

Crissa Bencoter

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Professor Ruffner

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The Illusion of Normalcy

"Normal," according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is "conforming to a standard, usual, typical or expected" (971). In Bernard Pomerance's play, *The Elephant Man*, the protagonist, John Merrick, is not able to conform to the standard of normalcy because of a mysterious illness that he suffers from. His illness is not just any illness either; it is one that is not only incurable but that has left Merrick with grotesque growths and protrusions covering his body. After spending much of his life as an exhibit in traveling freak shows run by Ross and having people gawk and stare at him, Merrick is rescued by Dr. Treves from the London Hospital and spends the remainder of his life at the institute. Despite the fact that Merrick's humanity goes beyond that of normal society which has done nothing short of humiliate and mock him, Merrick still aspires to be a part of it. Treves attempts to make normalcy a reality for Merrick, by making Merrick like himself, but only succeeds in creating an illusion of it.

First of all, normalcy is an illusion for John Merrick because of the artificial world of the London Hospital in which

he is brought to live. Upon first arriving at the institute, the Elephant Man is once again put on display in the "interest of science" as Treves lectures to the medical community on his deformities, "The most striking feature about him was his enormous head. Its circumference was about that of a man's waist" (Pomerance 5). Regardless of Treves' every good intention to rescue Merrick from the imprisonment of Ross, he treats Merrick very similarly to the way Ross did, displaying him while those of the medical community stare in astonishment at a sight they have never before seen. Later on, Treves begins to bring visitors to see Merrick so that he can begin his process of "normalizing" Merrick. Treves forewarns the visitors of Merrick's deformities and even shows pictures before they see him in person. One of the first visitors, Miss Sandwich, before seeing Merrick says, "Appearances do not daunt me" (Pomerance 17) but, after seeing him, runs out of the room and says, "Just pictures. No one will do this. I am sorry" (Pomerance 18). Once again Merrick is brought back to an environment similar to that of the traveling freak shows, where women fear and loath him. As Merrick continues to live at the institute, he comes to understand that the "normal" life Treves has attempted to create is only a portion of the life he longs for. Thinking that he will ever be able to live a life away from the confines of his hospital room is yet another illusion

Merrick is forced to face. According to Sheri Metzger, a Ph.D. specializing in literature and drama,

“When Treves finally recognizes that the social environment he has constructed for Merrick is illusionary, he is forced to question his own ideas about normalcy and the power of science to cure all problems.”

Treves believes at the beginning of the play that science and medicine will cure Merrick of his deformities. All along, however, the reader is aware that science will not be successful in healing Merrick because of the constant presence of the church. According to the authors of Literature and its Times, “the church is symbolic of the fact that science will not be able to make Merrick “normal” and the building of the church by Merrick represents the Body of Christ, Merrick seems to be thinking of it as a new body for himself” (122).

Furthermore, another example of the illusion of normalcy is Merrick’s relationship with Mrs. Kendal. Treves invites Mrs. Kendal because he recognizes the importance of women not fearing Merrick and his deformities. More importantly, however, is that Treves invites Mrs. Kendal because she is an actress and thus, will not run in fright at the sight of Merrick. Before meeting Merrick, Treves tells Mrs. Kendal precisely what to say and do,

"Well. In any case. If you could enter the room and smile and wish him good morning. And when you leave, shake his hand, the left one is usable, and really quite beautiful, and say, "I am very pleased to have made your acquaintance, Mr. Merrick" (Pomerance 29).

This immediately makes it obvious to Mrs. Kendal that this is just another performance. Although Mrs. Kendal tells Merrick that her stage life is an illusion and that her meeting with him is reality, in fact, it is all staged. She practices several greetings with Treves, so, her initial response to Merrick is not spontaneous but rather rehearsed. The meeting between Merrick and Mrs. Kendal is as artificial and illusionary as the hospital room in which they meet.

Finally, it is not until Merrick remarks to Mrs. Kendal that he has never seen a "real woman" naked, that she finally drops the act and recognizes that Merrick needs and wants more. Mrs. Kendal bares her breasts to Merrick and, for a moment, the illusion dissipates. Treves walks in, however, and says,

"But—have you no sense of decency? Woman, dress yourself quickly. Are you not ashamed? Do you know what you are? Don't you know what is forbidden?"
(Pomerance 50).

Once again, the illusion of normalcy returns because Treves establishes boundaries that limit Merrick's sexuality. What is

more normal than for a man to be attracted to a beautiful woman and to show interest in the sexuality of her? Yet when Merrick reveals his interest in Mrs. Kendal and she obliges, Treves is shocked and disgusted. Although nothing improper or out of the "norm" has occurred, Mrs. Kendal is banished and never returns.

In conclusion,

"If normalcy is an illusion as it is for John Merrick, then it is an illusion that much of mankind embraces. The need to feel normal, to appear normal, is all too common (Metzger).

The simple fact that mirrors adorn the walls of homes and other buildings indicates that the need to reassure ourselves of our normalcy is all too common among mankind. What it really gets down to though is that normal is an illusion for each of us because it does not exist. The dictionary may provide a definition of it and Merrick may have been trying to live his life according to what it is considered to be but really normal is a constraint that society and the individuals within a society put upon themselves. At the end of the day, normal is each person's interpretation; it is what a person is familiar with or akin to. For Merrick, he strives to conform to what is considered normal by the Victorian era but, this striving for something that he is not, ultimately leads to his death. As Merrick gets closer to "normal," the illness that will kill him

progresses. Richard Eder writes that "the free and boundless spirit of Merrick is gradually crushed as he realizes his normalcy has all been an illusion." Merrick dies after going to sleep in a "normal" position with his head down, another passive partaker of others' attempts to make him normal.

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