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James Clark

The Price of Growing Beyond Innocence: Examining the Literary Lineage
of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*

There exists a longstanding tradition in literature, dating back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which a protagonist, originally limited intellectually or socially by internal or external factors, becomes self-aware and ultimately suffers as a result of having achieved this new level of consciousness. Other novels which employ similar patterns include Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* and Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* can be categorized as part mystery/suspense novel and part *Bildungsroman*. However, due to Christopher developing an awareness of his own limitations near the novel's end, it can also be seen as a direct descendent of those classics, in that its protagonist's emotional and psychological journeys are consistent with those protagonists who have come face-to-face with the realization of some key aspect of themselves or their characters. Just as Frankenstein's creature realizes and must accept its hideousness, and just as Charlie is tormented by the memory of fleeting intelligence after experimental brain surgery, Christopher Boone's coming-of-age brings with it a new level of self-identification and its potentially powerful effects. This essay seeks to explore the intertextual relationships between *The Curious Incident* and previous works employing similar themes, specifically *Flowers for Algernon* and *Frankenstein*.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time opens in the middle of the night with 15-year-old Christopher Boone, the novel's protagonist, discovering Wellington, a poodle belonging to his next-door neighbor Mrs. Shears, dead in the garden with a barbecue fork stuck in its body. Christopher sets out to uncover the identity of the killer. His father extracts a promise (as do the police, after a misunderstanding in which he panics and strikes an officer) that he won't pursue the investigation, but he persists anyway, despite his father's warnings. He journals the investigation in a book at the urging of his teacher (the journal is represented by the novel itself).

His father confiscates his journal; while searching for it, Christopher discovers a series of letters written to him by his mother. He learns that she is alive in London with Mr. Shears, and that the two have for some time been involved in a relationship which sparked a similar romantic affair between his father and Mrs. Shears; it was the dissolution of this brief tryst that led his father to kill Wellington. Terrified, Christopher sneaks out and travels by train to London to live with his mother. She takes him in, but the resulting friction between her and Mr. Shears results in her decision to return to Swindon and find a new apartment. His father visits, but Christopher won't speak or acknowledge him until after the death of Christopher's pet rat, Toby, at which time his father presents him with a puppy.

Christopher achieves his goal of an A grade on the A-level math exams, and in the final paragraphs discusses his plans to attend University in another town, confident that solving the mystery and surviving the harrowing trip to London are sufficient evidence of his ability to thrive in normal society.

From its beginnings, *The Curious Incident* is disguised as a mystery novel; starting with the opening scene, Christopher is intrigued by the violent death of the dog and intent on solving

the crime, even to the point of ignoring warnings and breaking promises. Beneath the surface, however, the novel unfolds as a coming-of-age story couched in (and at times entwined with) the mystery Christopher seeks to solve. The *bildungsroman* that emerges is only the second layer, however, in a complex character study, the roots of which can be traced to Dr. Frankenstein's creature, Daniel Keyes' Charlie Gordon, and others. Although Christopher's connections to these literary figures may seem, at a glance, tenebrous, and although it isn't immediately apparent that the novel seeks to deal with consciousness and self-identification, there are multiple examples of intertextuality to be found between these works, along with clues that Haddon is exploring more with Christopher than one might expect to find in delving into a teenage protagonist.

Haddon subtly hints at human consciousness as an underlying thematic concern of *The Curious Incident*. In the opening pages, Christopher declares that the book is to be a murder mystery, but attempts to distinguish it from a "proper novel" by comparing it directly to Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, quoted on pages 4-5:

"In proper novels, people say things like, 'I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus'" (Haddon 4-5).

One can only assume that the selection of this quotation from Woolf's book is deliberate, but to what end? What is its significance? Its inclusion appears to serve a twofold purpose: it serves as exposition of his character, laying the groundwork for Christopher's explanation of why he can't produce a "proper novel" in revealing his inability to construct an imaginary narrative and his disdain for this passage and, by extension, all metaphorical language; second, it

is apparent that Haddon is using this particular text as a signpost to lead the reader in a particular direction. Occurring as it does from a novel from a period and an author known for stream-of-consciousness work, this quote automatically directs us to the workings of the human mind. Coupled with this exemplary Woolf quote is Haddon's careful construction of Christopher's fictional mind through narrative voice, particularly in presenting "idiosyncrasies in Christopher's use of deixis" (Semino 18); the two techniques clearly establish that consciousness, as used in it applies to the workings of Christopher's mind in particular, is central to the novel and a key concern of its creator.

