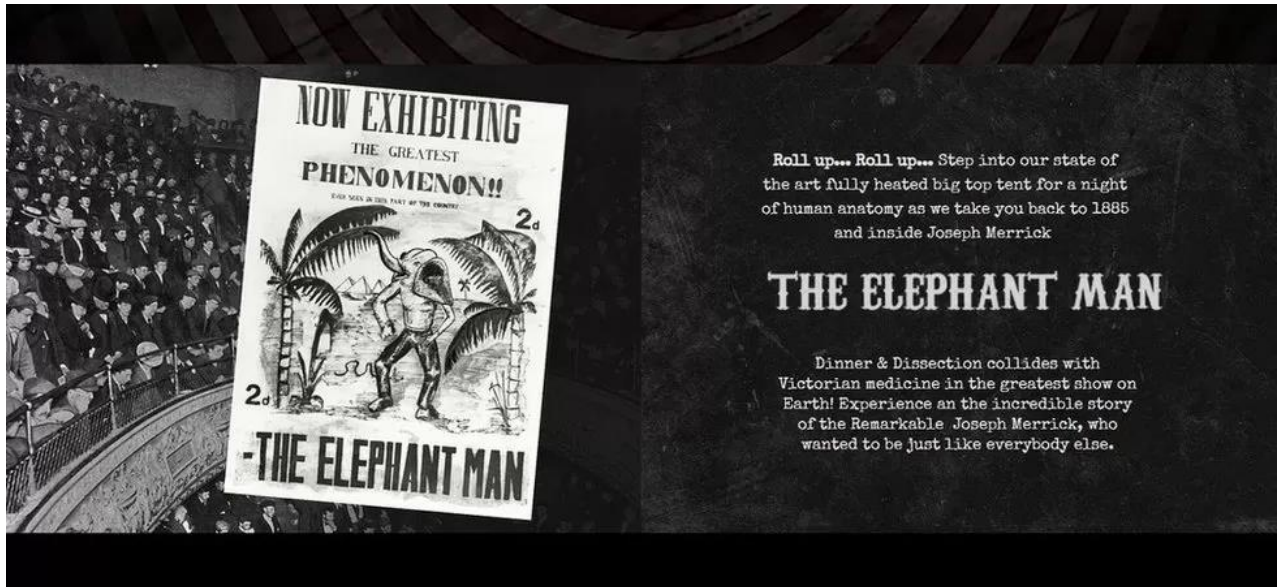


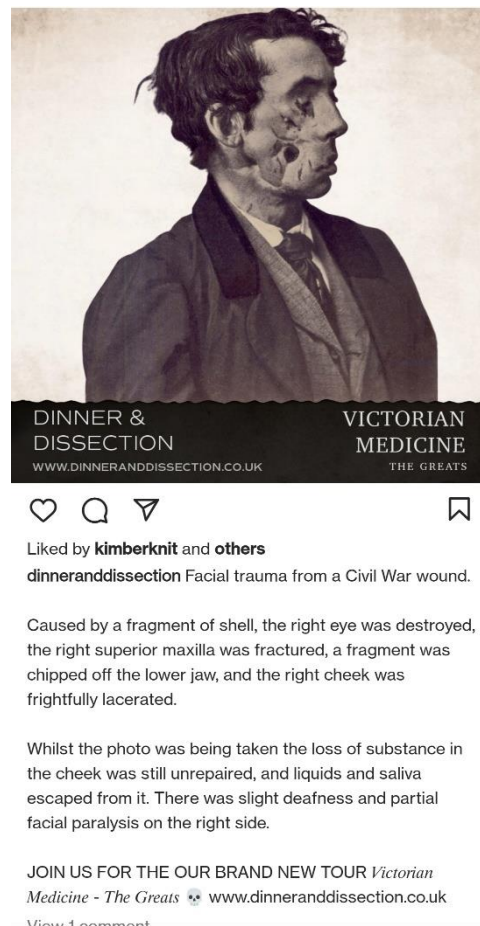
Figure 9: Poster Used to Market Dinner & Dissection

towards it"<sup>59</sup>.

Further research reveals *Dinner & Dissection* also planned to use other individuals with disabilities and deformities for similar events. This includes those such as Civil War veterans, or those suffering with syphilis. The show's Instagram feed acts as a 'freakshow' for viewers, showcasing faces deformed from various conditions. Various men and women are being displayed such as one man who suffered facial trauma from a Civil War. He is described as an object: "There was slight deafness and partial facial paralysis"<sup>60</sup> rather than saying he "suffered".

