

The Exploration of Humanism through Prejudice: 19th Century Freak Shows and the Images of the “Human” Body

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Posing a Question

Throughout the modern era, the definition of “the human” has been explored and defined countless times in response to an ever-changing society, constant political and social upheavals, and the classification of morals. Philosophers, psychologists, and scholars alike have contemplated the idea of the human in an effort to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the mind in a social, personal, and cultural context. While multiple historical events and social studies can provide evidence for an argument regarding human nature, one could further pursue a definition of the human being by exploring its presumable antithesis: the physically abject and abnormal individual. The term “freak” was used throughout the 19th century to describe these individuals: people with “physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies, both alleged and real” (*Freak Show 2*). Despite its negative connotation and offensive implication, the present use of the word “freak” will ensure historical accuracy and realistic accounts of circus-life. The American freak show, which reached the height of its popularity during the 19th century, showcased those with physical abnormalities and intriguing anomalies in order to attract a crowd of paying customers. While seen as a sick and twisted business venture by our modern society, the 19th century freak show industry thrived during an age of constant change. By exploring the perception of circus freaks during the heyday of American freak shows in the 19th century, one may question whether it is possible to interpret the norms of humanness and understand the implications of social prejudice from a post-modern perspective. Can a definition of “the human” be determined through understanding the 19th century disabled body and comprehending the reasoning behind the fascination with circus freaks and their classification in American society? What is the reasoning and moral motivation explaining the 19th century American obsession with freak shows, and why has this obsession changed in recent years?

Two Theories of Stigma and Prejudice

The incorporation of Erving Goffman’s Stigma Theory, Sam McFarland’s explanation of the roots of generalized prejudice, and other closely related theoretical texts will provide evidence surrounding human judgment and its effects on perception and social classification. Erving Goffman, a deceased sociologist who had a strong interest in routine social interactions, developed the Stigma Theory, which explores “the

social process in which particular human traits are deemed not only different, but deviant” (Thomson 31), in 1963 (“Sociology Professor”). The theory on stigmatization discusses the social process that accounts for disability in a societal context. Social comparison and stigmatization, according to Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies*, “create a shared, socially maintained and determined conception of a normal individual...sculpted by a social group attempting to define its own character and boundaries” (31). Theory regarding social judgment proves relevant to the freak show craze of the 19th century through its strong correlation to disability and aberrations, which helped distinguish freaks during this time period. As Americans searched for the abnormal qualities of freaks that separated them from the “standard” human, stigmatization became prevalent. Separation and maltreatment ensued, creating judgment and prejudice in a society that depended heavily upon physical appearance, wealth, and social status. In his recent theory piece published in the *Political Psychology* journal, Sam McFarland, a professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University who specializes in human rights and authoritarianism (“Sam McFarland”), discusses the origins of generalized social prejudice and judgment. His establishment of the underlying correlations between personality, society, and prejudice allows readers to determine the predisposition of certain social groups to judge others and details of the steps taken when forming judgments. With the aid of McFarland’s theory, the topic of freak shows can be explored through the identification of Americans’ tendencies to judge and isolate those who are deemed abnormal. By commenting on the influences of lifestyle, personality, empathy, and social dominance on generalized prejudice, McFarland’s argument surrounding judgment reflects upon values and ethics found in 19th century society that will explain the obsession with freak shows and contribute to the establishment of a more precise definition of “the human”.

Toward an Explanation

Such evidence has led to the consideration that circus freaks were not considered to be human at all; instead, they were extensively judged and isolated from society based on their physical and mental abnormalities. Since they were regarded as sub-humans, one may hypothesize that freaks could potentially define the norms of humanness through the conclusion that they were rejected from the societal definition of normalcy. In non-contemporary America, this definition of the “normal” human may have reflected upon a conservative, conforming individual who represented society’s values. Social judgment and stigmatization by 19th century Americans bolstered the distinct separation between

freaks and normal humans and further classified the freak as a deviant and inferior member of society. The 19th century regard of the disabled, which promoted prejudice against the abnormal, provides a resource that allows for the interpretation of human nature and a greater understanding of social judgment through the exploration of prevalent human qualities and inclinations toward discrimination. Though such exploration is limited to a non-contemporary society, its implications regarding “the human” helped to standardize social groups in a manner that has roots in modern society as well. By defining a human based on what it is considered not to be, one will find that the goal of obtaining a true explanation of “the human” can be more easily achieved.

