

From Livestock to Lives: Disability Caused by Zoonosis and its Representation in Popular Culture

Long before Dr. Rudolf Virchow coined the term *zoonosis* in the 19th century, human societies had already been coexisting with and suffering from diseases transmitted between animals and humans. Historical and literary evidence suggests that the physical, psychological, and social consequences of zoonotic diseases have been present since at least the 8th century BC.

References to illness, bodily trauma, and long-term dysfunction caused by animal-borne diseases can be found in foundational texts such as the Bible, the Indian Vedas, the Upanishads, and ancient Ayurvedic treatises, all of which document human attempts to understand disease, disability, and suffering. These early records reveal that zoonotic illnesses were not merely temporary afflictions but often resulted in lasting impairments that shaped individual lives and collective cultural memory. The relationship between zoonotic disease and disability became especially visible during major historical outbreaks, most notably in 14th-century Europe during the bubonic plague. Survivors of the plague were frequently left with permanent physical disfigurement, extensive scarring, chronic pain, mental trauma, neurological damage, and severe forms of arthritis. These long-term consequences of disease began to find expression in literary and cultural narratives, reflecting growing awareness of illness-induced disability. A significant example appears in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), where the character Ryland survives the plague but is left with a limp and chronic, debilitating pain.

Popular culture in the modern era has continued to engage with disability caused by disease, often through symbolic, monstrous, or sensational forms. DC Comics' *Swamp Thing* (1977) represents disability through a hybrid figure born from biological catastrophe, while the real-life figure of Joseph Merrick, known as *The Elephant Man*, demonstrates how disease-related disability was commodified in Victorian freak shows before being humanized in David Lynch's film adaptation. Similarly, the mental and neurological degradation caused by rabies has been represented in works ranging from Skinny Puppy's album *Rabies* to Stephen King's *Cujo*.

One of the most alarming zoonotic crises of the modern age emerged with Mad Cow Disease, which resulted in variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease in humans. More than 300 patients across the United States, the United Kingdom, and parts of Asia were affected in a single year, many of whom suffered severe and irreversible brain damage, often appearing after an incubation period of nearly twenty years. Cultural explorations of madness caused by diseased meat appear not only in the writings of Aristotle and Hippocrates but also in popular media such as *The Simpsons* and the Booker Prize-winning novel *The Discomfort of Evening* (2018).

This paper examines disabilities caused by biotic and abiotic components in humans, including deaf-blindness, polio, rabies-induced neurological disorders, physical impairments, and severe cognitive dysfunction. By tracing these conditions across historical texts and popular culture, the study highlights how societies interpret and represent disease-induced disability.