If the quote and the representation of Christopher indicate that human consciousness or, more specifically, the power and limitation of the human mind, are intended as a tertiary subtextual focus of the novel, then it is critical that Christopher's mental and psychological journeys be examined in depth.

Self-identification is a key factor in the move beyond innocence that takes place as a result of Christopher's and the other protagonists' experiences. It is perhaps important, then, to begin with an understanding of how self-identification is defined and what it entails. In its simplest terms, self-identification is nothing more than ascribing certain attributes to oneself or, put another way, the realization that one possesses particular attributes which constitute membership in a group or type of people. It is not enough, however, to consider "all thoughts which a subject may have 'about himself,' for presumably a person may think about someone who is in fact himself without realizing that he is doing so" (Brooks 96). It is not sufficient for Christopher to understand the effects of autism on social interaction and functionality; self-identification entails Christopher arriving at an understanding of how his interior self relates to the world. As with Frankenstein's creature and Charlie Gordon, Christopher's experiences in

The Curious Incident bring him to understand himself in the context of the world around him and how his condition affects his ability to interact and function within the parameters outlined by “normal” society.

Early in the novel, Christopher is concerned with taking his A-level math exam and going to university; he plans to become an astronaut, which he thinks he will excel at because he is intelligent and “good at understanding how machines work” and because he likes “really little spaces, so long as there is no one else in them” (Haddon 50). It is these plans that demonstrate Christopher’s naivety in the early part of the novel, a limitation brought about by his autism. As J P Teunisse states in his 2012 article, studies have concluded that “lowered self-awareness may result in an overestimation of personal real-world functioning” (Teunisse). This is clearly the case with Christopher, in whose simplified view a few basic skills are sufficient to tackle one of the most mentally and physically demanding undertakings in human experience. Christopher as a character is certainly realized by an author who intuitively understands the way autism presents in adolescents.

After Christopher concludes that he will have to go away and live in London with his mother, he realizes that he “could never be an astronaut” because it would mean “being hundreds of thousands of miles away from home” (Haddon 131), which scares him now that he has actually experienced being some distance from his home in Swindon. This small but telling introspective revelation allows the reader to understand that Christopher has begun to realize his own limits and to think outside his own mind, if only within the very difficult limits under which his autism restricts him. The novel concludes with Christopher planning to take more A-level exams in physics and further math, and then attend a university in another town. He is aware, as a result of having run away from home earlier in the book, that he won’t be able to cope without

an adult present; he is also aware that the idea of going into space is completely out of the question. It is this new awareness that provides the focus for the concept of consciousness as a critical subtext, as it is here that Christopher's actions and discoveries in solving the mystery, writing a book, and finding his mother, although technically successful, have led him to the conceptualization of his own flaws as part and parcel to his expanded understanding of the world at large.

Studies have defined a relationship between "an increase in self-awareness" and "daily and psychological problems" in people with broad-spectrum autistic disorders (Teunisse). Autistic study subjects whose examinations revealed a higher-than-average level of self-awareness, as evidenced through self-assessment surveys, showed a reduction in parent-reported functional issues but a greater tendency toward acting out and other signs of psychological problems.

It would seem, then, that Christopher Boone's new-found knowledge of his own limitations would ultimately lead him to some degree of psychological repercussion, which would likely be sufficient to class the *Curious Incident* protagonist among the iconic literary figures for whom self-identification has struck like a blow. The question of whether the novel's conclusion sufficiently reflects this real-world information, however, remains to be answered.

Through the majority of the novel, Christopher manages to maintain an innocent view of the world and, more importantly, of his place in it. This is demonstrated through such simplistic thinking as his assertion that he would make a very good astronaut for peculiar reasons, and through his believe that he can safely attend University in another town "because Father wants to move to a different town as well" (Haddon 45), implying the childlike need to keep his father present even as he engages in adult pursuits.

