

The elephant man analysis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

"The Elephant Man" is a 1980's film directed by David Lynch. The film is loosely based on the life of John Merrick, a man that lived in 19th century London and also suffered from severe deformities that plagued his body. The growths were large and made John look like an elephant and so the nickname "The Elephant Man" was coined.

A vicious rumour was then circulated detailing that whilst in the womb, John's mother was trampled by elephants causing him to become "The Elephant Man". The plot was adapted from "The Elephant Man and other Reminiscences" by Sir Frederick Treves and "The Elephant man: A Study of Human Dignity" by Ashley Montagu. The film stars John Hurt as John Merrick, Sir Anthony Hopkins as Frederick Treves, Anne Bancroft as Fanny Kemble, John Gielgud as Mr Carr Gomm and Wendy Hiller as Mrs. Motherhead.

The first scene that we are presented with is the credits. They appear as white text on a black background, whilst carnival-like music is played. I believe that the director made the decision to produce the film in monochrome (even though colour was available at the time) for two reasons. The first being that the actual story happened in 19th century London, meaning that there was no colour televisions. I believe that Lynch wanted to achieve the feel that the events were on screen; he wanted you to feel like a part of them.

The second reason is because of people's attitudes. Black and white is referred to as old fashioned; people's attitude towards Merrick was appalling. I believe that Lynch was insinuating that everyone's attitude was old fashioned and wanted to showcase this attitude in the film. The carnival

music used throughout the credits is dark, menacing and disturbing. It has an air of mystery about it, which begs the question: what is going on? The carnival music (which is non-diegetic) is primarily used because of the fact that Merrick was “employed” as one of the “freaks” at a carnival.

After the credits the screen cuts to black and a low-key, high contrast picture of an extreme close-up on a woman’s eyes appears. Looking into the eyes I can see that the woman is content and at peace. The camera then tilts further down the woman’s face (still in extreme close-up mode) to show her nose and her lips. Having been given the chance to see all of the woman’s face now, I can see that she is quite a beautiful woman with pristine facial features. A portrait of the woman (which we later learn is John’s Mother) in a picture frame then quickly succeeds this image.

Now, the woman’s eyes are black, one can gather no emotion or feeling from them, they tell me nothing. The woman is frowning, she is no longer at peace, and she doubts something. This image too is high contrast; one half of the woman’s face is in pure, brilliant white light, the other in dark shadow. This could symbolise mixed emotion or that she is hiding something in the shadows.

This image then fades out along with the carnival music. We are now presented with a low monotonous rumbling as the same woman appears again. Her hair is scruffy, her lips are pursed and her eyes tell tales of worry, anger and fear. We quickly zoom in on this picture to gain an extreme close-up of the woman’s eyes again; this image now consolidates her suspected emotions. The low rumbling sound now develops into a laboured, heavy

thumping sound that could be both non-diegetic and diegetic. Non-diegetic, because it could be likened to sounds of machinery; this was the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, man was being replaced by machine.

Every factory used them, so it would be highly likely that you would be able to hear them. Diegetic, because a herd of elephants have appeared on-screen this sound could be described as the elephants striding. The elephants are now partially faded out and the aforementioned picture of the woman partially fades in, so that we have a mix of the two. The woman still has the same look of fear in her eyes as the elephants march past. The elephants then freeze, it now looks like the woman and the elephant are one.

The screen then fades out to black again. We are then presented with a long shot clip at eye level of elephants marching towards the camera. This angle then tilts to a low angle so that we are looking up at the elephants, as if struck down by them. The screen again, fades to black.

Now, there is an elephant with its trunk raised in the air and its tusks thrust forward, looking ready to attack. A low-key image of the woman appears again, her face barely recognisable, the elephant's trunk swipes at her and knocks her to the ground. A high angle shot of the woman is now on screen, it gives the idea that we are the elephant. The woman is screaming inaudibly, in pain? In fear? Or in labour? The shots then oscillate between a low angle shot looking up at the elephant and a high angle shot looking down on the mother. The screen, once again cuts to black, then slowly a wisp of smoke rises into the air.

Magicians often use smoke, I think that because this clip of smoke is accompanied by the diegetic sound of a baby crying, it symbolises the magic of birth. The screen finally, cuts to black.