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The Devolution of Man: Mental and Social “Madness” Throughout Literature

Since childhood I have been fascinated by perception; perception of the world, perception of people, perception of one’s self. It began (as many of my questions do) while reading a book, trying to determine which characters to trust – what narratives to accept as truthful representations of reality – but it has since guided me to question how society forces perceptions upon others. I have found society to be unkind; often pressing their standards and ideals on to those who may or may not want to accept it. Individuals in these fringe groups, it seems, are often labeled as “mad”; radical in their views or different than the “normal” perceptions of the world. By defining people as such, however, society (and those participating in the critique) regresses to a state of fight-or-flight, which it believes it has already overcome. With this collection I hope to demonstrate how “madness” sparks the devolution of man throughout time and culture, as well as demonstrate that “madness” within literature is a positive thing as an instigator of thought within the reader and conflict within the story, by presenting a broad range of texts in a variety of genres.

My collection began when I bought the first book in this collection – *1984* – in sixth grade. Throughout years of literature classes and book-store raids, my collection slowly grew. But as I donated and gave books away, I discovered that I had subconsciously filtered my collection to the point that the only books still on my shelf were dark books, often with characters that are “crazy.” What was unconscious throughout the years I believe I have explored consciously with this collection.

When I pick up a book I am (and I believe that most people are) drawn by intriguing characters, compelling stories, and distinctive circumstances. Logically, then, the most captivating characters and stories revolve around people with unorthodox ways of being or thinking; characters who are often pushed into the corners of society, or labeled as “mad.”

To label something as “mad” is to identify it as radical or demented in some way – whether by mental or social dissimilarities. Shoved aside are the stories of people who are inherently different; ignored due to discomfort or fear. I believe that psychological madness (like sociological madness) is simply a difference in perception of the world and only when provoked by others become hostile and unreasonable. It is this never-ending-cycle of hostility and rejection that leads me to believe that both society’s “madness” and psychological “madness” are inter-dependent: if madness is defined by the majority, there will inherently be “mad” people and, thus, it cannot be fought.

Throughout history factions have put themselves on pedestal, believing to be better than the rest. Their self-righteousness and idealism often taints their view of the world, particularly in regards to society. Society evolves and mental frameworks shift, and those who follow these shifts convince themselves that they are civilized or rational. Only when people are confronted by the outcasts, the “crazies,” do they show their true colors. By identifying and targeting outsiders, cultures are identifying them as an “other” and grow to be discomforted by that difference.

It would be logical for people, and societies, to adapt; to evolve into cultures of inclusion of the ostracized or hurt, since this would make them more at ease and, thus, stronger. But as it (generally) does not evolve in this way, there is only one thing to be

deduced: that it is a conscious decision on the culture's part to hold the barriers strong; to keep the "mad" away. When humans defeat logic to do what makes them comfortable (an evolutionary response to a feeling of safety), one knows that they have regressed to fight-or-flight responses. In this way, man has devolved. Man devolves with every harmful label and every ostracism of the dissimilar.

I believe art can be used as a benchmark to discover mentalities of a culture at a certain point in time, and, thus, I believe art can show how and when humans devolve by looking at the situations in which people are belittled or treated differently.

Literature as an art form is typically meant to convey some sort of argument. A good writer will skillfully convey their point and convince the reader of their point. But if (as established previously) readers are drawn by characters that are different (or "mad"), why are people not convinced to sympathize? Why is there never a shift in culture towards inclusion?¹ Because humans are comfortable with their world and "madness" will not get in the way of that. Even so, readers are challenged intellectually and morally with every story of the "crazies" or the "mad," and, thus, the reason for my collection comes forth. To bring to the forefront of people's minds that they are confronted (often) with "madness" and decide not to adapt.

It would be naive of me to claim that I have assembled a thorough essence of "madness" throughout literature. What I hope to achieve, rather, is to grasp the essence of the connection between mental madness and social madness. With this collection I hope to demonstrate my fascination with "madness:" the insane, the anarchists, the "different," and the relationship between them all. I hope to exhibit that "madness" sparks the

¹ Since most stories in this realm deal with suffering or pain as a result of their label or disorder and, thus, should force the reader to empathize and make a change.

devolution of man throughout time and culture, presenting a broad range of texts in a variety of genres.

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MENTAL

1. Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946. Print.

