

Alexis Naugle

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Intro to Special Education

Dr. Macy

## MOVIE REVIEW: MY LEFT FOOT

The movie I chose to review was called “My Left Foot, The story of Christy Brown” filmed in 1989. The main character of the movie, Christy Brown, was born with a severe case of Cerebral Palsy. Christy could not walk or communicate for much of his childhood, and the only part of his body he could control with any accuracy was his left foot. He was born in Ireland into a low income family. His mother was his major caretaker and supporter. There were many children in his family and his mother struggled to take care of the children, maintain the household and give Christy the care that he needed. His father was laid off from work and things became even harder for the family because they could not always afford a full meal, and sometimes had to share a small portion of porridge. It became so cold one winter that Christy and his brothers distracted a man hauling coal so they could steal some of the coal to stay warm. This story vividly recounts the hurdles that someone with Cerebral Palsy goes through and also how it affects the family and their struggle with the disability.

**What condition does Christy have that affects his speech and causes him and his mother to seek out the help of a speech therapist?**

Christy’s Cerebral Palsy not only affected his motor skills but also affected his speech. The people from his community and even Christy’s whole family believed that he did not have the intelligence to understand what was going on in his life. One of Christy’s neighbors even referred to him as a “burden to his poor mother” (Pearson, 1989). It was not until one day when Christy picked up a piece of chalk between the toes of his left foot and with great effort and exertion wrote M O T H E R on the floor of their house. Christy’s father loved Christy very much but had been somewhat ashamed of his condition. He became elated when he realized that Christy could learn and understand. He picked up Christy and said “He’s a Brown, he’s a Brown alright” (Pearson, 1989) and carried him off to the pub for a jar even though he was only around

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10 years old. Once in the pub he introduced his son by saying, “this is Christy Brown, he’s my son and he’s a genius” (Pearson, 1989) It appeared that until that time he had no schooling because they felt he could not understand anything. I believe that it was because of this revelation that his mother realized that if Christy could communicate by speaking it could change his life.

Dr. Eileen Cole comes into Christy’s life. Dr. Cole wants him to go to a new clinic she opened especially for treating people with Cerebral Palsy. Christy immediately responds by saying he does not have any money. Christy’s mother assures him that they do not have to pay. I found it noteworthy that his first concern was his family’s financial ability to pay. Dr. Cole convinces him to go to therapy but once he gets there and realizes most of the patients are younger children he returns home because by this time Christy is a young man and feels out of place. Dr. Cole decides to work one on one with him at home. She works with him teaching him to blow bubbles. The exercise enabled him to control his breathing and even allowed him the ability to blow out his candles on his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday cake. This was what a normal 17 year old would do and it brought a sense of normalness to Christy, which is very important.

### **What exercises does Christy’s tutor, Dr. Eileen Cole, use?**

Another exercise Dr. Cole did with Christy was stretching his muscles. The Cerebral Palsy that Christy had made his muscles contract, which made it very difficult to move. Stretching his muscles gave him a little more flexibility and was needed to keep his muscles from contracting even further. This is similar to an athlete stretching before a sporting event so that the muscles would be loose and flexible, except an athlete’s muscles do not continue to contract as they do in a person with Cerebral Palsy.

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Dr. Cole also taught Christy to use his muscles and as well as controlling his breathing to drink from a straw. This is very difficult for a person with Cerebral Palsy to do because the muscles are always contracting. As hard as it was to drink with a straw it made him more independent because he was still unable to hold or grasp a glass in order to drink.

There was a period of time when Christy started to feel sorry for himself. He stayed in his room and would not come out. His mother was unable to figure out what was wrong with him. Almost everyone experiences depression from time to time but a person with a disability faces many more challenges and emotions not faced by others. It is Dr. Cole that brings him out of his feelings of depression. This is ironic because I believe Christy is depressed because he is falling in love with Dr. Cole and feels unable to express his love for her or be the kind of man she would want. Christy allows Dr. Cole to help him with his speech therapy. It comes to light later that he only allowed Dr. Cole to help him with his speech because he wanted to be able to tell her he loved her.

