

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE

Extended Essay in English B

Session: November

**Cristopher Boone's Condition:
Limitation or Illumination?**

Title: Limitation or Illumination in The Curious Incident
of the Dog in the Night-time.

How far does Christopher's condition limit or
enlighten his perspective on life in Mark Haddon's

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time?

SCHOOL NAME:

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Introduction (569 words)

The novel ***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*** was written by Mark Haddon in 2003. Haddon was born in October 28, 1962, in Northampton, Britain. He is a novelist, poet, playwright, artist, cartoonist, and illustrator. Haddon always wanted to write for the adult audience, and even though he did, most of his literary pieces were for children and for teenagers. However, ***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*** was his first book dedicated to the young-adult and adult public. Haddon's novel immediately won fans in each group, quickly selling more than a million copies in both markets, in no small part because of the unique voice of its narrator. The book earned critical acclaim as well, receiving praise from outlets like the New York Times and from noted authors including Ian McEwan. To date, ***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*** has become an international best seller. Despite his work with autistic children, Haddon assures that he had done very little research on the topic before writing the novel:

*"I know very little about the subject. I did no reseach for **The Curious Incident**. [...] Imagination always trumps reseach. [...] **The Curious Incident** is not a book about Asperger's. It's a novel whose central character describes himself as a 'mathematician with some behavioural difficulties'"¹*

The novel presents Christopher Boone, an autistic 15-year-old narrator of a revelatory novel. He relaxes by groaning and doing math problems in his head, eats red -but not yellow or brown - foods and screams when he is touched. Strange as he may seem, other people are far more a mystery to him, as he lacks the intuitive "theory of mind" by which most of

¹ www.markhaddon.com/aspergers-and-autism

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us sense what is going on in other people's heads. When his neighbor's poodle, Wellington, is killed and Christopher is falsely accused of the crime, he decides that he will take a page from Sherlock Holmes (one of his favorite characters) and track down the killer while writing a book about the investigation, with his teacher's help. As the case makes him discover the secrets of his parents' broken marriage and then forces him to live an incredible adventure to find the place where he belongs to, he must learn to use logic to understand the world that still remains a mystery to him. Although the novel never mentions autism, the novel's protagonist shows several symptoms that characterize the disorder, such as difficulty in reading facial expressions, repulsion to physical contact, odd behaviors as rocking back and forth and lack of empathy.

Personally, I really enjoyed the way in which Haddon has reflected the emotions and the way the main character sees the world. That is why this extended essay will mainly focus on Christopher Boone's character and how brilliantly Mark Haddon has portrayed him. Consequently, my aim will be answering the following research question: **How far does Christopher's condition limit or enlighten his perspective on life?** In order to do this, I will divide my extended essay into two sections, I will identify specific scenes in which Christopher behaves in an unusual way according to generally accepted patterns of behavior, and explore, in the first section, those incidents which limit his understanding of the world around him and in the second section, those which allow him to see more clearly than those who fit into the so-called "normal" patterns of behavior.

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Christopher's illness as a limitation (1646 words)

According to the organization "Autism Speaks", Asperger is defined as:

*"an illness where the person who suffers from it has difficulty with social interactions and shows a very close range of interests and repetitive behaviors. Their motor development may be delayed, leading to clumsiness or uncoordinated movements. Also, they may have limited or inappropriate social interactions with nonverbal communication (gestures, facial expression, etc.) with verbal skills inability to understand social or emotional issues or nonliteral phrases"*²

At the beginning of the novel, as he introduces himself, Christopher mentions his lack of understanding of facial expressions. This is a clear fact that limits him in his daily life. Deductive logic is not on his favor, as he is unable to grasp the meaning of certain faces, he cannot understand how and why people's facial expressions change. Even though Siobhan, his teacher, has drawn faces showing different emotions to help him, he still cannot understand what they mean because *"People's faces move very quickly"*³ for Christopher. This shows his lack of ability at the time of reading faces. Such common expressions like doubt, anger, surprise or confusion remain a mystery to him, thus narrowing his relationship with people he does not know very well.

