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**The safe landscape of childhood and identity in
Mark Haddon's
*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*¹**

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Abstract

The new millennium has witnessed a fundamental change in the perception of modernism. In his 2003 novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Mark Haddon looks at the contemporary values of Britishness through the prism of an autistic child, Christopher Boone, who creates his own landscape of the world. He is not understood by society because, as Haddon claims, Christopher “has a serious difficulty with life in that he really doesn’t empathize with other human beings. [...] He can’t put himself in their shoes” (Luden 2014). The paper discusses Christopher’s “otherness” that estranges him from his contemporaries. The awareness of mental disorders on the part of the public and its effect upon the mind of the teenage boy in his fictional world is dealt with because Christopher’s autism becomes the driving force for the postmodern form of a disrupted text that is not coherent and cohesive, while using elements of detective stories. This form of the novel makes it an example of a postmodern text that on the general level explores the construction, perception, and understanding of a childhood landscape through the rites of passage of an autistic narrator.

¹ This article is an extended version of my paper presentation at the ESSE 14 Conference, 2018.

Keywords: Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, childhood, autism, postwar British fiction, Asperger syndrome, centre, periphery

IN 2003 Mark Haddon succeeded in leading his readers through the maze of the landscape of the childhood of Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old boy. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* was a great success in terms of critical acclaim. Haddon won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award (in the category of novels rather than the children's books category), and furthermore, he was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the Best First Book category, as *The Curious Incident* was considered his first written for adults. In addition, he also won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, a once-in-a-lifetime award judged by a panel of children's writers. Apart from these, the book was also longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Many readers were surprised that it did not advance to the shortlist; however, John Carey, the chair of the Booker panel of judges, explained in *The Guardian* that "[they] have several clashes of opinion among the judges but [he] found Haddon's book about a boy with Asperger's syndrome breathtaking" (2004). In addition, Haddon earned the Book Trust teenage fiction award. In 2004 the book was a joint winner of the 2004 Boeke Prize and Haddon was also one of the winners of the 2004 Alex Awards, which "are given to ten books written for adults that have special appeal to young adults."² As the list of awards well documents, both the reading public and professionals had a hard time categorizing the book: the question is whether the book is for adults or whether it should rather be categorized as young adult literature. The publisher did not help to solve the question as when the book first came out in Britain, two editions appeared simultaneously, one for adults and the second one for young readers. The two editions differed in the graphic

² Alex Awards, <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/alex-awards>.

design of their dust jackets; however, the text itself was not edited for young readers by a children's book editor, which is almost always the case. According to Stephania Ciocia (2009, 321), *The Curious Incident* provides an example of what is termed "crossover literature," which is equally suited to both young adult and adult readers. This can well be supported by the immense success of the book, because according to the latest available data (Allfree 2010), almost three million copies were sold in English and the book has been translated into many languages, including Czech.

Returning to the topic of the portrayal of childhood, I would like to argue that childhood in *The Curious Incident* is created through multiple overlapping layers as Haddon's technique rests on several pillars. He employs Christopher in a quadruple role: as a narrator, as a protagonist, as a detective within the story, and as a writer within the text composing his own book. All the roles played by Christopher are to a certain extent influenced by his Asperger syndrome, which makes him stand out from the crowd. Christopher is not a regular child. His childhood is marked not only by his autism, which estranges him from the children of his age in the neighbourhood and at school, but also by the divorce of his parents. If we view Christopher's position through the dichotomy of centre and periphery, he is definitely at the very far edge of the periphery among the children. In addition, he physically lives on the periphery of a small town and has to commute to school. On the other hand, he is the centre of his father's attention and his assistant at school. Thanks to his syndrome, he can never mingle with the crowd and, therefore, he attracts undesired attention very often because of his non-standard behaviour.

When we look at Christopher serving as a narrator, John Mullan (2004) proposes viewing him as an "inadequate narrator," although such a label is not frequently used as an established critical term. However, the more usual "unreliable narrator" seems inaccurate for a narrator who, however un-comprehending, is

entirely trustworthy. We are not invited to be sceptical about what Christopher relates to us. As he says several times, “I always tell the truth” (*CIDN* 18). Indeed, his very truthfulness imposes a limitation on his understanding of the world. He is not able to comprehend that not everybody tells the truth. Therefore, he finds it extremely difficult to negotiate and argue his way through in conversations with other people.

Christopher is also detached from his own torments. When things become too much for him, he curls into a ball and hides in a small space, or simply screams. When he reads the letters from his mother that his father has hidden from him, he has no description to offer of his feelings, just an account of a kind of seizure. “I couldn’t think of anything at all because my brain wasn’t working properly” (*CIDN* 112). This is no figure of speech. When the patterns of thought and habits of behaviour on which he depends collapse, Christopher is not able to think of a Plan B; there is no solution for him and he is seized by panic.

