

Re-Creation of the Character and Subjectivation in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

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Abstract: This paper examines the creation of subject (the protagonist Christopher) and identity in Simon Stephens' play *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. *The Curious Incident* features vulnerability, dishonesty, different personalities, trust, experiences that go beyond the character's bounds and relationships between subjects and identities. Christopher is incapable of understanding and knowing himself; as a result, Christopher must learn to rewrite his existence and life in order to reveal his individuality and uncover himself. In opposition to the idea of living inside the confines of universally accepted rules, the play offers a different and autonomous definition of subjectivity which deconstructs accepted rules. The subject tries to exist in a form of power that classifies the individual in society and stigmatises him/her with his/her own individuality. This study, focusing on Alain Badiou's theory of subjectivation and within this context, his four terms (event, truth, body and present) in general and adding a fifth section as the event of daily life, argues that *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* depicts a collective subject similar to Badiou's figure: a subject who rejects ordinary forms of communication for alternatives to authority and its structural inequalities.

Keywords:

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The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time Oyununda Karakteri Yeniden Yaratma ve Özneleştirme

Öz: Bu makale, Simon Stephens'in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Gece Vaktinde Tuhaf Bir Köpek Vakası) oyununda öznenin (kahraman Christopher) ve kimliğin yaratılmasını incelemektedir. *The Curious Incident*, kırılabilirlik, sahtekârlık, farklı kişilikler, güven, karakterin sınırlarını aşan deneyimleri ve öznel ile kimlikler arasındaki ilişkileri ele almaktadır. Christopher kendini anlamaktan ve tanımaktan acizdir; sonuç olarak, Christopher bireyselliğini ve kendini ortaya çıkarmak için varlığını ve hayatını yeniden yazmayı öğrenmelidir. Evrensel olarak kabul edilmiş kuralların sınırları içinde yaşama fikrine karşı, oyun, kabul edilmiş kuralları yapı bozumuna uğratan farklı ve özerk bir öznel tanımlı sunduğunu savlamaktadır. Özne, bireyi toplum içinde sınıflandıran, kendi bireyselliği ile damgalayan bir iktidar biçiminde var olmaya çalışır. Alain Badiou'nun özneleştirme teorisine ve bu bağlamda genel olarak dört terime (olay, hakikat, beden ve varoluş) odaklanan ve günlük hayatın akıbeti olarak beşinci bir bölümü ekleyen bu çalışma, *The Curious Incident* oyununda Badiou'nun figürüne benzer, sıradan iletişim biçimlerini reddeden otoriteye ve onun yapısal eşitsizliklerine alternatif kolektif bir özneyi betimlediğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

The Curious Incident,
Özneleştirme,
Alain Badiou,
Karakterin Yeniden
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Introduction

To express his notion of subjectivity, Alain Badiou relies on mathematics, dialectical materialism, and Platonism in his works. Badiou attempts to construct the subject within the universalising concept. The subject, according to Badiou, carries a commodity and is devoured by an infinite power. The subject's own permanence, self-identity, is only feasible if the subject is dependent on his own power (*Saint Paul* 54). Subjectivisation "is a potential force for change rather than the preservation of the status quo" (Delgado-Garcia 64). Badiou's four terms "event," "truth," "body" and "present" are deployed to analyse the subject. To him, event/incident – the first of these terms – is divided into four sections: the arts, science, love and politics (Delgado-Garcia 17). The second of Badiou's term is "truth," which is "a concrete, time specific sequence in which a new thought and a new practice . . . arise, exist, and eventually disappear" (*Communist Hypothesis* 231). Through new attitudes and truth, a new identity is formed: "Subject is part of a truth-procedure" (McLavery-Robinson). According to Badiou, truth is simply a theoretical phrase for a hypothetical uniformity (*Fifteen Theses* 106). The third term "body" for Badiou refers to the set of everything that propels the subject together with corporeality (*Logics of Worlds* 467). The mental and physical traits of the subject may cause him or her to behave differently, but it is these characteristics that move the subject. The subject becomes self-actualised and is a part of the "present" as a result of these concepts.