Christopher has very poor social skills due to the fact that he cannot imagine what other people are thinking or feeling. This is very noticeable when he cannot explain himself after Mrs. Shears and the policeman enquire him about Wellington, his neighbor's dead dog:

² <http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/asperger-syndrome?gclid=C13U7pedlsACFSdk7AodBz0A2Q>

³ Haddon Mark, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Vintage Random House, Great Britain, 2004, chapter 2, page 3.

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*"...I wanted to answer the question properly, but the policeman did not give me enough time to work out the correct answer"*⁴

At which he quickly feels overwhelmed and starts groaning:

*"I rolled back onto the lawn and pressed my forehead to the ground again and made the noise that Father calls groaning."*⁵

Another clear impediment for Christopher is his incapability of understanding jokes. He lacks the sense of humor and the pleasure that laughter causes. That is why, when he undertakes the project of writing a murder mystery novel about Wellington's death, he states:

*"There will be no jokes in this book, because I don't understand them"*⁶

Jokes are sometimes complex and most of them contain some kind of hidden message, which is what makes them funny. As it has already been mentioned, Christopher finds it hard to understand anything that is not straightforward. The fact that one word can have multiple meanings confuses Christopher and makes him feel uncomfortable and that is the reason why jokes and metaphors (which work for him in a similar way as jokes), are incomprehensible for him:

*"The second main reason (why he finds people confusing) is that people talk using metaphors"*⁷

Metaphors include a comparison between one thing and another, both of which have usually no actual relation. Christopher can only feel

⁴ Op cit, chapter 11, page 7.

⁵ Op cit, chapter 11, page 8.

⁶ Op cit, chapter 13, page 10.

⁷ Op cit, chapter 29, page 19.

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comfortable with the literal meaning of words since he lacks the power to deduce the metaphorical meaning of certain common expressions. He even suggests that they should be called "lies", the reason why he thinks this way is clearly explained in the following extract from the novel:

*"I think it should be called a lie because [...] 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 with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about"*⁸

It is clear that Christopher is socially underequipped and this inability to empathize makes him dislike social interaction and try to avoid it whenever possible.

Another episode in the novel that makes it clear that Asperger acts as a limitation for Christopher is when he lets colours change his mood. Christopher explains that he ranks the day according to the number and color of the cars he sees on his way to school:

*"...4 red cars in a row made it a **Good Day**, and 3 red cars in a row made it a **Quite Good Day**, and 5 red cars in a row made it a **Super Good Day**. [...] 4 yellow cars in a row made it a **Black Day**".*⁹

He explains he does this because it is his own way of giving order to things and he adds that he feels safe when he does this. At first sight, this might seem just as unusual as his Father's habit of putting his trousers on before his socks every morning because it is his order. However, Christopher takes this habit to a different level, it becomes an obsession

⁸ Op cit, chapter 29, page 20.

⁹ Op cit, chapter 47, page 31

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on which both, his actions and mood depend. On "Very Good Days" he is a totally positive person that is willing to engage in every project that comes up to his mind and just because it is a "Very Good Day", he believes that he will succeed and nothing sad or bad can happen:

*"In the bus on the way to school next morning we passed 4 red cars in a row which meant that it was a **Good day**, so I decided not to be sad about Wellington."*¹⁰

On the other hand, on Black Days Christopher refuses to speak to anyone, sits by himself and does not eat at lunch. He cannot control his mood in the same way he cannot control his dislike for certain colors, namely yellow and brown and his repulsion if two different types of food touch on his plate:

*"Father banged the table with his fist really hard so that the plates and his knife and fork jumped around and my ham jumped sideways so that it touched the broccoli so I couldn't eat the ham or the broccoli any more."*¹¹

The extract above may show some kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder in Christopher. OCD (obsessive-compulsive behaviour) *"is an anxiety disorder characterized by uncontrollable, unwanted thoughts and repetitive, ritualized behaviours you feel compelled to perform."*¹² His irrational hatred for certain colors or his obsession for the way in which food should not touch on the plate become so excessive that they interfere with his daily life and although he admits they are irrational, he cannot resist them and break free.