Within the progress of the book, all the roles that Christopher plays diverge and converge at times in order to create a mosaic of postmodern British society which becomes the landscape inhabited by Christopher Boone. Many critics have stressed the fundamental role of the Asperger syndrome which Christopher suffers from. The syndrome, which belongs to the autistic spectrum of diseases, provides the framework and the gap through which Christopher’s landscape can be viewed. In a metaphorical sense, this gap is the niche through which the children’s world can be observed from an adult perspective, and vice versa, it also enables the reader to get a glimpse of the adult world from the angle of vision of a child who does not always understand the world of adults. The book often balances on edges. In terms of age, Christopher stands between childhood and early adulthood. However, because of his syndrome, he will always view some aspects of reality from a child’s perspective but simultaneously, he will at times behave and argue very rationally and act like an adult following adult rules.

Christopher's constant switching between the two perspectives and therefore his distancing from one or the other will always mark the dividing line between the two age groups, which is here doubled by his syndrome. However, the syndrome should not be considered the primary interest and focus of the book; it is rather an antecedent to the fictional landscape that is being created in the book. Christopher seems to benefit from it. Haddon foregrounds the fact that because of Asperger, Christopher is able to create a landscape of his own from the bits and pieces that surround him. It is a landscape that provides a safe harbour amid a world that Christopher does not fully understand and that does not understand him. His safe area is clearly marked by the neighbourhood and his way to school. He ventures beyond the borders of his world only very reluctantly and on most occasions only when accompanied by a person he knows and trusts. The world beyond his landscape is a hostile postmodern world that in his eyes does not follow any rules and is fragmented into elements that do not constitute a whole which would be meaningful.

Christopher crosses the borders when he is prompted by a very strong urge. This urge is the investigation of the murder of the neighbour's dog, Wellington. The incident of the murder of the dog provides a guiding element for exploring Christopher's landscape. As he sets his mind to investigating the case, he goes through the neighbourhood and asks for details. It is a quest for him as he has to overcome his inherent reluctance to speak to strangers. On the other hand, he considers himself a new Sherlock Holmes. The choice of his model detective is very interesting. Holmes exemplifies Britishness *par excellence* and therefore, he belongs to the landscape that Christopher is familiar with. In addition, Christopher shares with Holmes his utter admiration for logic and a step-by-step solution of the case, although both Christopher and Holmes may not be understood by their surroundings at all times. Christopher, in all probability, does not refer to anything foreign, which is well beyond his scope of

understanding as foreign cultures are governed by other referential frames and that would be twice removed for Christopher. He prefers to remain within the terrain of logic and predictability. That is why Christopher admires Sherlock and his assistant because as Dr Watson declares in *The Sign of Four*, “I never guess. It is a shocking habit – destructive to the logical faculty” (Doyle 1890).

Logic, repetitive procedures, and order constitute for Christopher a safe environment in which he knows how to behave and a territory he understands. Mathematics exemplifies all this and therefore Christopher absolutely adores this discipline,

Mr Jeavons said that I liked maths because it was safe. He said I liked maths because it meant solving problems, and these problems were difficult and interesting, but there was always a straightforward solution at the end. And what he meant was that maths wasn't like life because in life there are no straightforward answers at the end. I know he meant this because this is what he said. (*CIDN* 61-62)

One solution to the problem, clearly mapped structures, and no figurative language; these are the elements that Christopher appreciates about mathematics. Such a technique goes hand in hand with the postmodernist nature of the composition of the book. As Stephania Ciocia (2009, 321) has suggested, *The Curious Incident* can be considered a “metaphysical detective novel” or, in terms of Stefano Tani’s theory, it is an “anti-detective novel” (1984, 35). The focus is not on the process of investigation itself; what is of greater importance is the circumstances that accompany it: Christopher daring to step beyond the safe neighbourhood or his leaving the safe harbour of home because of a lie told by his father. Ciocia (2009, 321) argues that such a technique of constructing a detective novel of this kind within the fiction of the novel as such

draw[s] attention to the generic changes involved when the logic of postmodernism, with its radical uncertainty, is applied to the conventions of detective fiction; that is, to a narrative tradition that hinges on a rational interpretation of reality in order to yield indisputable answers. The prefix anti- and the adjective metaphysical thus allude to the necessary postmodern distortions of the original narrative conventions of the detective story, so as to shift its emphasis from epistemological to ontological concerns—a move that inevitably creates extra layers of meaning in the text, usually through raising metafictional questions.

The digression to metafictional elements provides an indirect description of Christopher's landscape. Through the insertion of various graphs, mathematical problems, charts, etc., the reader learns to understand the reality of Christopher's landscape, which is shaped by precision. At the same time, the digressions enable Haddon to postpone the solution of the incident and divert attention to the interpersonal relationships. The incident between Christopher's parents and their separation is a miniature study of the condition of British society, especially of those living in rural suburbs. The digressions do not always have a direct relation to the plot of the novel itself; however, their surprising nature keeps the reader in suspense.