The subject attempts to exist in a form of power that categorises the individual in society, marks him/her with his/her own individuality, forces him/her to adhere to his/her own character, enforces the principle of truth that the subject should recognise and apply in daily life, but this is a form of power, and others should recognise it. Because of the power we are subject to, we can have an identity, and this identity can be moulded by the same force. In this way, we embrace the identity of society, family, or surroundings as our own, or we must accept it according to predetermined standards.

Simon Stephens' play *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2012) is an adaptation of Mark Haddon's successful 2003 novel of the same title. Stephens, in addition to portraying all these four concepts by Badiou, adds a fifth section to the event explored in his 2012 stage adaptation. This fifth section is the event of "daily life." Just as a revolution is a political event, the protagonist Christopher's creation of his own character and finding his identity is also a revolution in the event of daily life.

Taking my cue from this theoretical conceptualisation by Badiou, I claim that the play offers an alternative and autonomous interpretation of subjectivity, and discuss how Simon Stephens' adaptation portrays a collective subject like the one by Badiou. Contrary to his plays which ignore physical descriptions of characters, Stephens especially focuses on the protagonist Christopher and identifies him with his physical form in the adaptation. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* involves vulnerability, dishonesty, heterogeneous personalities, trust as well as experiences which exceed the boundaries of the character and involve interactions between subjects and identities. In this frame, this study argues that Christopher does not understand or know himself and, for that reason, he must learn to reinterpret his existence, live and embrace life in order to disclose his identity, and discover himself. Hence, this paper zooms in on the character Christopher, shifting attention from his boundaries as ruled by others toward a journey of exploration and self-discovery. The initial aim is to describe the way the subject/character in the play is influenced by the beliefs and rules of others. Contrary to the concept of living inside the boundaries of norms acknowledged by everyone, I propose that Stephens' play presents a distinctive and alternate understanding of subjectivity; that is, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* portrays a collective subject as defined by Badiou: a person who keeps saying 'no' to ordinary means of communication as a response to power and its systematic inequities (Delgado-Garcia 146). To common belief, the habit of saying 'no' is hazardous to the direct and indirect maintenance of relationships, and should be kept under control; however, this article explores how, unlike Haddon's novel, Stephens' adaptation moves from the subjective to the objective form, as well as how the theatrical character is portrayed in a three-dimensional fashion in the Badiouan trajectory.

Here, I find it noteworthy to indicate a point for a better analysis of the play: character is not always the fictitious representation of a liberal-humanist subject. The term "person" does not have to refer to a distinct mental and ethical presence imbued with self-identical individuality. In the first part of the play, it is witnessed that Christopher does not understand himself because he has always been managed and directed by others around him. Accordingly, Stephens, instead of joining the debate about the disappearance or 'death of character,' reconstructs a logical and clever identity in his creation of character. Christopher, embodying a different identity, pretends to be in a different place. For this reason, this study not only aims to investigate subjectivity as represented in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, but also explains how the dramatist accomplishes this through his character(isation) choice.

***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and Subjectivation of Character**

The play premiered at the London National Theatre on August 2, 2012, and ten years later, I had a chance to watch the play which was staged at Sheffield Theatre Lyceum from February 15 to February 19, 2022. Stephens' adaptation is a successful one and a significant addition to contemporary experimental performances in terms of the play's in-depth questionings. What marks this play as special is how Stephens pays close attention

to ontological questions concerning 'who we are and have been' and how these questions reverberate in the stories and for spectators. The main character of the play is Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old boy with behavioural difficulties who undertakes a journey to uncover the truth about who killed his neighbour's dog, uncovering some nasty secrets concerning his family in the process. Christopher finds people and his environment dangerous, and for that reason, he cannot leave his street. The protagonist, represented as an individualised subject in his restricted surroundings, is a human being who has no option but to act in accordance with the regulations that govern him.