¹⁰ Op cit, page 31

¹¹ Op cit, page 63

¹² Robinson Lawrence, Smith Melinda, Segal Jeanne, "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder", www.helpguide.org/mental/obsessive_compulsive_disorder OCD.htm

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One of Christopher's main traits is his power of observation and his attention to detail. He can remember every detail of any place he visits, and he can rapidly perceive if there is any change if he has visited it before. However, when he is in a new place, he collapses as he tries to process every single detail in very little time, and his mind freezes. Christopher explains what happens to him in chapter 181 with an example of a field:

*" (...) It is very tiring if I am in a new place, as I see all these things and if someone asked me how the cows looked like, I could ask which one and I could do a drawing of them at home (...)"*¹³

This extreme attention to detail acts as limiting factor for Christopher when he finds himself stuck in the train station of Swindon on his way to see his mother in London:

*"... I was scared so I was not noticing things very well [...] And it was like standing on a cliff in a really strong wind because it made me feel giddy and sick..."*¹⁴

As he walks through the train station, Christopher feels overwhelmed to the point that he gets paralysed. In this case I believe that his unlimited memory plays against him, as it prevents him from fulfilling his aim.

Once he is able to overcome his fear on the train journey, Christopher finds his way to the subway platform but an incident at this point portrays

¹³ Haddon Mark, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Vintage Random House, Great Britain, 2004, chapter 181, page 176.

¹⁴ Op cit, chapter 191, page 179.

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how his condition puts his life in danger. All along his journey Christopher has kept Toby, his pet rat, in his pocket but he suddenly notices that it has escaped. He eventually sees Toby in the railroad track, and his first reaction is to jump down there and rescue his furry friend while the subway is approaching. The catastrophe is avoided by a man in the station that rescues him by holding his hand and lifting him up:

*"And the man with the diamond patterns on his socks tried to grab my shoulder, so I screamed"*¹⁵

To my view, this episode shows Christopher's unawareness of the risk he was running. It also shows irony, because, throughout the novel he shows fear about many things such as talking to strangers, his own father, being touched, but he professes no fear at all when he is almost hit by a train.

For Christopher, the A-level math test, which he intends to sit for at the end of the year, represents a way for him to feel proud of himself. That is why he displays a great desire to do it, such is his interest in it that he does not realize the inconveniences this may cause. When Christopher finally finds his mother in London, she is living with Mr. Shears, the man his mother has eloped with leaving him and his father alone. Mr Shears does not want Christopher with them and so his mother decides to go back to Swindon with her son. At the prospect of returning to Swindon, Christopher insists on his taking the A-level math test:

"And I said "Are we going back to Swindon so I can do my Maths A level?" and Mother said "What?" And I said "I'm meant to be doing my Maths A level tomorrow" and mother spoke very slowly and she said "We

¹⁵ Op cit, chapter 227, page 224.

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*are going to Swindon because if we stay in London any longer... Someone was going to get hurt. And it doesn't necessarily mean you."*¹⁶

This extract shows that Christopher does not understand what is going on between his Mother and Mr. Shears due to his lack of empathy, he cannot interpret his mother's feelings of fear.

¹⁶ Op cit., chapter 233, pages 252 - 253.

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Christopher Boone's illness as an enlightenment (1482 words)

Although never straightforwardly stated in the story, Christopher Boone has Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism in which sufferers have normal, or above normal intelligence but serious problems relating to others. Sarah Ray, Assistant Professor and Program Leader of Humboldt State University, states that:

"People with disabilities are perceived as having less intelligence, potential, and capability; indeed, the very definition of disability is the need for special accommodation to "allow" them to fulfill functions otherwise deemed "normal"."¹⁷

This claim shows how most people misjudge disabled people and see them as less intelligent. However, this may not be the case in ***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time***, as Haddon explains that *"the route to understanding someone else is ... just using your imagination to put yourself in their shoes"*¹⁸. His approach has greeted warm approval from those affected by the condition, who consider Haddon's novel *"as a humanizing portrayal that gives readers real insight into the thought processes of people with Asperger's"*¹⁹.

