

# Deconstructing Identity: A Comparative study of Tiny Tim and Christopher Boone

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## ABSTRACT

The social model of disability helps in understanding that various societal factors play pivotal role in defining disability. The stereotypical presentation of disability robs the identity of the individual and focuses only on his or her disability as a deciding factor in their personality. A study of character portrayal of Tiny Tim and Christopher Boone will help in discerning identity politics of disabled children. The most important way that the novel achieves its message that disability is a social construction is through point of view and using form to critique the dominant novel form: the novel is written from Christopher's perspective, rather than being about Christopher.

**Keywords:** Construction, capitalization, metamorphosis, disability, dysfunctional,

## Introduction:

A Christmas Carol is a classic children's novella by Charles Dickens, published in December, 1843. This Victorian novella is filled with the spirit of Christmas and has attained wide popularity. Apart from the protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, the character of Tiny Tim, a cripple, leaves lasting impression on the minds of the readers. Another children's book where disability has been presented is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. This book has been written by Mark Haddon in 2003. Christopher Boone is the protagonist of the novel who has Asperger's syndrome. A comparative study of these two texts helps in analyzing how disability has been portrayed in children's literature during the Victorian period and the postmodern age. The first text mentioned deals with physical disability while the second with Asperger's syndrome. Disability is used to refer to limitations resulting from dysfunction in individual bodies and mind.

Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* during the nineteenth century and his delineation of the character of Tiny Tim is not far from stereotyping. In this 'morality tale' the disability of

Tiny Tim has been used as a vehicle to induce change in the anti-hero or the protagonist of the text. Tiny Tim is not the central character in the novel, but his role is pivotal. Tiny Tim is a seven years old cripple who needs to use iron-frame for his weak body. The identity of Tiny Tim is overshadowed by his crutch and iron-frame. He is introduced in the Stave Three of the novel when Scrooge is visited by the Ghost of Christmas Present. The readers first see Tiny Tim on the shoulder of his father, Bob Cratchit, returning from the church on the eve of Christmas. This image symbolizes that Tiny Tim is a burden on his family. His father is a clerk who is paid poorly in the office of Scrooge and the family cannot afford the treatment of Tiny Tim as he also suffers from an ailment. In contrast to the image of Tiny Tim, Christopher Boone is the narrator of the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Thus, the readers are not introduced to Christopher Boone by others, rather they read the incidents of the novel from his perspective. Writing the novel from the perspective of a disabled is a huge step, as Sarah Jaquette Ray puts it:

The most important way that the novel achieves its message that disability is a social construction is through point of view and using form to critique the dominant novel form: the novel is written from Christopher's perspective, rather than being about Christopher.

Thus Christopher has been put in the center and the readers see through his eyes. It is like decentering the able-bodied perspective, and shifting the focus to the disabled. Thus, there is no space for stereotyping as the narrative doesn't give power to the outsiders to judge his character. Christopher is, thus, shown as a fifteen years old teenager who happens to have autism spectrum. Both the novels are based in England, although they are written in different periods. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is a conventional text whereas, the narrative technique of *The Curious Incident of the Dog at the Night-Time* makes it an unconventional one. Christopher is trying to solve the murder mystery of Wellington, his neighbour's dog. He makes use of maps, emoticons, and diagrams to convey his message to the readers. He is in a special school where his teacher, Siobhan, employs these techniques to help him understand the social convictions.

The narrative also bristles with diagrams, maps, drawings, stories, texts that inform Christopher's lexicon for mapping meaning in a world of bewildering signs and sounds. This collation of schema is conventionally not part of the linear design of narratives and works to substantiate and ratify Christopher's unique perspectives. The identity of Tiny Tim revolves around his disability. His disability has been mentioned various times in the novel so that it could generate pity and sympathy in the readers.

**Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame.**

This is how Tiny Tim enters the novel, upon the shoulder of his father. The use of the word "Alas" here denotes the association of pity that everyone felt for his disability. Contrary to this,

Mark Haddon never mentions Asperger's syndrome in the novel. Christopher mentions his 'Behavioral Problems', in the same manner that he talks about his liking for detective novels or prime numbers. Haddon doesn't attach any stereotyping with Christopher's disability while delineating his character. Haddon describes the Asperger's syndrome of Christopher in many ways but he never actually names it:

I do not like strangers because I do not like people I have never met before. They are hard to understand. It is like being in France, which is where we went on holiday sometimes when Mother was alive, to camp. And I hated it because if you went into a shop or restaurant or on a beach you couldn't understand what anyone was saying, which was frightening.

