Hello!
This guide is for you.

It's for you to use before you see the play *The Elephant Man* at Steppenwolf Theatre. It's for you to learn more about the main character of the play, John Merrick. Rescued from a freak show by a kind doctor, Merrick is cared for and introduced to the voyeuristic circles of polite society. As the doctor strives to help his patient regain his dignity and to make him feel “normal,” Merrick’s desire to fit in is complicated when his abnormalities elevate him to celebrity status.

This study guide will examine who John Merrick was as a person:

- Who was he **Historically**?
- Considering all that happened to him during his time in the hospital was he treated in accordance with **Medical Ethics**?
- What role did the **Relationships** he formed with influential people of the time and his own status as a celebrity play in the efforts to make him “normal?”
- What were his **Beliefs** and how did they affect his feelings about normality?
- What was **Beautiful** to him?

The play also provides a context to think about our own lives and our world. This study guide asks how social issues of Merrick’s time relate to ones we encounter today.

**What has changed? What has stayed the same?**
STEPPENWOLF FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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INTRO

JOHN MERRICK - the main character of the play. He suffers from an unknown disease which has deformed his body, isolating him from the rest of society as he earns a living by becoming a side-show attraction. He later resides at the London Hospital.

DR. TREVES - a highly respected physician at the London Hospital who takes in John Merrick to examine him in the interest of science. He later grows fond of Merrick which makes his job as his physician and protector more complicated.

MR. GOMM - the administrator of the London Hospital whose interest in Merrick is more than for the scientific discovery. He also hopes for the funds the hospital receives as a result of Merrick residing there.

THE BISHOP - serves as a religious support for Merrick during his stay at the hospital. He also grows fond of Merrick and becomes fascinated by his creativity and intellect.

MRS. KENDAL - a famous actress who pays visits to Merrick while in the hospital. They share a love of the arts and form a friendship.

ROSS - Merrick’s manager in the side show. He profits from the money Merrick earns from his shows.

Additional Characters who visit Merrick:
Duchess, Countess, Princess Alexandria, Lord John, Miss Sandwich, Porter
Who was John Merrick?

Early biographies of Merrick inaccurately give his first name as John; however, Merrick was named after his father, Joseph Rockley Merrick. Joseph Merrick Jr. was born in Leicester, England on August 5, 1862 to Mary Jane Potterton. Joseph’s mother died from bronchial pneumonia on May 19, 1873 which led to Joseph Sr. to remarry a year later, to Emma Wood. She soon convinced her new husband to get rid of the deformed Joseph.

Joseph was unemployable for the better part of his life until 1884 when he took a job as a side show attraction. At one point in his sideshow career, he was exhibited in the back of an empty shop where he was seen by Dr. Frederick Treves. Dr. Treves reportedly gave Merrick his calling card in the event that Merrick would be willing to be medically examined. Two years later, sideshows were outlawed in the United Kingdom forcing Merrick to find work in Belgium. With a lot of mistreatment and no success, Merrick moved back to London. One day he unintentionally became part of a disturbance at Liverpool Street train station which resulted in Merrick being taken by authorities. There, Merrick referred to Dr. Treves’ calling card leading to Merrick’s permanent residence at the London Hospital. From then on, Merrick became something of a celebrity among the London elite.

In later biographies, Merrick is said to have always wanted to live in a hospital for the blind so that he could find a woman who would not be frightened by his appearance and love him. He was cared for at the hospital until the age of 27. On April 11, 1890 he died from suffocation while sleeping, unable to sleep horizontally due to the weight of his head.

Merrick’s Medical Condition

Joseph Merrick was originally thought to be suffering from elephantiasis. However, in July 2003, doctors discovered and announced that Merrick actually suffered from Proteus syndrome. Named after the Greek god who could change his shape, Proteus syndrome is a rare disorder of the lymphatic system which causes overgrowth of one side of the body, an abnormally large head, and darkened spots or moles on the skin. DNA tests of samples of Merrick’s hair and bones determined that Merrick suffered from an extremely severe case of Proteus syndrome. Merrick’s head was so large his hat measured three feet in circumference.
**Industrial Revolution:**
**THE WORKHOUSE**

During the late 18th century, England experienced an increased pressure to produce enough food and goods to sufficiently feed its increasing population. To make the most efficient use of land, the three-field system and farming hand-tools which had dominated English and European agriculture for centuries was replaced with steam or electricity driven machines. The invention of new machinery led to England’s rapid change from an agricultural-based country to a manufacturing-based country. England became the spotlight of this economic transformation as the number of wage laborers increased. The Industrial Revolution brought about a social transformation as well. Manufacturing brought hundreds of thousands of workers into the cities because industrial workers were better paid than those in agriculture. However, factory workers, including women and children, worked for very long hours for little pay and under very harsh conditions. The Industrial Revolution gave rise to thinking of the human body as a machine, and viewing human beings for their utility. By 1825, factory workers joined in an effort to create vast political change and become a social force of their own.

