

## 81. Issues of hyper- and hypo-sensitivity in the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and the movie *Jack of the Red Hearts*

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### Abstract

Directed by Janet Grillo, *Jack of the Red Hearts* examines the growing relationship between the autistic teenage girl Glory, played by Taylor Richardson, and Jack (Jenny Jaffe), who hides her identity to be taken into the house as Glory's babysitter. Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* reflects the hypersensitive reactions of Christopher, who is on autism spectrum and how he under responds to sensory stimuli. In terms of representation, autistic characters are especially exposed to increasing prejudices in films and novels. These prejudices started with the movie *Rain Man* and gave birth to the stereotype that all autistic individuals are geniuses. For autistic individuals, who have such a hard-to-break stereotype, every film made and every novel written about them should not be considered as products in which directors and writers can only reflect their personal views and limited experiences about autism. Fictional products, especially cinema and literature, shape the perception of autistic individuals in society. Being aware of this absolute link between fictional texts and autism will both provide solutions to the representation problem of autistic individuals and respond to the needs of neurotypical parents. In the selected movie, demonstrating that the autistic individual causes problems in marriage and the mother's use of the "cure autism now" cup reflect autism as a problem and a disease. However, the bond formed between the caregiver and the autistic young girl is an example of the destruction of prejudices.

**Keywords:** *Jack of the Red Hearts*, autism, representation, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, hypersensitivity

## *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* romanında ve *Jack of the Red Hearts* filminde hipersensitivite ve hiposensitivite sorunları

### Öz

Janet Grillo tarafından yönetilen *Jack of the Red Hearts* filmi Taylor Richardson tarafından canlandırılan otistik genç kız Glory karakteri ve Glory'nin bakıcısı olarak eve alınmak için kimliğini gizleyen Jack (Jenny Jaffe) karakteri arasındaki güçlenen ilişkiyi inceler. Mark Haddon'ın *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* adlı romanı otizm spektrumunda olan Christopher'ın aşırı duyarlılık tepkimelerini ve uyarılara karşı verdiği tepkilerin azlığını yansıtır. Temsil açısından otistik karakterler filmlerde ve romanlarda özellikle artan ön yargılara maruz kalmaktadır. Bu ön yargılar *Rain Man* filmiyle başlamış ve tüm otistik bireylerin dâhi olduğu klişesini doğurmuştur. Böylesine kırılması güç bir klişeye sahip olan otistik bireyler için kendileri hakkında yapılan her film ve yazılan her roman sadece yönetmenin ve yazarların otizm hakkında kişisel görüşlerini ve sınırlı

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deneyimlerini yansıtabilecekleri ürünler olarak değerlendirilmemelidir. Otistik bireylerin toplumdaki algısını başta sinema ve edebiyat olmak üzere kurgusal ürünler şekillendirmektedir. Kurgu eserler ve otizm arasındaki bu mutlak bağın bilincinde olmak hem otistik bireylerin temsil sorununa çözümler getirecek hem de nörotipik ebeveynlerin ihtiyaçlarına cevap verecektir. Seçilen filmde otistik bireyin evlilikte sorunlara neden olduğunun gösterilmesi ve annenin “cure autism now” (otizmi şimdi tedavi et) kupasını kullanması otizmi bir sorun ve hastalık olarak yansıtır. Bununla birlikte bakıcı ve otistik genç kız arasında oluşan bağ ön yargıların yıkımına bir örnek oluşturur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Jack of the Red Hearts*, otizm, temsil, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, aşırı duyarlılık

## Introduction

The movie *Jack of the Red Hearts* directed by Janet Grillo and written by Jennifer Deaton came out in 2015. It tells the story of Jacquelyn or Jack who tries to save her 11-year-old sister Coke from foster care. She has a prior criminal record and is still on probation. Despite that, she commits identity fraud and steals identity of Donna, who is a therapist and professional care-taker. Despite her shortcomings and limited knowledge on autism spectrum disorder, she finds a way to establish a meaningful relationship with Glory, who is on autism spectrum disorder. The characters in the movie affect each other positively. Jack (played by AnnaSophia Robb), an eighteen-year-old girl, struggles to take her sister who lives with her foster parents. She pretends to be a graduate named Donna who has worked in day care for three years and has had enough experience with autistic children. She transforms into a responsible and sensible teenager with her new clothes and hair style. Despite her total ignorance about autism spectrum disorder, she takes the job as the caretaker for Glory. Jack tries to be sensitive and politically correct by using the term “differently abled” (Grillo, 2015); however, Kay Adams, Glory’s mother, says that it not necessary to be politically correct. She is portrayed as a mother overwhelmed with the full responsibility of Glory. She aims to find a caretaker urgently to alleviate her burden.