The above extract aptly describes the behavioral difficulty of Christopher. Since his disability has not been named, it takes away the power of attaching any stigma to it. The author himself says:

If he were diagnosed, he would be diagnosed as having Asperger's syndrome, which is a form of autism. I suppose you'd call it high-function on, you know, a day-to-day basis, in a kind of rudimentary way. But he has a serious difficulty with life in that he really doesn't empathize with other human beings. He can't read their faces. He can't put himself in their shoes. And he can't understand anything more than the literal meaning of whatever's said to him, although I'm very careful in the book not to actually use the word 'Asperger's' or 'autism'.

On one hand, we have iconic figure of Tiny Tim whose identity is overshadowed by his disability. Although his real name is Timothy Cratchit, he is called by everyone Tiny Tim because of his tiny stature.

Indeed, even the name "Tiny Tim", with its deliberate capitalization, its insistence on the subject's diminutive status, and its satisfied alliterative ring, functions to mark the character as

product rather than person. And it is this cultural iconography which thus informs and enables the interpretations of those more immediately concerned with disability.

Thus, disability is attached to the very name of Timothy Cratchit. His identity is never let to flourish outside his disability. In the same Stave, Scrooge even compares the Christmas turkey of the Cratchits' with Tiny Tim. Scrooge's macabre remark that the Cratchits' Christmas turkey is "twice the size of Tiny Tim" associates such plenitude with the object of sympathy in a manner that has become paradigmatic for *A Christmas Carol* itself.

An important aspect of the characterization of Tiny Tim is the requirement of his virtual death, so that the protagonist can learn to appreciate his life and become empathetic towards others. Tiny Tim is put in the story as a chariot of salvation. Tiny Tim needs to die in order for the rebirth of a better Scrooge. His identity is thus subjugated for this greater cause of the "complete psycho-social metamorphosis" of Ebenezer Scrooge by the novelist. Although, he doesn't actually die in the novella as Scrooge finally mends his ways.

The identity crisis of Tiny Tim lies in the fact that his portrayal in the novel does not rise above metaphorical level. Tiny Tim's relevance in the plot of the novella is not more than that of the figures of Want and Ignorance as their objective is same, that is, to awaken sympathetic feelings in Scrooge.

The allegorical figures of Want and Ignorance were created to arouse sympathy with readers—as was Tiny Tim. In contrast to this, it is the novel which is enhanced according to the character portrayal of Christopher Boone. Since he prefers prime numbers, the chapters in the novel are also numbered accordingly. Chapters in the books are usually given the cardinal numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and so on. But I have decided to give my chapters prime numbers 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13 and so on because I like prime numbers.

The character of Tiny Tim is not round, rather it is sewed around his disability. Dickens never lets the readers forget that Tiny Tim is a cripple. In Stave Four, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge what is going to happen in the future if he doesn't change his course. Scrooge is told about the death of Tiny Tim as the family couldn't afford his treatment. Here, pity and sympathy is evoked through the symbolic use of "a crutch without an owner". Even, the "vacant seat" of Tiny Tim fulfills his role. Portrayals in literature and popular culture . . . shape our images of disability. Often a disabled character is depicted as helpless and childish, like Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol'.

Tiny is created as a "sympathetic spectacle". His identity fades in this circumlocution. As opposed to this, Haddon does not exploit the disability of Christopher. He says that he has not mentioned Asperger's syndrome:

Because I don't want him to be labelled, and because, as with most people who have disability, I don't think it's necessarily the most important thing about him. . . And as a good friend of mine said after reading the book, a friend who is himself a mathematician, it's not a novel about a boy who has Asperger's syndrome; it's a novel about a young mathematician who has some strange behavioural problems. And I think that's right.

Christopher cannot comprehend the nuances of social conversations, but this doesn't define his identity. Like his other features, his inability to understand body language or emotions are presented in the novel. Tiny Tim is not just an object of sympathy for others, even he sees himself as one. This is seen in Stave Three as Bob Cratchit, his father, tells his wife;

" . . . He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see.