Throughout the novel, Christopher shows extraordinary signs of intelligence. However, he denies being clever:

¹⁷ Ray, Sarah Jaquette. "Normalcy, Knowledge, and Nature in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*." DSQ 33.3 (2013). Rpt. in *Children's Literature Review*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 188. Detroit: Gale, 2014. Literature Resource Center. Web. 21 May 2014.

¹⁸ <http://www.today.com/id/4489070/ns/today-todayentertainment/t/autistic-boy-unlikely-book-hero>

¹⁹ <http://www.today.com/id/4489070/ns/today-todayentertainment/t/autistic-boy-unlikely-book-hero>

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*"I said I wasn't clever. I was just noticing how things were, and that wasn't clever. That was just being observant. Being clever was when you looked at how things were and used the evidence to work out something new"*²⁰

In my view, this extract shows that Christopher is intelligent enough to question his own intelligence. At this point, it is interesting to mention Christopher's feelings about his classmates. He clearly feels superior to these "special needs" children but he recognizes that he does, in fact, fit into the category of "special needs". However, his need to overcome his condition leads him to dismiss the term:

*"People who have special needs" is not correct, as all the people have special needs. "(...) everyone has special needs, like father who has to carry a little packet of artificial sweetening tablets around with him to put in his coffee to stop him getting fat, or Mrs. Peters, who wears a beige-coloured hearing aid, [...], and none of these people are Special Needs even if they have special needs."*²¹

Evidently, Christopher recognizes his condition but he does not consider it makes him less capable than the average person.

Because Christopher is aware of the fact that his condition makes it difficult for him to communicate and that words are not enough to make people understand him, he resorts to charts, drawings and diagrams to get his message across. James Carter, an assistant professor of English describes Christopher's way of communicating with imagetext and explains:

²⁰ Haddon Mark, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Vintage Random House, Great Britain, 2004, chapter 47, page 32.

²¹ Op cit, chapter 71, page 56.

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"[Although he uses pictures to express himself does not mean he is not and cannot communicate effectively via these combinations of written word and pictographic image that form text]"²²

Christopher realizes that he lacks communicative skills and yet, he tries to implement his strengths to show that he is capable of conveying his message clearly.

Another illuminating factor of Mark Haddon's character is his memory, which is a gift to him, as he can remember details from any experience he has lived. He defines his own memory:

"My memory is like a film. That is why I am good at remembering things, like the conversations I have written down in this book, and what people were wearing, and what they smelled like, because my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack" ²³

This fact is a key asset for him, as he remembers things exactly as they happened, which allows him to know whom he has already met and what to do in situations he has already encountered. He uses his wide memory to act in difficult situations.

Another illuminating trait that Christopher has is that he uses his memory and his gifted mathematical mind to ease his anxiety about the world that surrounds him. For instance, he compares prime numbers with life:

²² Carter, James, "Imagetext in the Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time", *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, 3.3 (2007), Dept of English, University of Florida.
http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/carter

²³ Haddon Mark, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Vintage Random House, Great Britain, 2004, chapter 113, page 96.

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"I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them" ²⁴

Christopher's observations on prime numbers show that he values order and has a gifted mathematical mind. He tries to connect something he considers easy with something which he believes is almost impossible to comprehend. He sees prime numbers interesting in spite of their rules. Instead, he has a problem with his social skills, that is why he connects life with prime numbers, because he wants to understand life by means of a topic that he is keen on.

In addition, Christopher's condition enables him to solve mathematical puzzles as no other fifteen-year-old kid does. Although intelligence cannot only be judged by excellence in just one field, it can be seen as an enlightening capacity. Christopher has a very active mind, which allows him to remember different things and help him understand the world around him. We can see this at the beginning of the novel when he introduces himself:

"My name is Christopher John Francis Boone; I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,507." ²⁵

Along the novel, mathematical puzzles and problems are Christopher's way of escaping from his problems, when he is feeling down he focuses on mathematical problems to feel safe:

²⁴ Op cit. chapter 19, page 15

²⁵ Op cit, chapter 3, page 2.