Christopher's landscape is put across in relatively plain language. It goes together well with the Asperger syndrome. Those suffering from it have a hard time understanding any figurative use of language and thus their world exists on the literal linguistic level. However, this might be another example of how seemingly disparate elements can build a compact whole. The relative simplicity and the paratactic syntax (Ciocia 2009, 323) fit the very logical world of both Christopher and Sherlock Holmes and also drive the plot forward fast. On the graphical level, the publisher has supported the notion of a literal textual level by using sans

serif characters. John Mullan (2004) explains that the reading experience might be shaped by this

technical peculiarity of which they [the readers] might not be conscious. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* uses a sans serif font: that is, a simple kind of print in which letters lack the little tails and plinths that printers call serifs. This is highly unusual in any published book; the conventional wisdom is that serifs help the brain's visual apparatus as a line of print is scanned. The tiny thickenings and thinnings of the limbs of every letter give the eye something to catch on to. Sans serif fonts may be used in advertisements, headlines and the like, but their simplicity is almost physically uncomfortable in any lengthy text.

As a consequence, the linguistic simplicity of the narrative is supported by the technical apparatus of the book. Mullan (2004) adds

The font's discomfiting simplicity is perfectly suited to Haddon's narrator, Christopher, in all his pedantic veracity. He narrates plainly (sometimes just cataloguing or enumerating) and the plainness is even there in the lettering. Reading a page printed like this is, I think, visually disconcerting. Graphically speaking, we are in Christopher's nuance-free world from the start. We are unsettled by its lack of variation, just as we will become conscious of his flat-voiced failure to sense the emotions and tones of the novel's other characters.

Therefore, Haddon indirectly represents the coldness of the relationship between Christopher's parents and the ineffectiveness of the relationships in the neighbourhood, which in turn stand for British society in a nutshell.

Christopher's language is literal as this is also mostly the language of the exact sciences he appreciates. Both mathematics

and astrology (e.g. the reference to the Monty Hall Problem and the musings on the constellation of Orion) provide the order, whereas any humanities represent chaos. Therefore, he soon abandons his ideas about the existence of God³. The text of the novel is as hybrid as is the postmodern landscape. Such a landscape does not provide any lead for the eye and the head. The way has to be constantly searched for and constructed. This is precisely the method that Christopher meticulously applies. Christopher's writing his own detective novel is an intertextual commentary on Arthur Conan Doyle. In addition, the writing process helps Christopher to map his own landscape through the rigid principles of rational thinking and logic that is not marked by the use of figurative language. Simultaneously, the use of literal language signifies the world of children, who, until a certain age, are incapable of understanding figurative language. Christopher documents that, for example, in the following passage,

a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about. (*CIDN* 15)

In Walsh's view (2010, 112), such a linguistic strategy "could be said to reduce the experiential gap that generally exists between adults and younger readers." Christopher takes all things literally, not being able to comprehend the possible figurative meanings;

³ Interestingly, the American Library Association placed the book on the banned book list as many readers in the USA complained. The association stated the following reasons for banning the book: "offensive language, religious viewpoint, unsuited for age group, and other ("profanity and atheism")." quoted at https://mblc.state.ma.us/mblc_blog/tag/ala/.

thus metaphors remain a terrain that he will never be able to venture into. Christopher is obsessed with a desire for order: “I couldn’t stand it. All that jumble and dirt, it made me so I couldn’t think straight. I need to see clean surfaces, flat and uncluttered. I need to see the true shape of things” (*CIDN* 155). In addition, he is unable to engage in small talk and replaces that by the enumeration of seemingly unimportant details, for example, “the brown shoes that have approximately 60 tiny circular holes in each of them” (*CIDN* 5). Therefore, Ciocia concludes (2009, 328) that “throughout the narrative, Christopher draws our attention to the gap between signifiers and signifieds and to the impossibility of articulating exactly and unambiguously what we mean, thus gently leading the more sophisticated members of his audience to conclude, in poststructuralist fashion, that all language is approximate and figurative to a degree.” As Christopher is unable to comprehend figurative language, he sometimes gives up his attempts to penetrate into it and instead he creates his own, although sometimes illogical, explanations of reality. He never tells jokes as these are also based on the play between various language levels and registers. Similarly, Christopher never swears as swearing, as an embellishment of speech, probably would not make any sense to him. In this aspect, he compares well to Sherlock Holmes, who never swears but just employs logic and stays detached from the subject of his scrutiny. For both Holmes and Christopher, solving a detective case is like solving a mathematical/logical problem.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time provides an indepth study into the psychology of a teenage boy that creates his own mental landscape. Thanks to Christopher’s Asperger’s syndrome, he does not behave in a standard way which estranges him from his environment. His inability to grasp the figurative uses of language makes it difficult for him to engage in communication. He adopts his four roles and throughout the

narrative he switches between them in order to put across his limited view of the landscape with its inhabitants.

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