

Professor Wifall  
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## **Dynamics of Autism in the Main Character of “The Curious Incident of the Dog at the Night-Time”**

Mark Haddon’s novel “The Curious Incident of Dog at the Night-Time” revolves around the story of an autistic character Christopher. Certain weirdness can be detected in his character from the beginning of the novel. He, as the narrator, introduces himself - “My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world, and their capital cities, and prime number up to 7,057” (3). As the story develops, his unusual behavioral traits become more apparent. He is unable to read the facial emotions, and has a strong dislike to be touched. He has a predisposition for details, and hates even the minor changes such as moving furniture. He has almost a pathological inability to tell a lie, as he explains in the novel, “I do not tell lies. Mother used to say that this is because I was a good person. But it is not because I am a good person. It is because I can’ tell lies” (9).

Christopher’s personality in the novel closely resembles to that of an autistic child. His inability to tell lie as well as his dislike for metaphors can be interpreted as his literal mindedness as an autistic person. His personality as autistic person is quite in accordance with the article titled “Autism” from UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, which notes:

As autism affects social interaction and communication it has implications for how individuals participate in everyday life. Autistic people often interpret situations differently from non-autistic people

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and struggle with new, unpredictable and ambiguous environments.

This affects how they manage in a range of situations and settings such as schools, hospitals, shops, on public transport and in the workplace. (1)

Similarly, failure in “Smarty test” conducted by Julie (51) scientifically indicates Christopher is an autistic person. In her book “Autism and Asperger Syndrome”, Patricia Howlin writes, “Pictures, photographs, audio or video tapes have been all used to help people decipher emotional states and explain why certain situation arouse different feelings” (50). Similar techniques have been implemented with Christopher, showing the novel has been able to depict the autistic aspect of Christopher accurately. Yet, there are different dimensions in the personality of Christopher, and different factors that come into interplay when we attempt to understand this protagonist’s autistic personality in greater depths.

While his social skills are limited, Christopher has an innate scientific ingenuity. He is good at mathematics and science, as we can know from his talking about different concepts like “Milky Way” (6), “singularity” (15), “black hole”(15), “The Monty Hall Problem”(28), “Occam’s Razor” (40). This aspect of Christopher personality raises a classical question - is there any connection between autism and ingenuity? Seneca, a Roman philosopher, had famously said, “No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness”, which even some of the modern researches conducted in this

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field can attest to. In her article, "Creative Method in the Madness: The Connection between Creativity and Psychopathology", Dean Keith Simonton writes, "Creators will commonly exhibit symptoms often associated with mental illness." Thus, the savant aspect of Christopher personality could possibly be an out product of his autism.

The relation of Christopher with his parents presents one of the interesting aspects of this novel. In general, Christopher has loving parents. As a single child, he has been getting love and care he deserves. However, his parent do get upset and depressed at certain instances, and end up doing actions that are quite unjustifiable. For example, Christopher's mother, Judy, reacts with frustration and develops a liaison after Christopher had a panic attack during their shopping trip. Christopher is aware of this fact as he notes his observations about his parents after enumerating his behavioral problem:

Sometimes these things would make Mother and Father really angry, and they would shout at me or they would shout at each other. Sometimes Father would say, "Christopher, if you do not behave I swear I shall knock the living daylights out of you." Or Mother would say, "Jesus, Christopher, I am seriously considering putting you in a home," or Mother would say, "You are going to drive me into an early grave." (22)

Along with the relation of Christopher with his parents, a theme of irony runs in the novel. The marriage of Ed and Judy degrades due to

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Christopher's autism. However, it is apparent at the end that Christopher plays dominantly constructive role for the reunion of his family, thereby proving his autism had been just a false excuse, or a scapegoat, for his parents. Similarly, his parents do not function very well when they are under pressure. But Christopher, on the other hand, does function arguably well in his traveling to London as well as performs fine in his exam, for which he had not able to prepare much. Such contrary to common belief, Christopher shows that autistic people are capable of proper functioning under pressure, sometimes better than "normal" people.

The impact of society on Christopher is equally interesting to study. For instance, initially unaware of Christopher's condition police handles him with more care once they are aware. However, his relation with his classmates is not very smooth. Christopher considers them as "stupid" (20), and his classmates mock Christopher as "special need" (20). Similarly in his neighborhood, Mr. and Mrs. Shears are not sympathetic towards Christopher, whereas Mrs. Alexander is considerate with him. Thus, the novel acknowledges the varied receptions of autistic people in the society through different characters, and shows that still the majority of them are still on unfriendly terms with autistic people.

Christopher self-awareness about his behavioral problem is evident in the story. This raises a question - how does it affect the behavior of Christopher? It seems that this consciousness has positively affected the

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behavior of Christopher, who tries to restrain his negative behavior associated with autism. In fact, he only does the things he cannot help doing. For instance, although he carries a Swiss knife due to xenophobia, he never uses it. Moreover, the fact that he maintains a diary shows he must have rethought over his past actions, thereby increasing his level of self-consciousness. This strongly gestures that the ability of self control we can see in Christopher must be due to his awareness about his own situation. In their research paper titled "Theory of Mind and Self-Consciousness: What Is It like to be Autistic?", Uta Frith and Franca Happè support the aforementioned fact -

If the person with autism can judge their own inner states only by their actions, it might be important to teach behaviors which express for oneself what one thinks and feels. There are reports that keeping a diary about events that happened, or practicing self-talk in the same way, can be very helpful (11).