<sup>59</sup> Lowbridge, Caroline. 'BBC News'. *Elephant Man Dissection: 'Joseph Merrick Would Be Heartbroken'*, 3 Oct. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-leicestershire-58663776>.

<sup>60</sup> Figure 10: Screenshot of the Instagram Page for Dinner & Dissection, Showing the Man Suffering with Facial Trauma 2022



*Figure 10: Screenshot of the Instagram Page for Dinner & Dissection, Showing the Man Suffering with Facial Trauma*

This Instagram post<sup>61</sup> has a caption that is written in a theatrical manner, the description of how this man had ‘liquids and saliva’<sup>62</sup> escaping his cheek is dehumanising and unsympathetic; it is how a dog would be described. In the same breath this Instagram post advertises their website for their tour. This unknown man is being used to gain them attention and garner more customers for their disturbing show.

<sup>61</sup> Figure 11: Screenshot of the Instagram Page for Dinner & Dissection, Showing the Man Suffering from Syphilis 2022

<sup>62</sup> A screenshot of an Instagram post posted By Dinner & Dissection of a man suffering from Syphilis. Dinner and Dissection. Instagram. 2 Feb. 2022.



*Figure 11 An Instagram post posted By Dinner & Dissection of a man suffering from Syphilis.*

Here in Figure 11 is another example of the Instagram posts on ‘*Dinner & Dissections*’ account. They are showing the photos of a man suffering from syphilis and again on this post advertise their website. It is also important to note that on both posts they have their watermark placed on the photographs, this takes some identity away from the photographed individuals as well as not using their names. Both figures 10 and 11 are great examples to show that modern day ‘freakshows’ exist but are online instead of in person. These photos are graphic and are posted online for everyone to see with no restrictions or consideration taken for the people in the photographs.

‘*Dinner & Dissection*’ is a great example of how SFX is used to recreate people in a negative manner, in comparison to ‘*The Elephant Man*’ film which utilised SFX to recreate Merrick and depict his life story. It took almost 8 hours for the application

process of the Joseph Merrick prosthetics to be applied to John Hurt the process was so long and uncomfortable that Hurt was quoted saying “I think they finally managed to make me hate acting”<sup>63</sup>

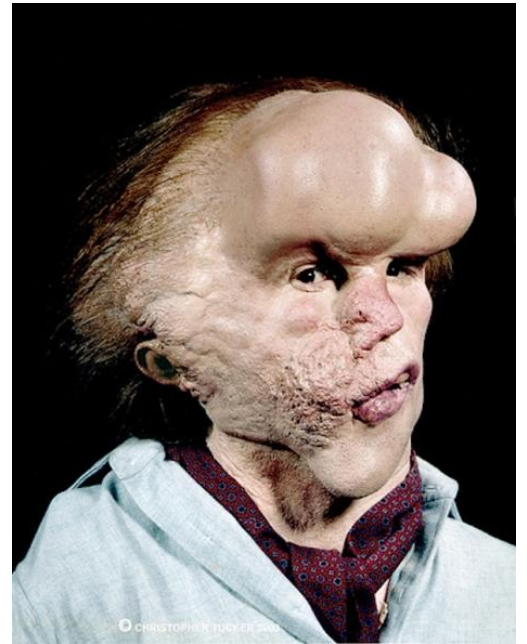


Figure 13: John Hurt Pictured by Tucker with SFX makeup applied, depicting Joseph Merrick.

While John Hurt did showcase the intelligent, sensitive, and kind side of Merrick he still allowed Merrick's life to be exaggerated in some elements. For example, the film depicts Merrick being captured by a showman and caged in Belgium with angry baboons. While Joseph did go to Belgium, he went willingly, and he was never caged with baboons. As revealed in *Chapter 1 Joseph Carey Merrick* he was, robbed by the showman and left stranded in Belgium with only enough possessions to pawn to earn money for his train ticket back to London, Doctor Fredrick Treves card and the clothes on his back.<sup>64</sup>

Of course, it is the nature of film to dramatize situations but, when it comes to a life-story as tragic as Merrick's, the reality should be done justice. The SFX makeup accurately depicted how Merrick lived his life particularly when they showcased him sleeping with his head placed on his knees, as it was too heavy for him to lay flat.