Christopher, the protagonist in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, aims to write an autobiographical mystery novel like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle about his quest to investigate the killing of the dog of his neighbour and later to find out her mother’s whereabouts. Christopher has an exceptional memory but fails to understand emotions in people’s faces. The novel starts with a self-description of the protagonist: “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 7,057”. Christopher throughout the novel is resembled to the renowned character Sherlock Holmes of Arthur Conan Doyle. Christopher’s methods to investigate a crime is regarded to be similar to Sherlock Holmes’s (Saliba-Salman, 2018).

Although the novel has been criticized for creating the biggest stereotype ever: the genius autistic child. Christopher’s photographic memory helps him solve difficult math questions and memorize abundant amount of information. He has social and behavioural challenges. He is represented as an occasional violent character that can resort to violence. Mark Haddon’s novel has had a severe impact on how autistic children are represented in fiction. Despite being at times stereotypical, the novel represents the diversity and complexity of autism spectrum disorder (William, 2012). It needs to be stressed that Mark Haddon did not make any research on autism, and the terms autism or Asperger’s syndrome, which are no longer used, are not used throughout the novel.

### Hyper- and hypo sensitivity challenges on autism spectrum

Autism was first described in Leo Kanner's study (1943). Kanner's following study in 1949 included common features of autism spectrum disorder (1949). As a heterogeneous group, autistic children are diverse and different; however, the majority of autistic people experience hypersensitivity to lights, especially fluorescent lights, high-pitched sounds, smells, textures, and tastes. Stimuli can be so overwhelming that they struggle to avoid sensory overload. In a study of the 46 subjects, 23.9% of autistic individuals were diagnosed as highly sensitive to sound and two of them were uncomfortable with intense sounds (Gomes et al., 2004). In another study, 75% of children with autism are reported to be diagnosed with sensory problems (Christopher, 2019). In another study, it has been put forward that 90% of autistic individuals respond to sensory stimuli abnormally (Gomes et al., 2008). Autistic individuals may have low tolerance for sensory perceptions, and amplified pain may be one of these core features of autism (Clarke, 2015). In some cases, autistic individuals are not stimulated enough to react, and this under-sensitive reaction is called hypo-sensitivity, a decrease in response to stimuli. They, furthermore, show certain interests to certain sounds and images: "The auditory abnormalities in autism primarily comprised of auditory hyposensitivity, auditory hypersensitivity, phonophobia, and peculiar interests in certain sounds" (Tan et al., 2012). Challenges in social interaction, the use of language development, and imagination, along with repetitive behaviours form "the triad of impairments" (Wing & Gould, 1979, p. 13). In a study, autistic children are reported to have significantly reduced habituation, a decrease in reacting to certain stimuli, compared to neurotypical children in terms of auditory and visual stimuli (Jamal et al., 2021).

Approximately 90% of autistic individuals demonstrate atypical sensory responses including both hyper- and hypo-sensitivity (Balasco et al., 2019). Hyperacusis, a form of low tolerance to uncomfortable sounds, is highly prevalent in autistic individuals, and this hyper-sensitivity by causing atypical reactions may affect an autistic person's social and academic lives (Danesh et al., 2021), and this hyper-sensitivity results from a sensory processing difference (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009). It has also been stated that auditory hyper-sensitivity is not related to the auditory system (Lucker, 2013). A systematic desensitization is needed to modify autistic people's reactions so that they can be more comfortable with those sounds (Koegel et al., 2004). Autistic people may cover their ears to block auditory stimuli and try to avoid bright places (Christopher, 2019). Due to being oversensitive to auditory stimuli, autistic children also have difficulty in concentrating their focus on auditory tasks (Danesh & Kaf, 2012). Crowded and busy places may result in "disorientation and extreme stress" for autistic people (Elwin et al., 2012, p. 427). Autistic individuals may try to stimulate their senses by flapping their hands or looking at a pattern continually (O'Brien et al., 2009) similar to Glory's use of a crystal ball to stimulate her visual system in the movie *Jack of the Red Hearts*. In a study, autistic people are reported to be more hyper-sensitive to certain sensory stimuli than being hypo-sensitive (Robertson, 2012). It is clear in the selected novel and movie that the protagonists are shown to exhibit more hyper-sensitive responses than hypo-sensitive ones. In Haddon's novel, "[n]oises, sights, smells, feelings, [which] are all experienced as random, jumbled and meaningless" by Christopher (Gilbert, 2005, p. 249) are similar to Glory in the movie.