At the beginning of the play, Mrs Shears' dog, Wellington, is killed, and Christopher is accused of being the murderer of the dog. Christopher's teacher Siobhan, as the narrator of the play and as the reflection of Christopher's rebirth as a character/subject, explains the situation:

There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog. The dog was called Wellington. It belonged to Mrs. Shears who was our friend.

...

After 12 and a half minutes a policeman arrived. He had a big orange leaf stuck to the bottom of his shoe which was poking out from one side" This is good Christopher. It's quite exciting. I like the details. They make it more realistic. (Stephens 5–6)

However, the teenager does not accept the accusation because he does not tell lies. Reminding the authority and the audience of what his mother used to say, he says he is truthful specifically "because I was a good person. But it is not because I am a good person. It is because I can't tell lies" (Stephens 6). He chooses the truth to reveal his existence. Because he imagines his truthful self to be identical with Siobhan, the protagonist prefers to talk to Siobhan and, in the meantime, Siobhan transforms into Christopher and begins to be viewed as Christopher's own spirit and mind:

Siobhan. "I find people confusing." . . . Siobhan says that if you raise one eyebrow it can mean lots of different things. It can mean 'I want to do sex with you.' I never said that.

Christopher. Yes you did.

Siobhan. I didn't use those words Christopher.

Christopher. You did on September 12th last year. At first break. (Stephens 7)

As seen from this inner dialogue, Christopher has no idea how to sympathise with other people, or even that he should empathise with them. He lives in a world of virtually pure phenomenology, with the resultant sensory overload. "I see everything," (7) he claims. Although he can see, observe, and feel everything, he finds people confusing. Instead of giving any proper statement related to the murder during the police interrogation, Christopher chooses to talk about the Milky Way. The Milky Way is a barred spiral galaxy, which means the core part looks like a 'bar' and is composed of stars, dust, and gas. People

tend to believe that the Milky Way is a lengthy line of stars; however, this is not the case. The galaxy is a massive sphere of stars that stretches for millions of light years: “For a long time scientists were puzzled by the fact that the sky is dark at night even though there are billions of stars in the universe” (Stephens 9). Disturbed by emotions, intimacy, and people, Christopher tries to distance himself from those very emotions and people by keeping his eyes firmly on the sky and thinking of the stars.

Christopher is lured into a realm of pure logic after being disconnected from regular human connections, unable to link events learned from other people’s exchanges, and helpless to understand the depth and significance of such encounters. Aside from Siobhan, Stephens inserts voices (voices one, two, three, and four) into the play to represent Christopher’s confusion:

Siobhan. The second main reason I find people confusing is that people often talk using metaphors.

Voice Three. I am going to seriously lose my shit.

Voice Four. He was the apple of her eye.

Voice Three. They had a skeleton in the cupboard

Voice One. The dog was stone dead. (Stephens 10)

For Christopher, metaphors expressed in common speech can become quite complicated. The fact that people use metaphors limits Christopher’s comprehension of those people and he has difficulty communicating with them. In actuality, Christopher, who wishes to speak in a straightforward manner, displays more heterogeneous personalities than the usual dramatis personae and attempts to avoid communication. Furthermore, his identity is too vast and diversified to be relevant on its own. Instead of Christopher, four voices speak and try to shape his identity.

Aside from expressing the truth, Christopher is also known for his scepticism. Christopher, accused of killing Wellington the dog, decides to investigate the case of the murder just like a detective:

Christopher. I’ve decided I am going to try and find out who killed Wellington because a Good Day is a day for projects and planning things.

Siobhan. Who’s Wellington?

Christopher. Wellington is a dog that used to belong to my neighbour Mrs. Shears who is our friend, but he is dead now because somebody killed him by putting a garden fork through him. . . . a policeman thought I’d killed him but I hadn’t and then he tried to touch me so I hit him.