<sup>63</sup> Dangerous Minds. *HOW THEY BROUGHT 'THE ELEPHANT MAN' BACK TO LIFE*. 1 Jan. 2018, [https://dangerousminds.net/comments/how\\_they\\_brought\\_the\\_elephant\\_man\\_back\\_to\\_life](https://dangerousminds.net/comments/how_they_brought_the_elephant_man_back_to_life).

<sup>64</sup> Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. *The True History of The Elephant Man the Definitive Account of The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Joseph Carey Merrick*. Allison & Busby, 2009.

While makeup artist Christopher Tucker brought Merrick back to life on screen<sup>65</sup>, It is important to understand why the SFX makeup was so accurate: primarily due to the Royal London Hospital Museum's plaster casts of Merricks body. It is important it is understood that because of the morbid curiosity which surrounded Merrick he was denied the normal life he so desperately desired.

SFX makeup is a great tool for film and when it came to Joseph Merricks life being represented in a film '*The Elephant Man*' depicted him as a caring, kind, sympathetic and a gentleman. David Lynch did him justice. The creation of Merricks death mask and body cast brings Treves' intentions and friendship with Merrick into question and makes his book '*The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*' into question and how much of it is biased.

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<sup>65</sup> BFI. *Christopher Tucker on Creating the Elephant Man*. 2019, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/video/video-christopher-tucker-creating-elephant-man>.



### Chapter 3: Character Archetypes

Character archetypes will be important to understand the characters representing Merrick as to what is exaggerated and what is not. *'Ripper Street'* and *'Year of the Rabbit'* are two television shows that will be discussed and will show examples of how character archetypes are used to portray Merrick. These sources will be analysed, and the positive and negative effects of these portrayals will be discussed. Character archetypes are important to discuss as it will show how disabilities and deformities are treated in modern society through television.

Disabilities and deformities in television and film according to the Canadian Association of Broadcasters they are often stereotyped and separated into sections as they note there is the helpless victim, the evil villain, and the inspirational hero<sup>66</sup>. These are character archetypes often used within the film industry. They heavily contribute to the stereotyping of individuals living with a disability or deformity, often suggesting that the only way these individuals can be happy or achieve peace is by somehow curing themselves. The archetypes “Frame disabilities as enemies to defeat, rather than a part of their daily lives.”<sup>67</sup> Media is an extremely important part of our lives; something we consume daily. It is something that cannot be helped but consumed daily. Thus, the portrayal of these archetypes can affect most individuals, especially those who do not fit society’s standards.

Joseph Merrick is one example of how an individual with a disability can become a character archetype in television and film. Across a number of media representations Merrick is often portrayed as an inspirational hero and a helpless victim. In the television series *'Ripper Street'*<sup>68</sup> (30 December 2012- 12 October 2016) Merrick is a kind-hearted and gentle soul; Merrick is made out to fit the inspirational hero and helpless victim archetypes. *'Ripper Street'* was British mystery drama television series where in one episode (season 2 episode 2) Joseph Merrick is a character who witnessed a murder. Merrick is portrayed as a helpless victim in many ways during

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<sup>66</sup> Canadian Association of Broadcasters. 'Media Smarts Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy'. *Common Portrayals of Persons with Disabilities*, <https://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/persons-disabilities/common-portrayals-persons-disabilities>.

<sup>67</sup> <https://sites.uab.edu/humanrights/2019/11/27/misleading-media-disabilities-in-film-and-television/>

<sup>68</sup> Warlow, Richard. *Ripper Street*. Endemol UK, 2012.

this episode: firstly, Merrick is shown wanting to tell his friend Fredrick Treves something but is disheartened as he feels threatened by an inspector. Merrick is then shown being overpowered by this inspector when he falls onto his back onto his bed., -Merrick resembles a turtle on its shell, and is completely helpless and suffocating, needing this man's help to sit him upright, -a scene which also foreshadows his death. A problem with this scene is that it is inaccurate. Merrick is shown lying on his back struggling to breath, but as discussed in chapter 1 it is known that Merrick died from lying back, the weight of his head dislocating his neck. Merricks neck would have dislocated from lying back like he did in this scene, but for *'Ripper Street'* this scene served a purpose of depicting Merrick as a helpless victim.