The Emergence of the Freak

In her book *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Rachel Adams defines the freak show as combining “the drama and costuming of the theater with the more sober conventions of the scientific exhibit” (Adams 29). Such shows provided the opportunity to view “people with alleged physical, mental, or behavioral differences at circuses, fairs, carnivals, and other amusement ventures” (“Social Construction” 23). With the expansion of cities and of public recreation from the 1840s until the 1940s, freak shows were a prevalent and accepted part of American life (Gerber 17). While they were at one time depicted as “educational or scientific exhibits” (“Social Construction” 25), freak shows were profitable business ventures that incorporated human disability to provide entertainment and collect revenue (23). Though considered an immoral practice in today’s society, the social and historical context of the 19th century provided a suitable environment for freak shows to flourish. According to Professor David Wall of the Batley School of Art and Design, “the institutionalization of the freak show emerged just as the social experience of carnival was being eliminated and ‘criminal penitentiaries and insane asylums... were becoming an integral part of the American reform culture’” (527). As the American obsession with abnormal and “crazy” beings grew through the creation of insane asylums, other societal and political changes revolutionized the way Americans viewed freaks. The recent adoption of democracy caused a major social upheaval that defined class distinctions and “set the stage for a new social hierarchy based on ability” (Thomson 64). As this new social hierarchy required the formation of social classes, upper class individuals wished to maintain their newly acquired status and power by establishing distinct boundaries that separated the classes. To successfully enforce a definitive separation in a simplistic manner, powerful individuals defined the American classes by appearance (64). The “idealized” American, said to be “masculine, white,

nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class” (64), provided the definition of an upper class, respectable American citizen. Since freaks did not satisfy the image of the idealized American, immediate judgment and social rejection followed during the establishment of social hierarchies. In his theoretical piece, Sam McFarland stresses the connection between prejudice and group authority. He states that “prejudice, particularly racism, results from a dominant group’s desire to maintain its privileged position and access to resources” (McFarland 454). The dominant group’s demand for power can be regarded as the “social dominance orientation,” which supports the idea that a society’s high-class will “dominate and be superior to out-groups” (McFarland 456). The desire for social dominance and the establishment of a new social order led to the classification of freaks as inferior to others solely based on appearance. As upper class individuals were able to control the social hierarchy and establish their own methods of class distinction, those who did not resemble these individuals were immediately viewed as subordinate (Thomson 63). Erving Goffman’s Stigma Theory, in which distinctions are made among people, reinforces that the process of stigmatization allows for the dominant group to establish its “idealized self-description as neutral, normal, legitimate, and identifiable by denigrating the characteristics of less powerful groups of those considered alien” (31). The dominant group of white and wealthy males, therefore, created a social hierarchy predominantly determined by “physical disability, deformity, and anomaly” (32). The group of freaks, which included “‘little people’, ‘giants’, ‘hairy people’, ‘human skeletons’, ‘armless and legless wonders’, ‘pinheads’, ‘fat people’, ‘albinos’, ‘Siamese twins’, ‘people with extra limbs’, ‘half men/half women’, ‘people with skin disorders’, ‘tattooed people’, and ‘anatomical wonders’” (“Social Construction” 24) obviously did not fit the description of the idealized body, and its regard in an appearance-selective society suffered greatly. The 19th century freak show’s cultural importance reflected upon the fact that it “dramatized the era’s physical and social hierarchy by spotlighting bodily stigmata that could be choreographed as an absolute contrast to ‘normal’ American embodiment and authenticated as corporeal truth” (Thomson 63).

Why People Seek the Carnival Freak

As the 19th century social hierarchy dictated that the freak be regarded as the opposite of the “normal” American, human curiosity and insecurity led to the freak show’s popularity. While one would expect that only high-class citizens attended freak shows, in actuality, many Americans, especially immigrants, the urban working class, and less prosperous rural people enjoyed attending freak shows as a means of “reassuring