### **Speech is a top priority for Christy to master, in spite of other challenges**

By increasing his ability to speak, Christy opened a whole new life. He could express his feelings more freely to more people. He became a part of a world that he never thought possible. I understand why it was so important to him to want to express his feelings to Dr. Cole. However, when Christy finds out Dr. Cole is getting married he is very angry and behaves very badly.

### **Christy is a unique character in cinematic history. What traits make him so distinctive?**

Christy's ability to write and paint with his left foot, of course, makes him distinctive. The fact that he worked so hard and never gave up through each hardship makes him even more

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distinctive. It must have been so hard to be a child learning new things and not be able to communicate his knowledge to anyone. For him to understand what is going on around him and have people believe he cannot understand anything must be the most frustrating and difficult thing to have to go through.

### **Were people with disabilities portrayed in a positive or negative light?**

In the movie, Christy was portrayed in a positive way. Despite his disability he was loved and accepted by his family with one exception. When his father first found out that Christy had Cerebral Palsy, it seemed as though he was ashamed to have a child that was perceived as “not normal.” However, he was treated with love and kindness by his mother and siblings and his father eventually came around. There were times when he was teased because of his disability, but I believe that because he was accepted and supported by his family, he never gave up on the lifelong struggles he had to endure. The movie showed that even a person with severe disabilities could live a caring and productive life. This proves that you do not have to be considered “normal” to achieve these goals. During Christy’s life and even today, sometimes society views mentally and physically challenged individuals as not being a productive part of our society. It is sad to know what society is missing.

### **Was the depiction of the disability accurate?**

I definitely believe that Cerebral Palsy was portrayed accurately. The way the actor that played Christy depicted the contracting muscles and muffled speech of a person with Cerebral Palsy was amazing. Nobody watching this movie would believe that the person they were watching on the screen did not actually suffer from Cerebral Palsy. I have had an opportunity to work with and know children with severe Cerebral Palsy who have the same symptoms as Christy had in the movie and he captured their symptoms magnificently.

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**Do you believe people will come away with a better understanding of the disability from watching the film?**

I believe that people will have a much better understanding of Cerebral Palsy after watching this movie. It clearly allowed the audience to see and understand what this disease does to a person. The movie showed the isolation that a person with a disability endures. It not only shows how a disability affects the person with the disability but how that disability impacts the person's family and friends as well. It was evident that Christy's disability affected the whole family, physically, emotionally, and financially.

Christy's mother was physically exhausted from carrying Christy up and down the steps to bed. She had to feed him, dress him and tend to his every need. This would be hard enough if it was just Christy but there were 21 other children in the family even though only 13 lived until adulthood. His father was not much help and the burden rested on his mother. She tended to him unselfishly. One day Christy's mother was carrying him up the stairs when they were alone in the house. She was pregnant and having difficulty supporting his weight. On the way back down she fell down the steps. Christy manipulated himself down to his mother and began kicking the door with his left foot and grunting as loud as he could to get someone's attention. This was an example of the physical strain on both Christy and his mother.

The emotional strain on Christy and his whole family was also evident in the movie. His sister got pregnant while she was not married. Their father was very angry and wanted to kick her out of the house. Christy was very close to his sister and wanted to be able to stand up to his father on his sister's behalf, but was not physically able to. It tore him apart. When Christy was upset it was reflected in his paintings. Christy painted angry faces which represented his emotions during stressful times. Christy's father always dealt with stress by going to the pub.

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During happy times such as Christy's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday when he blew out his candles with his whole family cheering him on, his paintings reflected these happy times also.

Financial problems also weigh on a family with a child with a disability. Each family member deals with it in their own way. Christy's mother hid money she was saving for Christy's wheelchair from his father even though the family was struggling financially because her husband had lost his job.

It is my opinion that this movie would give anyone who watched it a better understanding of the trials a person and his family endures when there is a disability in a family. Some people accept it, some pretend it does not exist, while others only see the potential of an individual with the disability and do everything in his or her power to develop that potential

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### **References**

Pearson, N. (Producer) & Sheridan, J. (Director). (1989). *My Left Foot: The Story of Christy Brown* [Motion picture]. United States: Miramax Films.