Christopher's transformation is made evident in his own reflections on his prior self. In the early stages of the novel, we learn that he has developed a system of making predictions about the quality of the day ahead, determining whether a day will be good or bad by way of tallying cars by color while riding the bus to school. He has created a formula by which "4 red cars in a row made it a **Good Day**, and 3 red cars in a row made it a **Quite Good Day**" (Haddon 24), and so forth; the system is called into question when he finds himself sitting at a window for a much longer period of time than the short ride on the school bus, during which time he realizes that "...you could look out the window...and see as many cars as you wanted, so the system didn't work anymore" (Haddon 205). This incident is a turning point in Christopher's understanding of himself and the world; narratively, it "presents [Christopher] in a state in which parts of the carefully arranged rule system that helps him cope with a world of ambiguity collapse" (Freißmann 395).

Although obviously high-functioning within the autism spectrum, Christopher is nevertheless limited in his ability to function to a level that most would consider in any way normal or complete; emotional connections with those around him, and empathy with other people, are restricted, and nuance and subtlety in the form of both spoken language and facial expression are lost on him. This inability to think outside the limitations of a rigid, self-imposed structure serves as an indicator of his inability to grasp the theory of mind, a common effect of Asperger's Syndrome and one of the attributes of autism that makes emotional expression and empathy difficult, if not impossible, as Gvasi Burks-Abbott asserts:

"Christopher's inability to 'put himself in someone else's shoes' refers to his lack of theory of mind, 'the ability to attribute independent mental states to oneself and others, in

order to explain behavior,' a liability that experts argue lies at the core of what makes autism a disabling condition" (Burks-Abbott).

In the novel, the impairments connected with autism, which affect Christopher's ability to interact socially, influence both Christopher's storytelling style and his way of using narrative thinking to plan the future. Christopher's mental limitations prior to the "turn" near the novel's end are not merely artistic constructs but reflections of the limits under which people with autism function—or don't—in the real world. As stated in the 2008 article "A Tale of Autistic Experience: Knowing, Living, Telling in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*":

"...even in the most emotionally intense situations Christopher's mindblindness does not allow him to break the rules governing his interactions with others and to develop intuitions concerning their intentions...[t]his is not a question of having and distrusting intuitions. It is rather a question of not being able or interested to intuit others' intentions" (Freißmann 399).

Christopher's perceptions of himself and those around him, as a result of his condition, are decidedly childlike; by the end of the book, however, some of his innocence has been lost to experience. It is through this core change, brought about by self-discovery, that he shares common ground with other literary figures.

Charlie Gordon, the protagonist in *Flowers for Algernon*, is a mentally-challenged bakery worker who is chosen for experimental brain surgery. His teacher, Alice Kinnian, encourages

him to keep a diary of his thoughts leading up to and throughout the process. The surgery is a success; afterward, his IQ peaks at 185. As he grows intellectually, however, Charlie Gordon suffers socially and emotionally. As the effects of the surgery begin to reverse, Charlie Gordon regresses. Even after his IQ returns to pre-operative levels, however, he can remember having been a genius and is tormented by the memory of his fleeting intelligence. In his final “progress report” entry, Charlie vows to “keep trying to get smart” so that he can “have that feeling agen” (Keyes 274). He has reverted, but has carried with him crucial knowledge, however vague, of having experienced something better. Prior to his surgery, Charlie accepted his minor “dumb” or forgetful moments as a matter of course. Post-operative Charlie is keenly aware of his shortcomings; for example, after he upsets Alice Kinnian by forgetting he is no longer in her class at the adult center, he elects to go away so he “wont do nothing like that agen” (Keyes 273).

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus, is the classic cautionary tale in which Victor Frankenstein’s hubris leads him to believe he can create life from death; even on its face, the novel is a warning about the cost of knowledge. Within the novel, personal knowledge takes its toll, as well; the Creature created by Dr. Frankenstein grows from innocence—or ignorance—to awareness, at great cost. The central thematic concern of *Frankenstein* is, as its subtitle suggests, a treatise on the risks of overreaching in the acquisition of knowledge; the dangers of knowing too much carry over to the creature’s own experiences. The novel depicts the creature as hideous and miserable, unable to gain acceptance from the human population to whom it is certain it seems repulsive. Initially, the creature learns to understand its own senses and learns key facts that ensure its survival, as when it reaches into the embers of a dead fire with the expectation of enhancing the sensation of warmth; in this way, the Creature is very much like a small child.

Upon discovering that it is “endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; ...not even of the same nature as man” (Shelley 106), the creature suffers severe grief, lamenting, “Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat” (Shelley 106). This demonstrates the heavy toll on Frankenstein’s creature as a result of its own self-identification and, by extension, the general dangers of growing beyond innocence.