Siobhan. Gosh.

Christopher. And I am going to find out who really killed Wellington and make it a project. (Stephens 13)

Christopher commences his attempt to figure out who killed Wellington. However, his father Ed constantly criticises Christopher and warns him to get his nose out of other people's business. Resonating with the Foucauldian definition of the subject as "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by conscious or self-knowledge" (Foucault 331), Christopher is controlled by his father, who believes that his son is completely reliant on him. Nonetheless, Christopher attempts to forge his own identity through truth and self-awareness. As in the indications of Badiou's subjectivation, Christopher creates his own truth by his own enforcement, difference, and decision.

As in the dramatist's clarification of the dialectical relations between lies and truths, "as soon as you lie to somebody, you become vulnerable because you have to live in hope that the lie is never uncovered" (Stephens 41). To avoid such a condition of vulnerability, Christopher cleverly chooses an in-between position: the guarded truth. While he investigates the case of the murder, "Christopher doesn't completely tell the truth of what he's actually doing. He says that, 'I'm reading a letter'" (Stephens 41). In appearance, this might absolutely seem like the truth. Yet, he guards his real intention to demystify the murder so as to protect himself to a certain extent (Ue 116). This way, the protagonist is able to create his novel way of deconstructing the system. With the same aim of deconstructing the system, Christopher chooses the companionship of his pet mouse Toby and constantly communicates with it because he finds humans unintelligible and overly complex. Then, he chooses to read Sherlock Holmes stories to track down the person responsible for the death of Wellington and admires the detective's ability to separate his head from his emotions. In this guarded truth to try to solve the mystery, he learns that actually his father killed Wellington. Admitting his crime, Ed confesses: "So... I killed Wellington Christopher. Just... let me explain. When your mum left... Well... Christopher, I'm trying to keep this simple... I thought we were friends. Chris, you know what I'm talking about... Look Christopher. I'm sorry. Let's leave it for tonight" (Stephens 36). Tracing the person responsible for Wellington's death and finding out who killed it is essential for the protagonist because the truth is the only fundamental term for his existence and identity.

In the following part of the play, Christopher comes across a letter with his mother's name on it, sent from London, one and a half years after his mother's death, while trying to find the book he was writing at home:

Siobhan. I was really confused. Mother had never written me a letter before.
And mother had never lived in London. I looked at the front of the envelope and I saw there was a postmark, the 16th of October 2013, which meant that the letter was posted 18 months after Mother had died. (Stephens 31)

Now Christopher has a second secret to solve. In order not to reveal his anxiety, he starts to repeat prime numbers (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, etc.). Relying on his new-found power of indivisibility – as symbolised by these prime numbers – in his newly flourishing subjectivity, Christopher decides to act without any forethought or planning since, as

Andy McLaverty-Robinson asserts, a “subject can only exist after a decision, as its effect.” He chooses to embark on a journey that would serve as a turning point in his life, allowing him to escape a situation he could not previously escape. This part of the play begins with Christopher finding the courage to leave the dead end in Swindon “when it emerges that Christopher’s school has turned his book into a play” (Bolton 152) for “everybody to join in (with) and play a part in” (Stephens 53). Christopher’s journey is risky, taking him from his home in Swindon, England, to the heart of London, on a journey of exploration and self-discovery.

On his journey to London, Christopher learns that sometimes (mathematical or real-life) approximations are all he can have and that he should try his best. He chooses to go to the capital in order to mature and develop his own identity and to eliminate the subject’s commitment to the subject. The subject’s body, his/her wants, inter-subjective relationships that define it and the subject’s bodily exposure to others are the most significant factors of one’s corporeality. Christopher’s physical and mental attachment to other subjects is deconstructed when he decides to go to London. Christopher, regardless of the material conditions of life, tries to disperse himself from his place/hometown and physical body.