An archetypal example of perceived madness, Meursault is utterly stoic and apathetic to the world around him. As such, he is labeled “crazy” and is deemed unfit for society. A short yet powerful exploration of an unflinching, unapologetic character, the writing is as calm and honest as Meursault is. The inclusion of this book in the collection is intended to demonstrate the range of actions that madness encompasses; polarized between exceptionally sensitive to one’s surroundings and absolutely callous.

2. Carroll, Lewis, and June Gouling. *Alice in Wonderland*. Bath, U.K.: Parragon, 2006. Print.

The world of Wonderland is, in itself, madness. The reader views the story as reality, assisted by Carroll’s fantastical writing style. Altered logic and, more importantly, a whimsically strange world of characters interact with Alice and force the reader out of their comfort zone. Reading the book is to unflinchingly accept a twisted view of the world, however the book is widely regarded as a classic; is this acceptance because of its label as “fantasy” or because it is a book intended for children? Blurring the lines between wonderful and horrifying, the book shifts the perception of “mad” to a potentially enthralling though, noting a slight shift in perception of “madness.”

Alice, in the book, is seemingly “sane,” but in a perceived-as “mad” world: she is the voice of reason, but she is the “mad” one. “Madness” is about context; about the surroundings and the society surrounding a person. In this way, the book speaks to mental “madness” as an illustration of projected social values.

3. Shakespeare, William, Louis B. Wright, and Virginia A. LaMar. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New York: Pocket, 1958. Print.

The character of Hamlet has been argued both rationally sane and insane throughout the centuries, but, regardless of such debate's conclusions, the play presents a man demented by his desire for revenge. His grief and rage are evident throughout, although they are manifested most strangely when the ghost of his father appears. This entry shows the breadth of madness in literature, which stretches from modern times back. Hamlet devolves into the same character of frustration and desire that many books in this collection exhibit.

4. Milne, A. A. *The World of Pooh; the Complete Winnie-the-Pooh and the House at Pooh Corner*. [New York]: Dutton, 1957. Print.

This classic children's book may initially seem out of place, however it has been argued,² I think successfully, that the entire book is about mental disorders. Each character seems to represent a different disorder (for example, Piglet is anxiety, Tigger is ADHD, Eeyore is depression). The stories in this book represent the mind of a child, Christopher Robbin, and how he manages the many facets of his brain. I hope to show the breadth of the topic and demonstrate how flexible "madness" is; once a reader decides to look for it, it can be found in nearly every text.

5. James, Henry, and Peter G. Beidler. *The Turn of the Screw: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2010. Print.

Led by the master of ambiguity, James presents a ghost story that haunts both the governess and the reader. The pale figures that interact with the governess are both

² Shea, Sarah E., Kevin Gordon, Ann Hawkins, Janet Kawchuk, and Donna Smith. "Pathology in the Hundred Acre Wood: A Neurodevelopmental Perspective on A.A. Milne." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 136.12 (2000). *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. Canadian Medical Association Journal, 12 Dec. 2000. Web. 5 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.ecmaj.ca/content/163/12/1557.full.pdf>>.

convincing and unnerving, forcing the reader to determine their trust in the narrator. This book presents an important question in literature that is often overlooked; can the reader trust the narrator? What, of the presented facts, are skewed, distorted or perverted by the narrator? These are consistent questions within most literature regarding mental illness; if the character's skewed point of view alters what one would deem "reality."

This edition of the book also includes many academic texts which analyze the novel through psychoanalytic, feminist, and Marxist lenses. Each presents arguments and reasoning for or against the governess's madness. The psychoanalytic text, for example, discusses how her madness is brought to fruition when she falls in love with Miles. Her fear of his growing up and leaving her manifests itself in the ghosts and forces her to smother him, leading to his death.

6. Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

Faulkner displays here the number of instigators that influence madness, from inability to cope with change to dysfunctional family life. Faulkner's distinctive style (multiple narrators' stream of consciousness) and setting (fictional Southern county) provide the backdrop to mental "madness," seen through depression, anxiety issues, paranoia, and neurosis, demonstrated in all the narrators. This wide variety of illnesses displays that there is no perspective that is simply "other" – rather there are many completely different lenses, each defined by labels under the umbrella term of "mad."

7. Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Lloyd Alexander. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions, 1964. Print.