Another scene portrays Merrick as a helpless victim: He leaves the hospital in disguise and is mobbed by people poking and prodding him while shouting at him to remove his hood. His hood is eventually ripped from him, leaving him vulnerable and exposed while onlookers gawk at him. Again, Merrick is seen falling onto his back unable to get up. - A police officer steps up and helps Merricks to his feet. This policeman is seen as a hero, who tries to evoke empathy in the crowd: "What is wrong with you? This man is your fellow! You would stone him? You call him monster? Look on your own sins!"<sup>69</sup> This portrays Merrick as the helpless victim archetype, who must be saved by others.

The portrayal of Merricks mobbing in *'Ripper Street'* is not far from reality. It is well recorded that Merrick had to wear a disguise to enter the public, but most times would be mobbed in a scene similar to that of the train scene in *'The Elephant Man'*., he is chased down and mobbed leading to his hood being pulled off. As can be seen in figures 14 and 15 it is apparent that *'Ripper Street'* took some inspiration from *'The Elephant Man'*.



Figure 14: Film still from *The Elephant Man* where Merrick is surrounded.



Figure 15: A still taken from *Ripper Street* showing Merrick being surrounded, his hood about to be pulled off.

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<sup>69</sup> Warlow, Richard. *Ripper Street*. Endemol UK, 2013

As *'Ripper Street'* continues Merrick begins to be portrayed as an inspirational hero. For example, he is shown as talking down a suicidal man holding a baby from a ledge.<sup>70</sup> Throughout many readings, a common belief about Merrick is that he was a hopeless romantic and very intelligent. He is quoted as stating “Am I not monstrous”<sup>71</sup> and “It is the truth of my every waking moment and yet despite all I feel joy”<sup>72</sup> these quotes are good examples which showcase how Merrick was aware of his so-called ‘monstrous’ looks, and yet was happy. His happiness is also true in reality, as Fredrick Treves often wrote about how Merrick was happy during the last years of his life despite his struggles. The character portraying Merrick in *'Ripper Street'* states “Once beyond my window I watched one of their numbers make love to the night porter. I have never known that John. The secret intimacy of a woman, who might have told me I was...desired. Beautiful in another’s eyes.”<sup>73</sup> It is being made apparent that Merrick was a hopeless romantic. *'Ripper Street'* accurately portrayed Merrick’s frequent fantasy about maintaining a loving relationship. Merrick successfully talked a suicidal man down from a ledge, he moves other characters with his speeches, and is shown to be an inspirational hero and hopeless romantic.



Figure 16: Joseph Merrick as portrayed in Ripper Street talking a man down off a ledge.

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<sup>70</sup> Warlow, Richard. *Ripper Street*. Endemol UK, 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Warlow, Richard. *Ripper Street*. Endemol UK, 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Warlow, Richard. *Ripper Street*. Endemol UK, 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Warlow, Richard. *Ripper Street*. Endemol UK, 2013.

*'Ripper Street'* uses Merricks hopeless romantic trait as a way to place him into the inspirational hero box. They do this because by showing something so normal for Merrick to want so intensely, brings to light that it is something Merrick will probably never have the chance to experience as a normal man. It moves the audience to feel as though Merrick is inspirational for reminding them that while what he wants is something so simple to a regular person, it is something he cannot have. Treves is quoted saying “Merrick had an admiration of women of such a kind that it attained almost to admiration”<sup>74</sup>. It was known Merrick had an ‘admiration’ for women and so this was used to fuel the character archetype of inspirational hero for Merrick. Often the inspirational hero is painted as a naïve and sweet character such as Merrick in this scene. His wish to be normal and find love inspires his ‘normal’ peers, leading them to find redemption, such as the individual Merrick talks down from the ledge.

This is a very different portrayal when compared to *'Year of the Rabbit'* another television series which portrays Merrick as more of a villain. Merrick is depicted as cunning, sly unpleasant, and overall, not a morally good person. -He also refers to himself as “the elephant”<sup>75</sup>. This is a far-cry to the sensitive, kind-hearted, and intelligent individual from *'The Elephant man'* and *'Ripper Street'*, as well as the true Joseph Merrick. While *'Year of The Rabbit'* is a comedy series it tastelessly portrays a vulnerable individual who has already been taken advantage of so frequently throughout his life.



Figure 17: Merrick depicted in *The Year of the rabbit* 3<sup>rd</sup> from the right.