The self-esteem of Tiny Tim is bound around the fact that he is a cripple. His identity suffers a loss because he is associating himself with pity and sympathy. As opposed to this, Christopher is aware that he has Behavioral Problems but he doesn't indulge in evoking pity from the readers. He mentions:

I used to have lots of Behavioral Problems, but I don't have so many now because I'm more grown up and I can take decisions for myself and do things on my own like going out of the house and buying things at the shop at the end of the road.

The character of Tiny Tim is under-developed and wrapped around his disability. The social model of disability studies how the portrayal of characters with disability in fiction mirror the stance of the society. Children's books portraying characters with disabilities can convey some didactic elements as well that they can become an inspiration for people with disabilities how to cope with difficult situations.

Tiny Tim is the embodiment of pity and this is revealed as Dickens does not allow him to blossom into a child. While participating in the dinner merriment he banged on the table with his spoon and "feebly cried Hurrah!" He also sang well in his "plaintive little voice" and is the last one to drink his toast.

#### **Tiny Tim already knows his status as a cultural test.**

Christopher enlists some of his Behavioral Problems in chapter 73. However, Haddon doesn't let it seem to be unnatural. For instance, the way it is described how he hugs his father throws light on his autism spectrum but it also conveys the impression that it is orderly and natural the way Christopher likes it;

He held up his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan. I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. We do this because sometimes Father wants to give me a hug,

but I do not like hugging people, so we do this instead, and it means that he loves me.

Another facet that is seen while deconstructing identities of Christopher and Tiny Tim is their relationship with their respective families. Dickens shows an ideal middle class family with father, mother, and siblings. Tiny Tim is loved by all the members of his family. However, the feeling of pity for him never vanishes. Whereas, Haddon shows a dysfunctional family where the father is taking care of his son. It is informed later in the novel that Christopher's mother couldn't deal with the stress of taking care of her child who has Asperger's syndrome. As Christopher writes; I used to think that Mother and Father might get divorced. That was because they had lots of arguments and sometimes they hated each other. This was because of the stress of looking after someone who has Behavioral Problems like I have.

Haddon weaves the plot around the broken marriage of Ed and Judy Boone. It is a postmodern novel where the author doesn't hesitate to show the stress that parents face while taking care of their disabled children. As Radhka Lhotska notes: Haddon represented dysfunctional family which could be considered as a sign of postmodernist approach.

Charles Dickens invests in the portrayal of an ideal family where he is only interested in showing the financial stress of raising a cripple. The emotional bond among the members is drawn beautifully. It is reflected when Tiny Tim returns from church on his father's shoulder, who "had been Tim's blood horse all the way from church". Not only the parents, but the siblings of Tiny Tim also show affection towards him as is seen when "the two young Cratchits hustled Tiny Tim, and bore him off into the wash-house, that he might hear the pudding singing in the copper." Dickens objective of portraying an ideal Victorian middle class family is to show Scrooge the familial ties and values so as to churn his conscience.

Lastly, Tiny Tim doesn't come out from the penumbra of a sweet little boy who suffers from disability. His characterization is dipped in saccharine, as "[H]e is as good as gold"<sup>31</sup>. Even during his absence, the gaze is fixated on "...how patient and how mild he was; although he was a little, little child"<sup>32</sup>. Christopher's personality is fully explored as in the novel "most of the interest lies in the characterization of Christopher, his voice, his views, his interactions with those around him"<sup>33</sup>. He is just a teenager who is not shy to give his opinion about others; All the other children at my school are stupid. Except I'm not meant to call them stupid, even though this is what they are. I'm meant to say that they have learning difficulties or that they have special needs. Christopher is in a special education class and how he perceives other children at the school shows him as an individual with his own opinion. His image has not been sugarcoated unlike that of Tiny Tim.

### Conclusion:

Thus, the identity of Tiny Tim is enveloped by his disability, he is a cripple who has been objectified. His identity is that of a kind little boy whose survival depends on charity from a rich businessman. Tiny Tim is an iconic figure of pity and sympathy. In contrast to this, Christopher Boone is a teenager who happens to have Asperger's syndrome. The writer explicitly mentions that he does not want the disability of Christopher to represent him.

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