those whose bodies and costuming did not match the fully enfranchised and indubitably American ideal” (Thomson 65) of their normalcy. The recent establishment of a new social hierarchy based on ability and power led to an identity crisis during the 19th century, as Americans faced anxiety and feelings of inferiority when attempting to determine their new roles in society. The freak soothed “the onlookers’ self-doubt by appearing as their antithesis” (65) as a means of improving a “normal” individual’s feeling of self-worth. The prejudice established against freaks, therefore, resulted from the new social hierarchy that allowed the average American to feel like he or she was a worthy and capable citizen. Freak shows provided the “opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what it was not” (59) and to fix “the mute freak as a figure of otherness upon which the spectators could displace anxieties and uncertainties about their own identities” (61). Though freak shows offered entertainment and an interesting spectacle, the human need to feel “normal” fueled the fascination with “otherness” and freaks. The institution of the freak show successfully normalized society by “establishing standards for segregating the deviant from the normal” (Adams 15). Average, insecure Americans were comforted by the sense of normalcy they felt after attending a freak show. According to anthropologist Robert Murphy’s theory on disability, entitled *The Body Silent*, the disabled body provides a means for people to be reassured by what they are not:

The disabled other absorbs disavowed elements of this cultural self, becoming an icon of all human vulnerability and enabling the ‘American Ideal’ to appear as master of both destiny and self. At once familiarly human but definitively other, the disabled figure in cultural discourse assures the rest of the citizenry of who they are not. (41)

To feel such normalcy and the satisfaction of fulfilling the American ideal, audience members had to establish harsh judgment and prejudice against freaks in an attempt to separate themselves from the freak performers. Social prejudice, states McFarland, is a “function of social identity maintenance”, and fueled by “a sense of group position” (454). The human desire to remain in a group and be considered “normal”, therefore, inspires the prejudice that separated people from freaks.

In spite of this theory, challenges posed by further research provide evidence that seemingly contradicts such a presumption on social identity maintenance. Data confirms that in reality, while freaks “reassured audiences of their commonality, at the same time the extraordinary body symbolized a potential for individual freedom denied by cultural pressures towards standardization” (Thomson 68). As society was swiftly changing in the

19th century, the tendency to conform became “the American way” (68) and culture “increasingly standardized individuals through a range of institutions” (68).

Consequently, Americans secretly longed for the opportunity to be unique individuals, and could only achieve such by living vicariously through circus freaks in an almost envious fashion. In summary, “the spectator enthusiastically invested his dime in the freak show not only to confirm his own superiority, but also to safely focus an identificatory longing upon these creatures who embodied freedom’s elusive and threatening promise of not being like everybody else” (69). Through Thomson’s exploration of Americans’ regard towards freaks, a new perspective on the freak performers as well as the audience members can be found. The strange balance between the outward desire to be seen as normal and the inner longing to be an individual provides surprising insight into the inner-conflict faced by Americans during this time period.

While McFarland’s theory on identity maintenance is sensible for defining social groups and the motivation for prejudice, it falls short of addressing a deeper issue in American society. McFarland’s theory is incomplete because it only addresses the human desire to be part of a group. The human motivation for individual identity maintenance instead of group identity maintenance may have driven people to actually accept and relate to freaks on the basis of what “could have been”, had they been born as freaks as well. While it is true that freaks were discriminated against and separated from the average American, the cause of such prejudice may have been based on envy and the desire to be different. The issues of social status, anxiety, and power are all prevalent issues surrounding the obsession with freak shows, but the longing to stray from the homogeneous American lifestyle should be more carefully considered when questioning the human inclination to discriminate against, and even relate to, freaks.

Misrepresentation and Exaggeration



While the social context of the 19th century was vital for the growing popularity of the freak show, other historical elements and occurrences contributed to the obsession with the abnormal body. Global exploration and Western expansion were important and exciting prospects during this time period, as Americans were curious about the identity of those who lived in the far-away, recently-discovered lands (“Social

Construction” 28). Curiosity for the “exotic” led to the great exaggeration and dishonesty prevalent in freak shows. Rachel Adams stresses the fact that “freaks are not born; they are made, and their making relies on the collaborative efforts of many hands who work behind the scenes” (Adams 14). Since the primary motivation for the creation of freak shows was to acquire profit, “misrepresentation was an accepted practice... promoters created a public identity for the person that was being exhibited that would have the widest appeal...” (“Social Construction” 25). As freak shows continued to flourish, “showmen displayed all such people so as to accentuate what was thought to be freakish about them” (Gerber 17). People had come to expect and look forward to freaks displayed in the “exotic mode”, in which “the person received an identity that appealed to people’s interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic...” (“Social Construction” 28). Such “exotics”, however, were treated like animals, with promoters casting “the exhibits as specimens, as inferior and as contemptuous. The association of various human differences with danger, with sub-humans, and with animals, was developed as well as perpetuated by these exhibits” (34). Exotic freaks were labeled “wild men” and “savages”, and would grunt and pace the stage while growling and screaming like animals (28). The presentation of freaks as exotic served to separate them even further from the average American. In one case, P.T. Barnum, the pioneer of freak shows, introduced a freak named William Henry Johnson to his audience and asked audiences, “What is it!?”. A publication used to advertise Johnson’s exhibit read, “While his face, hands, and arms are distinctly human, his head, feet and legs are more like the Orang Outang, indicating his mixed ancestry” (Frost 7). Barnum described Johnson as “‘a most singular animal’ who was neither human nor beast but ‘a mixture of both’” (Thomson 69). Displayed as the missing link between human and apes, Johnson’s manipulated and exotic appearance is evidence of the separation of freaks and normal people as well as the social prejudice that seemingly ensured such separation.