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<sup>74</sup> Treves, Frederick. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. Cassell & Company Ltd, 1923. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59865/59865-h/59865-h.htm>.

<sup>75</sup> Cecil, Kevin, and Andy Riley. *The Year of the Rabbit*. Objective Fiction, 2019.

'*The Year of the Rabbit*' depicts Merrick owning his own freakshow and acting as a showman who people fear. One scene in particular depicts an individual afraid to confront Merrick, not because of Merricks looks but because Merrick is cruel and seeking money. These further fuels a villain archetype. While '*Ripper Street*' depicts Merrick in a positive light, '*The Year of the Rabbit*' does the exact opposite and defames Merricks true character.

This version of Merrick is emotionally abusive towards others, is loud and flamboyant in his clothing (a bright-coloured velvet tailored suit and a crow), and is even shown running, jumping, and dancing, with no sign of Merricks usual limp or hunched posture. People seem to fear Merrick, not because of his looks but because of the power he wields. '*The Year of the Rabbit*' makes a mockery of the real Joseph Merrick. It is a perversion of the life Merrick lived and personal values he carried., - They attempt to exploit Merricks looks to their advantage turning him into a frightening character and as a money hungry showman. This represents everything Merrick was against.

This is the first instance of placing Merrick into a villain character archetype. The villain archetype is a common one in the film industry and is one that often uses an individual with a disability or deformity. The '*James Bond*' franchise for example has some of the most rememberable villains in film and yet many of these villains have a disability or deformity of some kind. In a parody trailer for '*James Bond*' A woman by the name of Jane Seymour points out James Bonds issue of killing disabled individuals, "the whole disabled persons as a supervillain thing is cliché and offensive. I've never seen anyone cling to outdated stereotypes so stubbornly"<sup>76</sup>. The franchise is aware depicting disabled and deformed individuals as villains is problematic but continues to do so regardless. Aruma a disability provider <sup>77</sup>wrote a blog post about problematic character archetypes where they outline that "throughout history, books and films have drawn strong links between disabilities and evil or depravity."<sup>78</sup>This shows that this is a common occurrence in film and television.

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<sup>76</sup> Funny Or Die. *James Bond Sensitivity Training with Jane Seymour*. 2015.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.aruma.com.au/about-us/about-aruma/>

<sup>78</sup> Aruma. 'Disability Stereotypes in the Media'. *Disability Stereotypes in the Media*, <https://www.aruma.com.au/about-us/blog/run-forest-run-disability-stereotypes-in-the-media/>.

Individuals with a disability or deformity are often not depicted to be true, by film and television often depicting the individual as being unhappy because of their disability or deformity. One example of this is the film *'Me Before You'*<sup>79</sup> where a wealthy banker has been in an accident and paralysed for life, this character is portrayed as miserable and bitter because of his disability. Which leads back to the victim archetype, where this character is severely depressed due to being wheelchair bound from an accident and how with the help of a beautiful woman, he can become happy again. This sends a message to the audience that disabled individuals are unable to be happy and successful and need an able-bodied person to make them happy again.

Each of the three primary character archetypes mentioned previously have been used to portray Merrick in media. These portrayals could heavily affect those individuals with Proteus Syndrome (which scientists believe Merrick suffered with) and other individuals suffering from other disabilities/deformities.

These characters representing Merrick are never treated with dignity, nor as 'ordinary' people, instead being characterised by these three archetypes. It is important for these individuals to receive proper representation within the media to see individuals like themselves being treated like ordinary people and with dignity: "Many people develop their understanding of different disabilities through the representations they see in film and television (this) impacts the way people are viewed by their local communities and, therefore, their ability to access their human rights."<sup>80</sup> The portrayal of individuals suffering with disabilities and deformities within the media is critical to their proper representation and access to respect and fundamental human rights within their communities.

Character Archetypes play an important role in film and television. However, it has been shown that they are problematic for individuals with disabilities and deformities and often fuel society's outlook on these individuals. Merrick has been portrayed as a villain, an inspirational hero and a victim. Merrick's wish in life was to be a normal person and to have society and media placing him in a character archetype is problematic. While it is thought modern society would be more progressive in the treatment of individuals with disabilities, it still has a ways to go. As shown in

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<sup>79</sup> Sharrock, Thea. *Me Before You*. Warner Bros pictures, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> <https://sites.uab.edu/humanrights/2019/11/27/misleading-media-disabilities-in-film-and-television/>

*'Ripper Street'* and *'The Year of the Rabbit'* Merrick is still being stereotyped in modern society through the production of these television programmes.





