

The elephant man essay sample



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Introduction

John or Joseph Merrick was more popularly known by the moniker *The Elephant Man*. Different versions of his story were dug up and the difficulty of determining the authentic account surfaces. However, one major undeniable fact and characteristic about the man is that he did exist and the existence was that of a hideous defacement almost never duplicated or equalled in times past. This reality though, paled in significance to the greater nobility which hid behind the mask of a man. Who was Merrick, the man, and the truth to the legend ascribed to him? Who were his parents, and what malady was he afflicted with? How did he cope with his gross disability? What would people of today do to a man like Merrick?

Literature is rich with many of the facets of his personality. This paper therefore, attempts to provide a brief and succinct description of the person and his life.

Discussion

1. *John Merrick's early life.*

John was his name because this was the reference that his doctor and “adoptive father” Treves frequently called him. His real name is Joseph and his true birth date is believed to be 1862 despite claims of Merrick that it was 1860. Born an Englishman, Joseph or “John” died on April 11, 1890 due to natural causes (_____)Joseph Merrick: *Medical Curiosity*, WHO2).

According to his own account, Merrick began to notice the developing masses of flesh all over his face and body when he approximately five years

old. His father remarried when Merrick's young mother died, also described as one who had crippling defect, when he was only eleven years old. He took a job selling haberdashery but taunting by other children and people made his work harder. Eventually, the added maltreatment his stepmother did to him forced him to step out of their lives forever (_____) Joseph Merrick: *Medical Curiosity*, WHO2).

1. *His job*

He took odd jobs but in all probability, his disfigurement was a major disadvantage to his search for a decent occupation. Eventually, he took the offer to work using his “disadvantage” his source of livelihood, that of being a sideshow attraction. He did earn quite well considering the times. In the later point of his work where he was promoted as a “circus draw,” Merrick came to meet Dr. Frederick Treves, who took more than a fancy on him, and gave him his calling card, with the hope that Merrick will submit to a health check (_____) Joseph Merrick: *Medical Curiosity*, WHO2).

1. *His medical condition*

First attributed as *Elephantiasis*, “John” Merrick was diagnosed later as one having the ailment *neurofibromatosis*. However, more recent examination and analysis of the disease shows that a more rare case than *neurofibromatosis* was actually what Merrick suffered: *Proteus syndrome* (_____) “*Proteus syndrome*”). Neurofibromatosis type I is a genetic disorder and had now become attached next to Merrick's name. In 1986, the latter more correct diagnosis of his sickness – the proteus syndrome was strongly suggested. Named after the “shape-shifting god Proteus,” the syndrome

manifests itself in the tissues and nerves, “ and is a sporadic rather than familiarly transmitted disorder” (Tibbles J, Cohen M, 1986).

Because it is a very rare congenital disease, proteus syndrome would not be cured even by today’s medical breakthrough. The NF1, more known than the proteus syndrome, is also difficult to cure. What doctors and specialists do with these two diseases might have to do more with minimizing the growth or do corrective surgery as Dr. Treves did to Merrick to lessen the deformity (Tibbles J, Cohen M, 1986).

NF1, for *neurofibromatosis*, causes tumor growth in various parts of the afflicted person, and the reason that bone deformation occurs as well with the tumors. In addition, the proteus syndrome that was *co-existent* with NF1 is a congenital disease, responsible for the overgrowth of the parts of the head, limbs or other extremities (BBC News, *Elephant Man mystery unraveled*, 2003).

A certain Dr. Charis Eng who did DNA tests on John Merrick’s hair and bone, confirmed that the young man, who died at age 27, was afflicted of Proteus syndrome, but added furthermore, that Merrick might have had neurofibromatosis type I also (BBC News, *Elephant Man mystery unraveled*. 2003).

1. *Society’s conduct to people with ailment like Merrick’s*

The deformities of Merrick started when he was aged five, but the defacement continued to grow even more hideously as he approached his teenage years (_____ “ *A BBC story about the Results of DNA tests on Merrick’s body*”). Expectedly, the misshapeness that characterized him

more than his overall personhood became the reason for society's rejection. Curiosity on his condition, that he looked like a freak, could have been very emotionally painful but his own accounts attested to the deep-seated understanding that Merrick felt towards the people in general, this despite the rude and cruel looks, name-calling and physical maltreatments (_____ "*Autobiography of Joseph Carey Merrick* "). He earned from these curiosities, more so because he had no more viable options during his time with the limited abilities he had (_____ *Joseph Merrick: Medical Curiosity*, WHO2).

1. *Merrick's way of life*

His childlike ways, his gentility, and his brand of Christianity/spirituality made him an acclaim that he is today around the world. It had become an amazing phenomenon that he survived life's difficulties or impossibilities with the no trace of resentment to those around him. He had one of those rare qualities that defy explanations: why he did not harbour ill-feelings towards any person (_____ "*Joseph Merrick's Short autobiographical note*").

Joseph or John may have been depicted as more of a legend and a myth as people today may have thought him to be. But the real John or Joseph " in action" was more than the stories put together. Memoirs from Treves, some from his own chronicles and others from people who had come to know him, confirmed that his was the kind of life that illustrates the cliché " art mimicking life." What was distinctly him was his ability to read, write and speak well knowing that his was a background that was utter neglect and isolation (Batt, 2004).

Conclusion

Considering the very limited life that was before Joseph “ John” Merrick, it is a wonder that he actually was a very optimistic, bright and well-read individual. The oft-quoted poem referring to his mind is at best a more appropriate description of the real person inside the horrendous tumours.

Works Cited Page

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APPENDIX

Source: < [http://: www. answers. com](http://www.answers.com) >

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A computer image of how Merrick may have looked

How Merrick may have looked without his affliction