### Hyper- and hypo sensitivity challenges in autistic individuals in *the Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and the movie *Jack of the Red Hearts*

Haddon's novel after its publication became instantly popular with both the young and adults. It won numerous literary prizes including the Whitbread Award. Its popularity promoted the representation of

ASD in fiction. Mark Haddon avoids using terms such as autism or Asperger's syndrome in his novel although it is clear that his protagonist is on autism spectrum disorder. In an interview, he says, "I don't want him to be labeled, and because, as with most people who have a disability, I don't think it's necessarily the most important thing about him" (qtd. in William, 2012, p. 1). However, it is clear that Christopher is on autism spectrum. Haddon's literary style in his novel is a skillful pastiche of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's the Sherlock Holmes stories. Besides creating a pastiche of Doyle's renowned character Sherlock Holmes, Haddon places great importance on Christopher for him to be an active child detective rather than being a passive observer of a crime. Stefania Ciocia (2009, p. 331) marks that "the Romantic view of childhood as an age of innocence" no longer enchants people, and thus children are in contemporary fiction portrayed even as perpetrators and witnesses of violent crimes. This changing attitude in fiction towards children is notable in contemporary fiction. Christopher is not merely a victim of a crime but an active participant to solve it.

It has been argued that although Haddon's novel introduces a new way of understanding both the self and the world, it still focuses on an autistic child with savant abilities instead of focusing on an autistic child with severe symptoms (Chen, 2022). The novel focuses on Christopher's features related to ASD rather than recognizing his personality as a whole (Orlando, 2018). While ASD defines Christopher and includes him in an ostensibly homogenous group in the novel, the complexities of Christopher's personality are ignored. Autism in the novel is thus claimed to be used as a literary device, and the novel fails to present the complexities of ASD, which as a result maintains common stereotypes related to ASD (Burks-Abbott, 2008). Since the public opinion about ASD is that it is both "threatening and fascinating" (Nadesan, 2008, p. 79), literary texts mainly represent these two aspects. However, to introduce autistic individuals' hyper- and hypo-sensitive responses to the reader, the novel is crucial.

As an autistic person, Christopher finds it difficult to understand facial expressions and gestures, and figurative language is a challenging process for him. That is why he cannot use sarcasm, idioms, or figures of speech. It is clear in the DSM-5 that for autistic people, using the language appropriately is one of the biggest challenges (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), so it is safe to deduce that some autistic people's pragmatic competence is not similar to neurotypicals. They find it difficult to use the language flexibly with idioms, connotations and figures of speech. Christopher admits that neurotypicals are confusing for him due to their use of language: "I find people confusing. This is for two main reasons. The first main reason is that people do a lot of talking without using any words" (Haddon, 2004, p. 14). Using gestures and body language is incomprehensible for the protagonist. Thus, he is unable to decode them. Christopher lists some expressions and idioms the meanings of which he does not know:

I laughed my socks off.  
 He was the apple of her eye.  
 They had a skeleton in the cupboard.  
 We had a real pig of a day.  
 The dog was stone dead. (Haddon, 2004, p. 15)

These expressions show that he has a literal understanding of the language. The dialogue between an inspector and Christopher reveals that he speaks directly without taking the speaker's intentions and agenda into consideration. The inspector intentionally asks whether he hurt the police officer on purpose, and Christopher responds directly:

He said, "Did you mean to hit the policeman?"

I said, "Yes."

He squeezed his face and said, "But you didn't mean to hurt the policeman?"

I thought about this and said, "No. I didn't mean to hurt the policeman. I just wanted him to stop touching me."

Then he said, "You know that it is wrong to hit a policeman, don't you?"

I said, "I do." (Haddon, 2012, p. 22)

In the dialogue above, both hyper-sensitive response to being touched and the failure in the pragmatic use of language are shown to the reader. Christopher does not use implications and blatantly says what he thinks regardless of possible downfalls and disadvantages. He loses his temper and hits a policeman. Another act of violence is presented through Sarah, one of Christopher's peers. He punches Sarah to stop her from pulling his hair. She loses consciousness and has concussion (Haddon, 2012, p. 45). Contrary to the popular belief, autistic individuals are reported not to be more violent than NTs. The popularity of Mark Haddon's novel has tremendous influence on shaping people's perceptions about people with ASD. Thus, a misunderstanding that autistic people are prone to violence may be formulated.

