The Elephant Man (dir. David Lynch, 1980)
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Key Stage 3 or 4
Citizenship/PSHE

A lesson that uses The Elephant Man to encourage students to analyse and evaluate language used towards disabled people. The lesson also encourages students to empathise with those who might have a disability.

Curriculum Links

Preparing to play an active role as citizens:
- 2.e. to realise that people and other living things have needs and that they have responsibilities to meet them

Developing good relationships and respecting the differences between people:
- 4.a. to recognise how their behaviour affects other people
- 4.c. to identify and respect the differences and similarities between people
- 4.e. to know that there are different types of teasing and bullying, that bullying is wrong, and how to get help to deal with bullying

Lesson Objective

To highlight that the language associated with disability is often negative. To evaluate why people bully, the effect bullying can have and the right way to treat others.

You will need...

- **Trailer:** DVD of The Elephant Man. A3 paper for posters.
- **End Credits:** Space for a drama exercise
Activities

**TRAILER: THE LANGUAGE OF DISABILITY**

Split learners into small groups and ask them to answer the question ‘what is disability?’. They should write down key words or draw images on a poster. These can be displayed around the classroom for comparison later.

Watch *The Elephant Man* and ask students to note down the terms (including medical terms) used to describe John Merrick by characters in the film. They should then think about:

- Which words are positive? Which words are negative?
- Are any of the words helpful?
- Do any of the words convey essential information?

Now ask students to compare the language used by the film’s characters to the words identified by the class. Elicit that many descriptions of disability can be negative, even medical terms.

Lead a discussion on the difference between impairment (the individual’s condition) and disability (their experience).

**MAIN ATTRACTION: DISABILITY AND BULLYING**

Ask students to write a diary entry from the perspective of John Merrick following the scene where the Night Porter invites punters to gawk at him in exchange for money.

Ask them to include some or all of the following:

- A summary of the facts leading up to the scene
- An explanation of how Merrick is perceived as different to others
- How Merrick felt when the punters flooded his room, gawking and jeering
- An explanation of why people might treat Merrick differently and how that feels
- A discussion of impairment and disability
- A comment on the language used towards disabled people

A group/classroom discussion on these points could come before or after this activity.

Students can share their diary entries with the class or in small groups.

**END CREDITS: HOW MIGHT IT FEEL?**

The teacher picks a characteristic that some but not all students in the class have. For example it could be those with blue eyes. Divide the class up according to this trait and give those with/without the trait preferential treatment. This could take the form of allowing them to go to lunch first or by making the other students sit on the floor.

Following the exercise, ask students to evaluate the experience:

- How did they feel being discriminated against/favoured based on something about their appearance such as “insert characteristic” – e.g. hair colour?
- What have they learnt from the experience?

Encourage students to see that people with disabilities are individuals just as they are. Use this activity to challenge any preconceptions they might have.
Extras

Other Ideas

- The figure of John Merrick in the film could lead to the exploration of artists who have engaged with the notion of ‘otherness’ and the outsider. Discuss performers like LADY GAGA and artists like Matthew Barney and Orlan. How do they help question society’s perception of physical beauty?
- Ask the students to think about David Lynch’s film alongside others involving outsiders or those who appear different from others, for example *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (dir. William Dieterle, 1939) or *Edward Scissorhands* (dir. Tim Burton, 1990).
- This film could also be used for a lesson on ethics. A key question arising from the film is whether Dr Treves is any different from the showman, Bytes. Although Dr Treves shows John Merrick compassion, he also uses him in some ways by exploiting his rare condition for the advancement of science. Might this make the doctor as ethically corrupt as the profiteering showman?

Read

- *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck
- *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by William Faulkner

Watch

- *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (dir. William Dieterie, 1939)
- *The Last Laugh* (dir. F. W. Murnau)
- Michael Jackson’s music video for ‘Leave Me Alone’ (1989)