## Conclusion

Merricks biography was an important one to learn in order to better understand his life, this set up the rest of the thesis. By understanding Merricks biography, it makes understanding chapters 2 and 3 more simple. Chapter 2 discusses the use of special effects makeup (SFX makeup) and how this was used to depict Merrick in film, by discussing SFX makeup it opens a path to discuss the exploitation of Merrick after his death and how he was placed on display in the Royal London Hospital Museum. Chapter 3 then picks up on character archetypes and how they were used in television and film to depict Merrick and how this has had a possible effect on disabled and deformed individuals in modern society.

Merrick suffered from Proteus syndrome; this condition greatly affected the life Merrick led. It has been proven throughout chapters one to three that the mistreatment of people suffering from varying disabilities and deformities greatly impacts these people's lives even in the twenty-first century these people are still stereotyped and treated as though they are less than abled people. The character archetypes of film and television, in chapter three show how Merrick and others are most often placed in one of three categories, the hero, the villain and the victim and how problematic these titles are for non-abled people.

The challenges Merrick faced and how television and film take advantage of his character and twist it to fit their narrative show that to this day people do not have the best intentions. Merricks body being on display in the Royal London Hospital Museum shows a lack of respect for Merrick even in death he is being taken advantage of. This presents a worrying issue for the disabled and deformed people today and brings up the question of whether they will suffer a similar fate. Chapter two "Dinner and Dissection" shows how people suffering from proteus syndrome are still at risk of being used as a freakshow of some kind, this television show has openly decided to replicate Merricks body and then dissect him on live television. This brings up the question of if they are willing to do such a thing to Merrick what would stop them from doing something like this to other people with similar conditions?

Many people only know Merrick as the "Elephant Man" and not his name it was very important to bring his story to light with the appropriate research and comparisons. There would be some good examples of how history is repeating itself with the way

the advertisements of 2021 for *'Dinner and Dissection'* took inspiration from old freakshow posters that depicted Merrick as a monster to be feared.

The representation of people suffering from various deformities and disabilities in media has constantly been shown as a negative thing that this person should be depressed and ashamed of. The general public has been shown to almost use these people for their entertainment whether it is subconsciously or not. *'The Year of The Rabbit'* talked about in chapter three is a great example of how a television show has defamed Merricks character and portrayed him as something he is not, this television show portrayed this character as an unpleasant, loud, malicious person. It is thought that because Merrick is no longer alive it is okay to defame his character, but it sets an example to other disabled and deformed people that they too are at risk of this treatment as such little respect is shown towards Merrick in death why wouldn't people with similar conditions receive the same treatment.

However, *'The Elephant Man'* film portrays Merrick as a kind, empathetic and intelligent man, this film is a good example of showing how Merrick lived and acted towards the people he valued. While parts of the film are exaggerated such as the scene with monkeys, it does a better job of portraying Merrick than *'The Year of The Rabbit'*.

The research process consisted mostly of books and articles as it was important to make sure the information that was received was accurate, many of the books used were very old due to how long-ago Merrick lived and it was important to use books that had first-hand interactions with Merrick to make sure the information given on his personality and life were as accurate as possible. One source, however, *'The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences'* by Fredrick Treves was slightly biased as it was only from Treves' perspective and Treves often spoke about himself in a way that made himself seem like a hero. The issue with this source was that Treves also called Merrick, John instead of his true name Joseph it is unclear why Treves did this, but it does bring into question how accurate the information from this book is. Another source used that was found to be helpful was *'Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture'* by Nadja Durbach, this source provided useful arguments on the topic of freakshows, and the language used by Treves when he wrote about Merrick.

Merrick's tale was a long and difficult one. He faced much discrimination and many trials for a condition which he carried no control over. Despite this, he remained a kind and empathetic individual throughout his life. Disabled and deformed individuals may take inspiration from his personal strength and resolve. For modern society, Merrick's story remains as an example of how we must attempt to portray disabled individuals more fairly within media and must respect them more throughout life. Overall, the title of this thesis *The Representation of Joseph Carey Merrick and His Disabilities and Deformities in Film and Society* has been discussed and shown with the appropriate sources to back up any arguments.

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