**Scientific Revolution:**
**DR. TREVES’ FOUNDATION OF THOUGHT**

Starting from the year 1600, there were dramatic and historically rapid changes in the ways in which scholars thought about the physical world and studied it. There was a development of scientific ideas mostly in the areas of physics, astronomy and biology. Other scientists also discovered the vital functions of different organs of the human body. Finding evidence of scientific theories came about through observation and experimentation—to desert assumption and to attempt to simply observe with an open mind—was in strict contrast with the earlier approach of deduction, by which analysis of known facts produced further understanding. Many scientists (and philosophers) believed that science required both the willingness to question assumptions, and also to interpret observations. Observing became a powerful form of finding answers to scientific inquiries and problems.
Medical ethics is the study of moral values as they apply to medicine. In many cases, moral values can be in conflict, and ethical crises in how best to treat a patient can result.

What are Medical Ethics?
Love’s got nothing to do with surgery—Dr. Treves

Dr. Frederick Treves, a young and accomplished doctor on the brink of great success, discovers John Merrick at a freak show in London. Both confounded by Merrick’s physical condition as a medical phenomenon and horrified at the inhumane way Merrick was treated by his manager Ross, Dr. Treves arranges for Merrick to be taken to the London Hospital to be examined and housed. His mission is to allow Merrick to have as normal a life as possible.

What role do medical ethics play in Treves’ relationship with Merrick?

When Merrick arrives at the London Hospital, there is no known cure or diagnosis for his condition. Dr. Treves’ primary concern is to learn more about Merrick’s condition in the hope of treating him and making his life better and safer. The hospital also receives funding as a result of Merrick living at the hospital and becoming a national celebrity. Merrick was provided a safe haven from the life he lived in the freak show. Dr. Treves feels responsible to navigate Merrick’s social, intellectual and spiritual life in spite of the fact that he is at a loss for how to treat him medically. As the play goes on, Treves begins to question the ethical implications of the role he plays in Merrick’s life and whether it compromises his role as a doctor. Why does Treves feel responsible for Merrick?
Terry Schiavo
Terry Schiavo was a 41-year old woman who suffered from severe brain damage. Schiavo was unable to feed herself, speak or even think. While she never put into writing whether or not she would want to be kept alive artificially, her parents fought to keep her alive while her husband believed her feeding tube should be removed so that her body would eventually die.

Cochlear Implants
A cochlear implant is a surgically implanted electronic device that provides a sense of sound to a person who is deaf or severely hard of hearing, thereby allowing him/her to hear and understand speech. Cochlear implant surgeries are usually recommended for deaf children when they are very young. One of the controversies surrounding cochlear implants is that members of the deaf community who are pre-lingually deaf (meaning sign language is their first language) are opposed to a procedure that “cures” a person who is deaf of having to use sign language, a language with a cultural history all its own. Others argue that it is wrong to deny a person this treatment and therefore the right to hear. Because cochlear implants are performed most frequently on children, other ethical issues having to do with consent come into play.

The “Pillow-Angel” controversy
Ashley X, or the “Pillow Angel,” as she is known, is a severely developmentally disabled six-year old. Her brain is at the developmental level of an infant and her parents sought out a treatment to stunt her growth to make caring for her more manageable. Her parents argue that keeping Ashley at a small size makes the physical demands of caring for her possible and maintains her dignity as she gets older. Protestors of this procedure argue that her parents’ decision and her doctors’ consent leads to a slippery slope of sterilizing or amputating disabled people without their consent to make caring for them easier.

What does “normal” mean to Merrick? Thinking about Merrick’s situation and the medical ethics cases above, how do we determine what someone’s quality of life should be?
YOU TRY IT!
What is YOUR quality of life?

Choose one that you consider one of the most important to your life.

Consider these aspects of any given person’s life:

Love,
Health,
Money,
Family,
Education.

Now consider what your life would be like without it.