When discussing Johnson’s experiences in freak shows, one may still question, does the treatment of freaks support the societal regard of freaks as abnormal sub-humans, as animals, or as neither? Is there a difference between these categories? As Barnum portrayed Johnson to be “neither human nor beast but a mixture of both”, he attempted to define the freak in opposition to both the animal and the human instead of in relation to either of them. While Johnson’s treatment by Barnum and audiences verifies his sub-human status, he is surmised to be a sub-human without being considered an animal.

The extent of the disrespect faced by freaks, however, did not cease after death. Instead, it mattered very little whether freaks were alive or dead. A dead, embalmed freak was often displayed to audiences, as it was “equally profitable, and often more readable and manipulated. Freaks and social prodigies were solely bodies, without the humanity social structures confer upon more ordinary people” (Thomson 57). The complete disregard for life, even the life of sub-humans, is difficult to explain, though disability, according to Mary Douglas’s theory, “is in some sense ‘matter out of place’, in terms of the interpretive frameworks and physical expectations our culture shares” (Thomson 33). As 19th century Americans did not view disability as a normal condition, they did not see the immorality and cruelty involved in treating freaks like animals and displaying them even after death. Such callous treatment, however, actually suggests a shift away from the realm of social prejudice, which is heavily explored in McFarland’s theory. In this case, McFarland fails to apply to the freak show argument because it seems as though social status and power struggles are not the reasons that fueled the cruel treatment of freaks. As a non-threatening and insignificant group in the American population, there must be a deeper motivation for the malicious treatment and deviant classification of freaks than just the preservation of social status and group identity maintenance.

The story of the life and death of Joice Heth, an African American freak displayed by P.T. Barnum in the 19th century, provides a powerful example of society’s disregard of life as well as the maltreatment of freaks. As expected, Heth’s true identity was blatantly exaggerated in her exhibition, as she was advertised as being 161-years-old and George Washington’s childhood nurse. Her countless physical anomalies include “weighing only forty-six pounds; she was blind and toothless and had deeply wrinkled skin; she was paralysed in one arm and both legs; and her nails were said to curl out like talons” (Reiss 75). The direct comparison between Heth’s appearance and that of a bird immediately reflects upon her animal-like characterization in society. Her regard as an animal is further validated by the fact that “visitors regularly shook hands with her, scrutinized her, and sometimes even took her pulse” (75). Joice Heth’s true contribution to society, however, was only determined in the time immediately following her death, during which her inhumane and distasteful autopsy attracted a larger crowd than that of her live exhibition. The autopsy, which disproved Heth’s exaggerated age and freak show persona, determined that her corpse had an immense monetary value. In his article “Barnum and Joice Heth: The Birth of Ethnic Shows in the United State”, Benjamin Reiss writes that “the cluster of social meanings adhering to Heth’s corpse made it an

object of considerable value. . . . despite the steep 50-cent admission price, 1500 spectators showed up, netting a large profit. . . .” (78). The freak show obsession, as well as the poor social regard for freaks like Joice Heth, are apparent through the money-making spectacle organized even after her “retirement”. Through Heth’s life, death, and the aftermath that followed suit, much can be surmised regarding the extent of human curiosity and the blatant disrespect and disregard for life. As she was treated like a beast on display, however, Heth’s role in society as a deviant and separated form of abnormal entertainment may not reflect much upon the human capacity for social judgment and motivation to stigmatize others. Just as Johnson was treated as neither an animal nor a human, the sick obsession with Heth’s autopsy cannot be explained by any theory on stigmatization or social prejudice. Therefore, both McFarland and Goffman fall short by failing to address a sensible motivation for human cruelty to such an extent.