Badiou’s subject description, as Cristina Delgado-Garcia also points out, is not one-of-a-kind and autonomous. The figure is placed in a certain shared structure as a result of this subjectivation, highlighting a character’s materiality, the holder of a truth’s subjective appearance: “The body thus can be a musical piece, or paintings such as those Picasso; it can be algebra” (67). One other aspect which Christopher demonstrates and realises himself in is algebra, which is the language that underpins how numbers function. It is a system that describes the principles that govern numerical behaviour. Christopher uses algebra to explain the patterns that underlie his behaviour and thereby reveals the mystery underlying his behaviour and expresses himself. Like mathematical formulae in Badiou’s theory, Christopher’s mathematical intelligence accompanies the event in his life. While contrary to Christopher’s previous life (based on living within restricted borders), his decision to be independent represents another event as a second coming to life. Algebra represents the power that classifies Christopher in society, marks him with his own individuality, forces him to detect his own character, puts into effect the principle of truth that he himself should recognise and apply in his daily life. In line with the depiction of Badiou’s term “body,” Christopher’s body creates his own ‘subjectivisation’ through an algebraic lens. When Christopher arrives in London, he finds his mother, who, as his father claims, is supposed to have died years ago, near Willesden Junction:

Christopher. I came on the train.

Judy. Oh my God Christopher. I didn’t... I didn’t think I’d ever... Why are you here on your own?

...

Christopher. I'm going to live with you because Father killed Wellington with a garden fork.

...

Judy. Why didn't you write to me, Christopher? I wrote you all those letters. I kept thinking something dreadful had happened or you'd moved away and I'd never find out where you were.

Christopher. Father said you were dead.

Judy. What? (Stephens 56–57)

The fact that Christopher goes to London, finds his mother, and bravely tells her everything shows that he has matured as a character. Just as Judy escapes from her husband, Christopher chooses to escape from his father to where Judy and Mr Shears, her lover, reside in London. Christopher and his mother then return to Swindon one night. This change of locations also represents a revolutionary event for Christopher because the protagonist has managed to find his mother by himself and has reached the truth, and returned home. Upon coming back to Swindon, Christopher goes to school to take his math exam to get an A-star. His mathematical ability represents Christopher's capacity to find the magical in his borders. Through this capacity, he achieves A-star and goes beyond his borders. Christopher's mental and physical characteristics may cause him to behave differently, but it is these characteristics that move him. Through these terms, the subject is now self-actualised and has become a part of the present, as clarified in his resolutions below:

Christopher. I'm going to pass it and get an A-star. And then in two years I'll take A-level physics and get an A-star. And then I'm going to go to university in another town. I can take Sandy and my books and my computer. I can live in a flat with a garden and a proper toilet. Then I will get a First Class Honours Degree. Then I will be scientist. I can do these things.

Siobhan. I hope so.

Christopher. I can because I went to London on my own. She looks at him. I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington.

She looks at him.

I found my mother. I was brave. (Stephens 72–73)

Christopher is more courageous than ever before since he has done everything, what he thought he could not do, and is now gaining self-confidence. He is now someone who recognises himself as a subject, completes his own form, and makes his own truth accepted by others. It seems that Stephens especially values *The Curious Incident* because he does not support tentative behaviour with no purpose. Niamh Cusack clarifies the dramatist's intention and praises his adaptation:

It's an anarchic play, ultimately, . . . and I think Simon is probably a bit of an anarchist too. There's an element of saying: "Here's the play: play." And that's a glorious gift to give to anyone who's interested in making theatre. . .

. Simon's plays are quite robust and bold, and so they can be treated with the same sort of boldness and robustness. And I think that's a marvellous gift. . .
 . [Simon] is a very courageous playwright. He's not tentative. And he dares you not to be tentative. (Cusack)

Stephens stresses Christopher's own book as a means of ensuring the lasting identity acquisition and life as a subject. Christopher, who has become the narrator of his own life, defines his thoughts and feelings as well as his likes and dislikes. He has acknowledged the truth of his existence because Christopher's art communicates both his sentiments and his own thinking as an autonomous subject.