Holden Caulfield of J.D. Salinger’s quintessential coming-of-age novel *The Catcher in the Rye* endures similar changes, as well. Although he has set rigid standards for the rest of the world—particularly for the “phony” adults who control everything around him—he ultimately realizes that the standards he has set are naïve, and that even he can’t adhere to them.

Finally, preceding *The Curious Incident* by just four years is Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, an epistolary novel in which 15-year-old Charlie, trying to cope with his status as a loner and the suicide of a close friend, writes letters to a stranger relating his life and relationships as he struggles with his tendency toward introspection and distancing.

Beyond the similarities in structure, other similarities exist between *Flowers For Algernon* and *Curious Incident*—the two are similar enough, in fact, that *Algernon* is referred to as *Curious Incident*’s “sister novel” (Blackford 286)—and some patterns emerge which intertextually connect *Curious Incident* to Chbosky’s *Perks*, as well. Notwithstanding the childlike narration of *The Curious Incident* and *Algernon*, which is perhaps a simple parallel but nevertheless warrants mention, we also find similarities within the narrative:

- Keyes’ Charlie Gordon is encouraged by Alice to keep a log of his thoughts as a sort of running progress report; Christopher is encouraged by his teacher, Siobhan, to write a

book about his investigation into the death of the neighbor's poodle; Chbosky's Charlie is encouraged by an unknown third party to write his letters to the mystery recipient;

- At the height of his mental recovery, Charlie finds he is attracted to Alice, but is unable to perform with her sexually due to feelings of panic in intimate moments. Eventually, Charlie unearths suppressed memories, among them a recollection of his mother violently assaulting him for having the slightest sexual impulse. The effect is twofold: he discovers sexuality and unearths painful memories as a direct result of this intellectual and personal growth; a similar moment occurs in the closing chapters of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, when Charlie finds himself in an intimate situation with his long-time friend and crush, Sam; everything goes well, Charlie's letter explains, "Until she moved her hand under my pants, and she touched me" (Chbosky 245), at which point Charlie panics; later, as a result, he experiences a dream/memory of a traumatic childhood event, unearthing a horrific family secret.
- Christopher relates poorly with other people, but feels an attachment to his pet rat, Toby; the titular Algernon is a mouse with whom Charlie Gordon shares a special connection, as they are both chosen by doctors for intelligent-enhancement experimentation.

These similarities suggest Haddon was aware of *Algernon* and the much more recently published *Perks*—beyond their existence in periphery, at least—even if those later works only reflect Keyes' novel obliquely. The important thing to note is that, in each of these cases as well as other works with less prominent evidence of intertextuality, the protagonists experience change that is ostensibly for the better, although not without cost.

Clearly, then, *Curious Incident* follows in the footsteps of its literary predecessors in its depiction of a protagonist's mental, psychological, and/or social growth, but what of the suffering endured by Charlie and the Creature? Is Christopher subject to the same anguish as a result of discovering his own limitations? It is reasonable to assume that most self-discovery initiates core change, but can Christopher's core change be compared, in terms of its severity and its effect in the long term, to the permanent upheaval in the lives of those other literary icons?

In selecting a narrator and protagonist who suffers from autism, Mark Haddon limits the extent to which he is able to realistically relate, in print, the character's emotional reactions, growth, or regression. Even among professionals in the field of mental and psychological health, "the role of emotion in autism is still debated" (Uljarevic). It could be argued, then, based on Teunisse's aforementioned assertions regarding the effects of autism on self-identification, that Haddon's intent in *Curious Incident* is to paint Christopher as doomed to feel the long-term negative effects of his awareness; it could be further argued that any overtly stated lamentation on Christopher's part, in the tradition of Shelley's Creature and Keyes' Charlie, would run counter to established fact in regards to autism spectrum disorders. From this point, one could argue that Christopher is absolutely the spiritual successor to those literary icons, although the author who created him is not at liberty to demonstrate emotional turmoil through Christopher himself. What Haddon offers, both as a substitute for overt emotional expression in Christopher's narrative and as a means of demonstrating exactly why those emotional revelations can't be direct, is a direct, factual account of other people's actions and reactions, as provided by the narrator himself. His inability to react to disruptions in the planned course of events illustrates his inflexibility, a fact Christopher as narrator cannot explain it directly to the reader;

however, it's not uncommon for writers of fiction to "use child consciousness to reveal to the reader more than the child him- or herself can reveal or consciously process" (Blackford 286). Through the use of his mother's declaration that she doesn't know whether it's "going to be possible" (Haddon 202) for him to travel back to Swindon to sit for his A-level exams, Haddon allows us to infer what Christopher is unable to articulate. His decision to travel to London is predicated entirely on his assumption that his mother's existence is peripheral to his own; it "suggests an inability to take into account what others... might want or be obliged to do" (Freißmann 411). The needs and responsibilities of others are invisible to the mindblind Christopher; that she might be unable to aid him in completing the test on schedule never enters into his thinking.