According to Benjamin Reiss, Joice Heth’s story of freakery had greater social implications than anticipated. While circus freaks were an easily accessible and popular form of entertainment, Americans were aware of Heth’s autopsy, though they did not anticipate the drastic and unexpected societal changes that resulted. Reiss emphasizes that “her autopsy—like other spectacular displays of race created by the media—dramatized some of the new meanings of racial identity and allowed whites to debate them as they gazed upon her corpse” (74). Joice Heth’s lifetime of mockery and prejudice provided the basis of modern racial identity. Her impact on society’s creation of racial boundaries, while unforeseen, remains consistent with the idea that the upper class whites had the discretion to judge based on skin color and outward appearance:

The story of Joice Heth exposes how entrepreneurs of culture in the antebellum American North borrowed images from the slave-owning South to construct fantasies of northern white mastery, in which the slave’s body was subjected to the modern disciplines of scientific and mass-cultural scrutiny. (80)

As 19th century society was changing with the abolition of slavery, powerful white individuals continued to classify blacks as inferior in order to uphold the northern white mastery. Though Joice Heth’s story of both discrimination and popularity attempts to define the norms of humanness by concluding that some freaks were rejected from the societal definition of normalcy, the evidence of her morbid treatment cannot be explained by theoretical means. It is doubtful that an autopsy of a white, “normal” American would generate enough revenue and media attention to alter modern society, but the reasoning

behind the human motivation to conduct such a procedure as a public spectacle is also uncertain.

Questioning Theories

In his book *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Robert Bogdan, a Professor of Social Sciences at Syracuse University, expresses an impressive counter-argument that questions the true treatment of freaks. While all previous evidence has supported the idea that freaks were disrespected and treated as sub-humans, Bogdan states that “during its prime, the freak show was a place where human deviance was valuable, and in that sense valued...most human oddities were accepted as showmen. They were congratulated for parlaying into an occupation what...might have been a burden” (*Freak Show* 268). Apparently, on some occasions, freaks were not disrespected and reviled; instead, they were seen as artful performers. Bogdan’s discussion regarding the freaks’ futures after participating in shows contributes to his argument. He stresses that many freaks actually went on to live happy and healthy lives and became respectable citizens, as “outside the boundaries of the freak show...they had neighbors and family; they loved and were loved, were accommodating and were accommodated, were respectful and respected...they were a welcomed...part of that culture” (269). Such information refutes the previous theoretical sources as well as prior evidence, since during the 19th century, research supports the fact that disabled people and circus freaks were not seen as “normal” members of society or as true humans. This raises the question, if freaks were not considered to be truly “human”, then what were they? The lines of humanness have become heavily blurred, as the previously proposed explanation has been neither refuted nor accepted and the true definition of a human has not been established. While some freaks were discriminated against and some were accepted, a general consensus that comments on the freak’s social status can be reached. Whether they were treated as animals, sub-humans, or even as artful performers, all evidence supports the fact that all freaks were considered to be unlike any other American social group. The classification of freaks as “other”, though a vague category, is the only explanation fit for such a complex argument. The concept of the “other” cannot be supported by McFarland’s theory on social judgment or Goffman’s theory on stigmatization, as both sources discuss disability and prejudice on a deviant level. As evidence has shown that some freaks were well respected and highly regarded in society, while others were not considered to be human or animal, the freaks’ disabilities were not always seen as burdens and inferior qualities. Ironically, the only classification that all

freaks shared was their inability to be truly classified in society. Instead of fitting into specific categories of “humanness”, such as sub-humans, animal-like characters, or admired performers, most freaks could not be sorted into particular groups; rather, they could universally be defined as “other”.