Apart from the use of language, Christopher is hypersensitive to particular sounds and lights. Noisy and crowded places are too overwhelming for him to bear; consequently, he avoids those places and certain people that are too loud. He says, "I do not like people shouting at me. It makes me scared that they are going to hit me or touch me and I do not know what is going to happen" (Haddon, 2004, p. 4). People are thus too unpredictable for him, which is one of the first things he hates. When one of the students starts screaming, he does not know how to react, and he covers his ears to block the noise: "Instead she started screaming again. I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes and rolled forward till I was hunched up with my forehead pressed onto the grass. The grass was wet and cold. It was nice" (Haddon, 2004, p. 4). Christopher has clear sensory issues related to sound, light, and texture. He does not want to be touched by other people, even his father. He says, "We do this because sometimes Father wants to give me a hug, but I do not like hugging people so we do this instead, and it means that he loves me" (Haddon, 2004, p. 16). He finds alternative ways to show his affection instead of touching or hugging his father.

Christopher even lists his behavioural problems in a detailed way. He is portrayed as a boy with hyper awareness. Although it can be argued that a person is unlikely to have consciousness to that extent, his list, however, serves as a comprehensible guide to inform the reader about the common characteristics of ASD. Some of the common features he lists are not wanting to be touched, screaming and smashing things during a tantrum, and not noticing how other people feel. The author uses a playful language while listing Christopher's behavioural problems. Based on the list, it can be stated that Christopher has low tolerance for any kind of change in his surroundings. He hates crowded places since too much noise and light overwhelm and overload him. He also says that he does not like touching yellow or brown objects (Haddon, 2004, p. 46). All these sensory challenges make Christopher a target at school. He is bullied verbally by other neurotypical children. He says, "But that is stupid too because sometimes the children from the school down the road see us in the street when we're getting off the bus and they shout, 'Special Needs! Special Needs!' But I don't take any notice" (Haddon, 2004, p. 44). This level of exclusion is not encountered in the movie *Jack of the Red Hearts* since Glory goes to a school especially designed for autistic children.

In *Jack of the Red Hearts*, Glory is introduced to the audience through a scene with colourful lights. Glory's perception of her surrounding is reflected through her own eyes. She is mesmerized by the colourful lights filling the room. She is overloaded by them and refuses to go to bed. It is clear in this scene that being oversensitive to certain visual stimuli distracts an autistic person from their daily routines. Glory is unable to ignore visual inputs since she is highly engaged in them and fails to follow her routine. Glory was diagnosed at the age of four. In the movie, she has temper tantrums when she is overstimulated. One of her favourite objects is a crystal ball that refracts light. The light refraction engages her interest throughout the day. She enjoys looking at the world through coloured-plastics. The scenes, where the audience can see how Glory perceives the outer world, are bright, vibrant but uncomfortable. These scenes make it clear that Glory sees the world brighter, which results in her being overwhelmed and exhausted. Coping with bright colours and noises is not easy for Glory to succeed in, and these scenes reflect her struggle to adjust.

Glory has a limited verbal abilities and social skills; however, she is not entirely non-verbal. One of the first questions Jack asks is whether Glory is good at mathematics, and Kay says that she is not Rain Man. *Rain Man* (1988) is a movie directed by Barry Levinson. Dustin Hoffman plays an autistic adult named Raymond Babbitt with extraordinary memory. Raymond is brilliant at maths but fails to communicate with people. The contrast between an exceptional memory and poor social skills is captivating. The success of *Rain Man* both introduced autism spectrum disorder to the public and created a new cliché about autistic people that all of them possess eidetic memories that help them memorize information without difficulty. In the movie, the cliché of the autistic prodigy is not maintained. Glory is described as a girl who challenges in terms of have hyper- and hypo-sensitivity. She gets increasingly agitated when being touched. Autism spectrum disorder as a sensory processing disorder is reflected in the movie with various scenes using excessive lights.

Repetitive behaviours such as rocking her body, jumping, and clapping to soothe herself can be observed in Glory's behaviours. She has restrictive interests especially in lights and the sky. Her mother believes that she needs a new school since the state school is not suitable for Glory's needs. She, along with her education, has sessions with a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist. Temple Grandin also took speech therapy sessions that helped her process the hard consonant sounds (Grandin, T. & Panek, May 1, 2013). Those therapies are also beneficial for Glory's progress. Glory is hypo-sensitive to verbal communication and ignores any dialogue held near her; however, sounds and noises engross her. The scene in which Jack takes Glory to the school bus show that Glory is generally undersensitive to sensory information coming from other people. She ignores Jack and continues to observe the sky and colours. There are scenes that show Glory's vantage point. These scenes make it clear that Glory unconsciously blocks her auditory perception since as the audience, we are unable to hear what neurotypicals say to Glory. These scenes are examples of Glory's hypo-sensitivity issues.