Would I be happy? Would I be sad or angry? Would I feel any different?

Would my not having this thing in my life affect the way people treated me? How?

Would my life be better or worse because of not having this thing?
What is Imperialism?
Imperialism is when a country extends their power and influence to another country or colony especially by gaining territory and by gaining control of their political, military and economic life. By the 19th century, the British Empire controlled several countries in Africa and Asia, capitalizing on goods and commodities that came out of those countries and enforcing their political and cultural influence. A term that came out of Imperialism was “the white man’s burden”—a term that justified bringing Western civilization (characterized by those who were white) to areas where they lacked the “enlightenment” of Western ideas as a noble policy.
The Empire provides unparalleled opportunities for our studies, as places cruel to life are the most revealing scientifically. –Gomm, hospital administrator

As John Merrick resides at the London Hospital, he is often visited by Mrs. Kendal, a beautiful actress whom Dr. Frederick Treves has invited so that Merrick can interact with a female companion. During his stay, Merrick also receives visits from British royalty who offer Merrick gifts as a token of respect and gratitude for allowing them to see him.

How does Imperialism relate to John Merrick?

Dr. Treves allowed for Victorian aristocracy to visit Merrick in the hope of making him feel more socially accepted. As they gradually become fascinated by him, they start to see mirror images of themselves in his character. They pride themselves on the qualities reflected from Merrick. They become satisfied with the charitable attitudes they have bestowed on him. He eventually becomes a status symbol for them, reflecting how important their wealth and influence gains them access to him. Imperialism therefore becomes a metaphor for Merrick’s relationships. Under the veil of charity, Merrick’s influential visitors exploit their position of power to have the chance to look at him, to become voyeurs in only a more prestigious and exclusive venue than the freak show from which he came.

• Why do they see him as a mirror of themselves?

• Is Dr. Treves helping Merrick in feeling socially accepted?

• Does Merrick care about this?

• Are these guests intervening on the privacy that Treves tried so hard to create for Merrick?
Freak shows or “side shows”, were commercialized displays of parading disabled people or people with unusual physical traits (as well as genetically mutated animals) for amusement. In John Merrick’s time, “freak” meant a whimsical notion or something never seen before. Freak shows included a large variety of “curiosities” including bearded women, albinos, Siamese (conjoined) twins, amputees, midgets, hermaphrodites, giants and much more. Additional performances coincided with these displays including ventriloquists, contortionists, beauty contests and trained animals. The freak show was democratizing to its patrons in that it was fairly inexpensive. People from any economic background had access and therefore freak shows became a popular form of entertainment.

In the nineteenth century, scientists and doctors, like Dr. Treves, started examining freak show performers for scientific study and to verify their “authenticity.” As science and medicine became more elite and developed more scientific theories (see Darwinism in the next section), the fields distanced themselves from the freak shows. Instead, science concerned itself more with the idea of the average human and the belief that standardizing human attributes was good for both the individual and society. The “freak” then became a problem that needed solving.

Voyeurism is actually a psychological term for someone who gets sexually excited from watching someone without them knowing. While people who attended freak shows and the people who visited Merrick most likely didn’t get sexual pleasure from watching him, arguably the same kind of emotional sensation of watching something taboo was similar to the emotions derived out of voyeurism.

**what do you think?**

- How did Merrick’s life change going from the freak show to living at London Hospital?

- What changed and what stayed the same?
This is an exercise that can be done from your seats!

Everyone in the class starts sitting in their desks like a “NORMAL STUDENT” would sit, in whatever way that means to each person in the class.

Now, everyone in the class sits in their desks like an “ABNORMAL STUDENT” would sit, in whatever way that means to each person in the class.

Your teacher can pick a volunteer to demonstrate how they think a “normal student” sits. Everyone in the class will strike the same pose as the person who volunteered.

Next your teacher will pick a volunteer to demonstrate their pose of how an “abnormal student” would sit. That person will strike their pose as everyone else poses as the “normal student”.

Take a minute to look at the person in the “abnormal student” pose. Does this seem abnormal to you?

DISCUSSION FOR YOU AND YOUR CLASS:

For the whole class, what were the qualities you thought of when you thought of your pose for the “normal student” and for the “abnormal student”?  

How did it feel to all have to adopt the same pose as the “normal student”?  

How did it feel for the person who demonstrated their “abnormal student” to the class?  