From the Viewpoint of the Freak

Robert Bogdan supports his argument that freaks were accepted and highly regarded in 19th century society by exploring the viewpoints of actual freaks on the matter. An intriguing revelation addresses the idea that financial issues led many people to pretend to be freaks in order to take part in freak shows. Bogdan emphasizes that “the freak show reminds us that there is money to be made on human variation. This was at one time so true that people feigned disability in order to qualify for freak shows...abnormality was a meal ticket...exhibits with disabilities had an advantage” (*Freak Show* 268). This argument indicates that either freak shows were a desperate, last resort for lower-class Americans to survive, or that the societal treatment and view of freaks was not as intense or cruel as evidence has indicated. As the possible veracity of the latter conclusion disputes the hypothesis that classified the freak as a disliked, deviant, and inferior member of society, it is still probable that freaks underwent social judgment in order to develop the American identity:

Motivated interpretations of identity...became the staple of the nation’s reform narratives that made visible the purported evils and monstrosities of such un-American lives. These were set against the industrious and righteous white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant identity of the acceptable US citizen. (McGowan 35)

Regardless of their personal reasons for joining freak show exhibits, freaks still contributed to the solution of the American “identity-crisis” during the 19th century by providing an extraordinary body that was seemingly a contradiction to the average citizen. Whether particular freaks accepted this treatment or reviled society for its cruelty, however, is debatable.

Great dispute has surrounded the word “freak” in the modern day regarding its current negative connotation, so it is pertinent to explore the opinion of 19th century circus performers regarding this characteristic word. Apparently, circus exhibits did not mind the term “freak” at all, as “there is no evidence that exhibits took the nouns used to refer to them seriously” (*Freak Show* 271). However, this opinion of the word changed as “the eugenics movement clouded the scene and human differences became medicalized...the status of human oddities declined, and some exhibits began to resent

what they were called...” (271). Performers began to get insulted over the word “freak”, after it was given an entirely new meaning. Bogdan stresses the idea that 19th century society was quite different from the modern day, as “words like *freak* did not have the deep stigmatizing and discrediting meaning that they have today” (271). The fact that freaks did not mind their defining title suggests that the strong differences between the modern and non-contemporary societies may have led to the negative regard of freak shows in modern day. As societal values and the social environment have changed dramatically between the 19th and 21st centuries, the concept of freak shows and the actual word “freak” have been twisted to receive an unfavorable, and perhaps convoluted, reputation.

The Grand Finale

When considering the original questions and arguments surrounding the 19th century freak show, one is still inclined to wonder, what did it reveal about humanness? Unexpectedly, the 19th century freak show failed to define what a human actually is, in a non-contemporary society or in a modern world. While the concept of freakery and the detailed accounts of the regard of particular freaks in society affirm the prevalence of prejudice and social judgment, they failed to define the word “human” or provide a clear definition of the freak’s role in society. Instead, the cases of all freaks reveal a universal quality of “otherness” and a shared element of difference. Since each freak had such a unique experience in his or her exhibit, it is impossible to draw a conclusion that would similarly categorize them all. By exploring the theories of McFarland, Goffman, and other experts on the subject, it is possible to identify the reasoning behind the prejudice and judgment faced by a number of freaks, but such theories fail to apply to many aspects of this 19th century social dilemma. What can be revealed through the study of freaks, however, is a clearer definition of the *normal* human, instead of the abnormal. Regardless of social class, status, and interests, people were drawn to freak shows by their desire for both social acceptance and individuality. In a time of great social and economic uncertainty, Americans embraced the freak’s unconventional and abnormal lifestyle yet satisfied their own insecurities surrounding social acceptance. The average human’s insistence on being considered an individual, yet reluctance to actually become one is an issue that is still prevalent nearly 200 years after the freak show’s introduction. Exploring 19th century freak shows has revealed darker themes regarding the “normal” human as well. The endless limits of human curiosity contributed to the morbidity and racial bias that characterized the nation’s social issues for subsequent generations. The particular

stories of Joice Heth and William Henry Johnson uncovered qualities of sadism and racism that, perhaps unbeknownst at the time, were prevalent in members of all social classes. Eventually, the field of medicine, which is considered to be an altruistic and charitable institution, finally completed the degradation of the freak in 19th century society by extinguishing the concept of “otherness”. Ultimately, through “the rise of genetic theory, human deformities increasingly came to seem less marvels than diseases that were dangerous to the progress of the species...” (Gerber 19). Ironically, the same medical research that eradicated the freak’s complete exploitation as a characteristic “other” also ascribed a negative modern connotation to the word “freak” that only further enforced current prejudice against and judgment of the abnormal. Though “economic hard times, technological and geographic changes, competition from other forms of entertainment, the medicalization of human differences, and changed public taste resulted in a serious decline in the number and popularity of freak shows...” (“Social Construction” 23) in contemporary society, it is impossible to deny the lasting impact of the 19th century freak show on the American entertainment industry and the establishment of modern social standards.

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