The Curious Incident is, above all else, a work of fiction. As such, it must by necessity be removed from speculation of authorial intent and viewed solely within the confines of what is presented on the page, with some consideration given to what may be inferred by the reader—and inference in itself is problematic, as it gives rise to further questions of the cognitive abilities of the average reader and, in fact, what the term "average reader" might actually entail. It is incumbent upon the literary scholar to speculate on Christopher Boone's connections to other fictional characters not only as delineated by the work itself but also within the framework of a scientific understanding of the real world. Although Mark Haddon has stated that he is not an expert on autism-spectrum disorders—and, in fact, did little research in developing *The Curious Incident*—it is not necessary to such a scientific study that a critical view be dependent upon viewing of the author as expert.

The question, then, comes down to the drawing of a single line, the terminator between story value and scientific accuracy. If *Curious Incident* were a textbook, there could be little

argument that Christopher's behavior in the novel's conclusion could be masking a deep-seated volatility of emotion that does not present externally in any discernible way; if Haddon had not demonstrated his knowledge of other aspects of autism spectrum disorders, it would be easy to accept at face value Christopher's final declaration in regards to getting a First Class Honors degree and becoming a scientist:

“And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of **Who Killed Wellington?** and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything” (Haddon 221).

Regardless of the degree of accuracy to which his condition and actions are depicted elsewhere in the book, Christopher is a fictional character inhabiting the pages of a fictional work. Fiction is “in its broadest definition...a direct impression of life” (“Art of Fiction”15), and the distinction between art and science lies in the rules that govern the way it is recorded. Limiting fiction by ensconcing it too deep in factual information ignores the idea that “the reporter, however philosophic, has one law, and the originator, however substantially fed, has another” (“Honorè de Balzac” 80). Prescriptivism and hard science have their place in fiction, but must defer to narrative; they are of use only as far as they do not hobble the creation of interesting characters or engaging stories.

Without consideration for authorial intent or, for that matter, more than a cursory exploration of what Mark Haddon may have meant for us to believe about Christopher Boone and his future, we are not entirely limited to what Haddon, as an artist, has overtly presented; we are in no way forced to conclude that Christopher really will go on to do, within reasonable

limits, the things he hopes to do, or that his awareness of his own limitations will become just another factor in the complex mental equation by which the rigidly mathematical adolescent defines himself.

The opposite is true, in fact; owing to the expressive limits of Asperger's syndrome, specifically "difficulties in using, sharing and responding to emotions" (Ujarevik) with which Christopher is burdened, it is safe and perfectly reasonable to assume that, despite outward appearances, he is struggling beneath the mask of autism. We may safely infer, via Haddon's use of Woolf as a signpost and through intertextual connections with Shelley and Keyes, that Christopher's declaration of a happy ending, while not a lie (for here we have, if not an entirely reliable narrator, at least a narrator for whom an outright lie is impossible), is nevertheless inaccurate; although his analytical forebrain declares the novel's events as ultimately successful, Christopher's ability to articulate his own emotions is concealed by his condition. What he can offer the reader is a purely factual narration, a play-by-play of the events beginning with the discovery of Wellington; his mere survival through the challenging and stressful events of the story stands, in his purely analytical assessment, as the final proof of the positive outcome of his narrative.

Christopher Boone is a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome; he is not the hideously disfigured Creature; he is not the mentally challenged Charlie Gordon. Instead, his limitations and liabilities are social and emotional, defining him as a fringe member of society; it is through the events of the novel that he realizes his social status and the limitations he will always face. He has seen himself, as the Creature did; he has been introduced to his differences, as Gordon was. Christopher holds a secure place in a long line of fictional characters who achieve a keener

awareness of themselves and, while free from the limits of their own past ignorance, suffer a heavy—and in this case, almost entirely invisible—emotional toll.

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