Despite his social awkwardness, we cannot overlook the instances where Christopher has been insightful to understand his surrounding social condition. For example, he deduces that his parents might have divorce because they have frequent arguments. At another time, when Ed discovers Christopher reading the letters from Christopher's mother, Christopher describes his father voice as, " tiny and far away, like people's voice sometimes do when I am groaning and I don't want them to be near me"

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(51). Thus, despite the fact that Christopher cannot recognize the facial pattern, he does demonstrate a basic aptitude in comprehending the situation, and sometimes can go as far as correctly predicting the future.

Christopher has a mentor at his school - Siobhan. He characterizes Siobhan as "understanding" (14). While there has been some strain in his relation with parents, his "friendship" with Siobhan has always been smooth. She truly understands the feelings of Christopher, motivates him to write a book, talks about his problems and provides comforting solutions. Thus, through her, the novel is pointing out that society needs to understand the autistic people, and their world. Such understanding would help to bridge the prevalent gulf between the autistic people and the society.

Talking of animals, they play a comforting role in Christopher's life. When he finds Wellington dead, Christopher embraces the dog despite its gruesome condition. He dearly loves his pet rat Toby, and takes a great deal of care of him. While Christopher is very sensitive to hugging his father or any human for that matter, he surprisingly does not mind even being bitten by his pet rat (85). We can thus conclude that Christopher is more comfortable in the companionship of animals than with humans. In her article "Service Dogs Aid People with Autism", Merope Pavlides states, "Parents of children with autism service dogs frequently comment on how much calmer their children are, and how much more manageable meltdowns are when the dog is present" (3). Though the exact reasons are not known, she points sensory integration, social support, and interruption and

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redirection of the tantrum behavior as possible explanations. Meanwhile, Christopher has explained the reasons of his love for animals as the simplicity in their behaviors and their truthfulness (4).

The title of the novel signals towards the unique personality of Christopher. Christopher, who loves math, is a logical thinker, and the task of solving a crime, at least by his definition, falls under this category. Furthermore, it expresses the will of Christopher to write a story like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of Baskervilles", and on the top of that to prove himself to be as intelligent as Sherlock Holmes, the detective of in the Doyle's story. Thus, the title is suggestive about Christopher's dreams and aspirations.

It is also interesting to follow Christopher's train of thought about prime numbers. He expresses his interest in prime number right from the beginning. Prime numbers, which are one of the most researched fields in mathematics, remains unsolved mysteries till today. Christopher is not only proud of his knowledge of prime numbers, but also has beautifully philosophized the prime number as he says, "I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work to out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them" (8). Such, Christopher finds a parallelism between life and mathematics, which demonstrates his critical ability to think.

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We can understand the personality of Christopher by dwelling into the biography of the author - Mark Haddon, who has proved to be a prodigious author with more than a dozen of books to his credit. In an interview with Claire Allfree, a correspondent for *The Independent*, Haddon said that he grew up with a dream to be a mathematician, but later switched to writing. About his motivation in undertaking the task of the novel, he talks about his fascination with the mental problem -

It's rather like being fascinated by how cars work. It's really boring if your car works all the time. But as soon as something happens you get the bonnet up. If someone has an abnormal or dysfunctional state of mind, you get the bonnet up.

However, there are some critics who argue about the fallibility of the novel as its depiction of autism is concerned. Eric Chen, author of the book "Autism & Self Development" and an individual diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder, has pointed out some flaws in the novel. She says that autism has never been mentioned directly in the novel, and writes, "I noted that Christopher is highly self-aware, and could articulate his thoughts so clearly", which she proclaims to be different from her own experience. From the prospect of Robert M Joseph and James Tanaka, two researchers in the field of Child Psychology and Psychiatry who claim, "There is substantial evidence that children with autism are impaired with facial recognition" (1), Christopher may not be exhibiting autistic deficiencies. Besides, at in his aforementioned interview with *The Independent*, author Haddon says, "For

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me, *Curious* was a book about reading and books, and how people fill in the gaps when they read something on the page. But everyone said it was about Asperger's." Thus, there is a possibility that the author might not be had a picture of an autistic person when he was creating the novel.

In addition, there is an inconsistency in the novel about the behavior of Christopher. Initially, Christopher has an inclination to say his age to the accuracy of the days, which he does at least thrice. However, in the later part of the novel, he fails to show this behavioral trait. At one point of the novel he writes. "She (Siobhan) only started working at school when I was twelve" (52). This discrepancy in the behavior of Christopher should not had been overlooked for his personality lies is the focus of the novel.

In conclusion, given the overwhelming supporting factors for Christopher's autistic personality, the doubts about the verity of his autism can be interpreted as the symptom of Christopher outgrowing his autism, which considering him as a dynamic character in the novel is an plausible explanation. Besides, given that autism has a very wide range of symptoms, Christopher situation can be a unique one. Thus, Christopher stands as an icon for the people who generally do no interact with the society, and can easily be mistaken for their behavior. Through various interesting aspects of his personality and his response to different situations, Christopher has become a window that has effectively introduced readers to an unconventional view of the autistic landscape.

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