How did it feel to watch the “abnormal student” be different from the rest of the class?
Many believe that science and religion are at odds with one another in that science responds to a need to understand the world and religion responds to a need to give meaning to the world. Sciences rely on fact whereas religion relies on faith. While both powerful belief systems, many feel that an understanding of the world relies in the belief in one versus the other. Others find ways to use science and religion to guide their thinking about the world and its existence.
“God does know, and Darwin does not.” – The Bishop

“The Bible promises in heaven the crooked shall be made straight.” – John Merrick

At the London hospital, Merrick displays a particular interest in the Bible. A well known Bishop pays Merrick several visits as to give him further religious instruction. As the Bishop grows sympathetic toward Merrick, he also finds himself surprised to witness Merrick’s unconditional faith in God in spite of all the suffering he has endured.

What will heal Merrick?
Medical or Spiritual healing?

Dr. Treves believes that as a doctor he has the power to relieve suffering and solve problems through medicine. He believes that all the choices he has made on Merrick’s behalf are in the service of medicine. As time passes in the hospital Merrick becomes more certain that he will achieve an idealized form of himself in heaven and that it is only in death that his suffering will end.
In Context

Science and Religion Debate Continues

For centuries scientists and theologians have argued over how the universe began and how it functions. There are many scientists who believe that there are scientific theories that explain how the world was created and has evolved over time and there are theologians who believe that the world and its creatures were created by a divine being or force that is the source of all creation. Another theory to come out of this debate is known as Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design is the theory that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection, or a literal translation of the Bible of how the world was created. Because there is no way to calculate whether an “intelligent agent” is the source of creation, many scientists do not consider intelligent design to be a scientific theory.

The science and religion debate has also been hotly debated in the world of public education. A Supreme Court ruling in 1987 outlawed teaching creationism and intelligent design in science classes to uphold the amendment “separation of church and state.”

what do you think?

• Considering that Merrick believed that his suffering would end in heaven, how did he value the time he spent under the care of the hospital?
Consider that someone feels the opposite from you on a certain topic, either belief in a certain faith, belief in a theory, belief in your ability to achieve something.

How would you describe your beliefs or your doubt to someone who does not feel the same as you?
What is Beauty?
Beauty is a characteristic that promotes feelings of pleasure at physical and aesthetic attributes. Gives the sensation of being in harmony with nature. Anything that resonates with personal meaning.
“Plato believed this was all a world of illusion and that artists made illusions of illusions of heaven.”
– Dr. Treves

“It is not stone and steel and glass; it is an imitation of grace flying up and up from the mud. So I make my imitation of an imitation.”
– John Merrick

As Merrick immerses himself in the comforting promises of Christianity, he starts to create a model replica of St. Philips church. Dr. Treves, Mrs. Kendal and the other people who frequently visit Merrick continue to be impressed by his intelligence and his agile understanding of the world around him. Throughout the play, Merrick diligently works on the St. Philips church model and finishes it shortly before the end of the play.

How was Merrick influenced by Beauty?

Merrick has a keen interest in art and literature. He develops a friendship with Mrs. Kendal, an actress. During her visits, Mrs. Kendal and Merrick have extensive discussions on beauty and Merrick is greatly influenced by these conversations. He starts to work on a model of St. Philip’s church, a replica of a building that itself is a replica or representation of grace and beauty, as Merrick describes it. It is beauty that comes out of the ground, out of nothingness and chaos and reaches towards heaven, where Merrick believes he will achieve the ideal beauty everyone wishes for him.
For centuries, visual artists have sought to express notions of beauty. Here are some examples of artists who have characterized the way their society thinks of what is beautiful. Do any of these resonate with you? Do any of these seem in opposition to what you would characterize as “beautiful”? 

Michelangelo’s David (top right) is one of the most recognizable statues in the history of Western art. It has come to encapsulate the ideal male and youthful form.

The ancient figurine, known as the Woman of Willendorf, or Venus of Willendorf (bottom right) is thought to be an idealized female form from 24,000-22,000 BCE. Her enlarged female organs, breasts and stomach suggest that she represents fertility and signifies a universal mother. She is ironically called “Venus” because she reflects opposite notions of womanhood and beauty than more classic renderings of the goddess Venus. It was also thought that these types of figurines were self-portraits by the women of that time.

**What do you think?**

- **When you think of something or someone that possesses beauty, what do you think of?**
CONSIDERING WHO \textit{\textbf{John Merrick}} \textbf{was}  
HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THIS MAN?
### STEPPENWOLF FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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