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"I doubled 2s in my head because it made me feel calmer. I got to 33,554,432 which is 2^{25} which is not very much because I've got to 2^{45} before but my brain wasn't working very well." ²⁶

To my mind, this extract portrays Christopher's intelligence not only because he can make such difficult mathematical operations but mainly because he uses this method to relieve himself. In addition, the fact that he considers that reaching that number (2^{25}) is relatively low depicts the fact that he is an ambitious person, and that he is not going to feel pleased with reaching that number, as he wants to "force" his mind to do better.

Christopher's talented mind for Maths makes him the first boy in his school (a school for children with disabilities) to sit for the A-level Test in Math, which means a lot for him since it is a way of proving he is cleverer than the other students in his school. This is evidence that his condition, while a handicap, does not limit him to the extent that the other children's disabilities limit them.

As the novel advances, we can see how Christopher uses math equations and problems as a way of distracting from his problems and also as a hobby during his leisure time. In my opinion, this reflects that he is a very intelligent person, as he uses these mental challenges to take his mind away from what worries him in life. Logic puzzles, math problems, and maps are a symbol of order for Christopher. Accordingly, Christopher uses them as tools to organize his thinking. In chapter 101 Christopher describes the "Monty Hall problem". In this chapter, Christopher explains how to solve a mathematical problem with formulas and a chart. He questions the value of intuition at the moment of taking

²⁶ Op cit, chapter 167, page 149.

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a decision, as he says that most of the times intuition makes most of the people make mistakes, even when they think they are totally right.

*"This shows that intuition can sometime make things wrong. And intuition is what people make decisions. But logic can help you work out the right answer."*²⁷

In my opinion, his condition makes Christopher a very sensible boy for his age since he does not rely on intuition to take decisions, instead he uses his analytical mind and explores the different options before acting. In this way he succeeds in overcoming the different obstacles on his journey to London. When his thoughts become jumbled in the train station in Swindon, for instance, Christopher thinks of the visual riddle called Conway's Soldiers to clear his mind:

*And then I tried to think about what I had to do, but I couldn't think because there were too many other things in my head, so I did a maths problem to make my head clearer."*²⁸

Similarly, Christopher's uses maps to lead his way. If we consider that he is 15 years old and has never left his neighborhood before, it is his condition which enables him to reach his destination. The following extract portrays how Christopher successfully finds Swindon train designing a mind map of the place, something no other boy could have done:

"And that was how I found the train station, and I concentrated really hard on following the rules and making a map of the centre of the town

²⁷ Op cit , chapter 101, page 82.

²⁸ Op cit, chapter 191, page 181.

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*in my head as I walked, and that way it was easier to ignore all the noise around me"*²⁹

In essence, maths problems and maps provide Christopher with a strategy to follow when there are too many variables for him to reach a clear solution.

²⁹ Op cit, chapter 179, page 173.

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Conclusion: (260 words)

After an in-depth analysis of Mark Haddon's portrayal of the protagonist of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, I have come to the conclusion that Christopher's condition is an illumination for him as he can see the world in a much more detailed way than we do. Christopher can analyze different situations without letting his emotions interfere and as we can see along this extended essay he succeeds in most of the challenges he faces, even if he has to struggle to overcome obstacles.

Haddon depicts Christopher as a kind of "machine" person, who can use his mind to solve any problem, not only mathematical puzzles but the puzzles life presents to him. For example, when Christopher doesn't understand something, he uses his bright mind to find a solution. He connects his own knowledge to the topic he does not understand in order to gain new insight and find a way out.

As the novel advances, we can see that Christopher does not use deductive logic, as he lacks it, but he uses his "cold" minded system of thoughts to understand the different situations. As he does not let his emotions interfere in his decisions, he has a clearer view, as he is not influenced by the different emotions that can lead a person to adopt certain attitudes.

In answer to my initial research question: **How far does Christopher's condition limit or enlighten his perspective on life?** I believe that Christopher's condition is an asset that helps him see the world in a different, more enlightened perspective.

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