The common characteristics of autism are present in Glory's behaviours. She does not make eye contact even if her mother insists on maintaining eye contact with her. She has repetitive behaviours and speech patterns. Her fixation on a subject is so strong that Jack has great difficulty in making her focus on other subjects. She has a strict routine to follow while getting dressed, and any slight disruption in her routine causes her to have tantrums. Despite not being a common feature of ASD, she has the habit of eating dirt and mud. Glory's habit of eating dirt may be related to pica, which is defined as eating non-food items. In a recent study, nearly 1 in 4 parents of young autistic children reported that their children ate non-food items (Fields et al., 2021). Glory is portrayed as a girl with limited food preferences. She frequently eats sweet potatoes and hyper-sensitive to food textures.

Looking at an autistic boy wearing headphones, Kay attracts Jack's attention to the sensory challenges autistic children suffer from: "That kid has to wear those all the time. He can hear water running through the pipes. Lot of these kids have sensory issues. Autism pretty much sucks" (Grillo, 2015). The boy is clearly overloaded by auditory stimuli. To be able to cope with sounds around him, he has to wear headphones. Kay, in this scene, is highly critical of autism and with little empathy. As the mother of an autistic girl, Kay is expected by the audience to be a highly empathetic and open-minded character whereas the reality is the opposite. She encounters another mother and asks whether her son has recovered entirely. Kay assumes that autism is an illness that needs to be cured. Her use of the "cure autism now" cup also reflects that she is both judgemental and ignorant. The fact that autism is an identity is overlooked by her, and she takes Glory to all those sessions in the hope of finding a "cure" for her. Kay's aim is to normalize her daughter by taking her autistic identity away. Although she at times mentions that Glory has an exceptional personality, it is understood that her hidden agenda is to make Glory closer to neurotypicals. The boy's mother is clearly offended by Kay's remarks and leaves instantly by making an excuse. She repeats the verb "recover", and it shows that she is disappointed with her daughter's progress despite all her efforts since she still has not been "cured" properly. Kay's frame of mind is criticized in the movie intensely.

In a different scene, the reaction of another mother of an autistic child is given to show that not every mother of an autistic child is empathetic. Jack eavesdrops on a conversation between two mothers and hears about a new prestigious school where Glory will have an interview to get in. When Jack mentions Glory's interview, one of the mothers says, "I mean, she's low functioning. She'll never get in". The term "low-functioning" is no longer used due to its derogatory nature since it aims to classify autistic people according to their abilities and proximity to NTs. While autistic people with slight symptoms are valued more, those with severe symptoms are deemed less worthy. This unfair classification was eradicated with the introduction of DSM-V. People are no longer categorized based on their shortcomings and talents. The spectrum is so vast and diverse that there cannot exist any meaningful types of classification. Glory is assumed to fail in the interview since she exhibits severe symptoms, one of the most important of which is her communication challenge. The mother using the term "low-functioning" ulteriorly wants to emphasise that her child is better and more valuable. Using the both end of the spectrum to add value to autistic people or trivialize them is hurtful and degrading.

## Conclusion

A comparison between Christopher and Glory shows that autistic people suffer from hyper- and hypo-sensitivity issues. While Christopher is able to communicate effectively with neurotypicals except some challenges in using and comprehending figurative language, Glory is almost non-verbal except using some phrases and repetitions. Despite their communicative differences, both characters exhibit hyper- and hypo-sensitivity to certain stimuli. Christopher is unable to cope with loud noises and seems at times aloof when people talk to him since he is interested mentally in other subjects, which make him look disassociated and unempathetic. Glory is hypo-sensitive to any form of communication when she is intensely concentrated. She is particularly mesmerized by lights in nature. Her crystal ball is a recurrent example of Glory's hyper-sensitivity to lights. In both Haddon's novel and Grillo's movie, autistic characters despite the severity of their symptoms suffer from visual and auditory overload. These fictional worlds offer the reader and the audience a chance to understand how especially hyper-sensitivity affect autistic individuals and the reason why they sometimes seem distracted and disconnected due to hypo-sensitivity.

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