Because Christopher actually writes *The Curious Incident*, the narrative proceeds with the rhythm of a completely concentrated, yet easily distracted, mind. It swings between detailing the events leading up to and following Wellington's death and Christopher's broad and lively inner world. As a consequence, the reader discovers that the term "metaphor" is a metaphor in and of itself, that the constellation Orion may resemble a dinosaur, and that Christopher's beloved arithmetic can be utilised to answer practically any conundrum (Schultheis 193). In the novel, Christopher's singular voice is represented as tentative. Referring to Badiou's four terms, however, the play has enabled Christopher to discover the truth, carry out his own revolutionary deed, exist intellectually and physically, and have his voice heard. Actually, without repeating/referring to Badiou and his terms too much in the introduction part and the body of the essay, this article has tried to analyse the play by focusing on the first term "event" as science with mathematical figures, indivisible numbers and as love with his pet, Wellington and his books. The second term, "truth," is examined concerning Christopher's new ideas and experiences with the Wellington case and his relations with his family; the third term, "body," is explored with subjectivisation, the subject's body, and Christopher's physical body. The fourth term, "subject," is analysed in terms of how Christopher's "present" is created. Finally, the fifth term, "daily life," is illustrated through how events of his daily life and relationships transform Christopher's identity.

Conclusion

According to Stephens, the main purpose of the play is to teach and learn how to become a free-willed individual. Christopher's connection with his teacher, Siobhan, is important to the play because Siobhan is one of the characters who read Christopher's imaginary book. For that reason, Stephens' adaptation casts Siobhan as the narrator of the play and as the reflection of Christopher's rebirth as a character/subject. It is a well-known fact that, in this journey of becoming an individual, no one walks alone and everyone has a teacher. The teacher of this autistic individual, Christopher, is Siobhan. Many of the protagonist's characteristics are consistent with Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, Christopher is never formally diagnosed in the story; his exact mental condition is less relevant than his distinctive view of the world around him. Christopher's numerical optimisation follows the event in his life, much like mathematical formulae in Badiou's

theory. The play offers maths, which organises the universe, indivisible numbers (2, 3, 5, 11, 13, 17, and 19), which symbolise power, and animals in space (Christopher's rat in space), which like Christopher himself symbolise crossing borders.

Christopher is obviously incredibly clever, with a marvellously logical intellect that excels at mathematics, but ordinary interactions have little or no meaning for him, and despite knowing all of the countries in the world and their capitals, he has no comprehension of human emotions (Moss). In the first part of the play, it can be observed that Christopher is a poor choice as a character since he is incapable of defining or appreciating individuality. Stephens bridges the gap between being a subject and not being a subject by showing that Christopher is not indeed a poor choice, emphasising his intelligence and courage with the things he has done, and by making the hero realise the things he has done.

Stephens, in his interview with Tom Ue, clarifies the gap: "I think that puts us in that position where we recognize in ourselves the gap between what we do and what we imagine ourselves doing. I think that's where we recognize ourselves in Christopher's humanity in our own humanity" (Ue 116). Delgado-Garcia asserts that we as scholars also have a role in the perpetuation of several frameworks of fear of people's lives that we admire are confronted inside an artistic or fictitious structure (62–63). Supporting Delgado-Garcia's point of view, Stephens as a playwright adopts the character Christopher and presents him to us as a self-actualising protagonist. Through its conceptualisation of body, subject, truth and event, Badiou's theory seeks to uphold the objectivity of truths. Likewise, Christopher portrays or seems to be in a new place while embodying a different persona. In consonance with Badiou's idea, Christopher becomes a subject because he can make his truth appear and Stephens sees the protagonist and his intelligence as a potential force that can break through his own constraints, challenge the status quo, and give this potential subject a voice and an identity in his daily life.

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