Yet another tale of a man brought to madness by his own mind, this existential novel revolves around the idea that trying to grasp the idea of life itself can lead to both mental and (in this case) physical sickness. Perhaps among the more philosophical books within this collection, I include Sartre to illustrate the variety of struggles that authors

illustrate using “madness” as a vehicle.

8. Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996. Print.

Building upon trust of the narrator within “mad” texts, the story presents what would normally be seen as a non-literal story, one presented in the eyes of a crazy man but disproven by characters around him. His transformation, or “metamorphosis,” however, is quite literal, with other characters interacting and reacting to the change. The use of “madness,” here, is not used as an excuse, but rather a potential explanation. This entertains the questioning of the genre placement of all literature with seemingly “mad” characters. Is it within its pre-defined genre of “fiction,” or does it deserve placement in “fantasy” or “science fiction?”

9. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *"The Yellow Wallpaper" and Other Stories*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997. Print.

Often associated with “Gothic” or “horror” fiction, the unreliable narrator in this story expands this collection into the clearly psychological. As we follow the woman’s descent into madness we witness both paranoia and hallucinations, creating a sense of insecurity within the reader. Overtly demonstrative of a mental illness, this short story exemplifies the fear that comes along with the degenerative mind and what it reveals about a character’s temperament and ethos. How one acts when all sense of reality is lost reveals their true self, without social norms and with complete disregard of others.

10. Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Random House, 1934. Print.

Since this enormous book, the exploration of a day in three peoples’ minds, is all in some way evidence of madness (beginning with the first chapter’s reference to “General Paralysis of the Insane”), I will isolate one chapter which serves the function within this collection particularly well. Part II, Episode 15 --“Circe” -- demonstrates

mentally handicapped people, exuberant hallucinations, an over-sensory setting (a brothel), as well as a literal format shift (written as a play script, stage directions and all, which disorients the reader further). The characters are exceptionally hostile and mad, the chapter closing with the hallucination of Bloom's dead child.

Within this collection, this chapter (and the book as a whole) serves two purposes; to demonstrate the chaos that is associated with madness and to illustrate another style of narrative (stream of consciousness). Ulysses, at some level, illustrates society's perception of what it is like to be crazy; anarchic and wholly different.

11. Shaffer, Peter. *Equus: A Play in Two Acts*. New York: Samuel French, 1973. Print.

This twisted account of a teenager's fascination with horses contributes to this collection twice over. It provides a vicious account of a boy motivated by his madness and obsession, while also provides fascinating context to the journey of the seldom-explored character: the psychiatrist. Dr. Dysart provides insight into his definition of madness, as well as the toll patients take on their caretakers. As one of two plays in this collection, its inclusion is also motivated by expanding the narrative formats of books presented.

SOCIAL

12. Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York, NY: Warner, 1982. Print.

The perfect example of social madness, Boo Radley is ostracized and written off as “crazy.” The theme of socially-projected craziness is also evident in the theme of racism, particularly in Mr. Dolphus Raymond, the town drunk. As a white man who fell in love with a black woman, he thinks that it is easier for people to see him as out-of-his-mind-drunk than explain his love. He feels secluded and forces a perception of craziness onto himself.

13. Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Bantam, 1982. Print.

While madness is not a focus of this novel, I include it for the fact that the character who foreshadows the whole of the book (and, arguably, who the entire book is about), Moshe the Beadle, is viewed as crazy. Within the first few pages, Moshe, the poor Jew in the town of Sighet, is deported before the rest of the town, only to return with news of the Nazi’s actions. As a Beadle he carried out minor functions within the synagogue and questions Eliezer’s faith in G-d, as well as humanity. Only after they are taken by the Nazis do the townspeople doubt their label of him. Perhaps the label of “madness,” this text would argue, is a projection of fear; fear of a person or fear of an unfortunate truth.

14. Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. New York: Putnam Group, 1954. Print.

Anarchy, the lack of political order, sets the stage for a discussion on “civilization” and, with that, the definition of insanity within this structure. The rule of law inherently rules some actions acceptable and others encouraged. The inclusion of Flies within the collection is to demonstrate the fine line between madness and sanity, a line only defined arbitrarily by those who deem actions dangerous to social order. This

selection also demonstrates a forced devolution of man, stripping the characters of others' expectations and structure.

15. Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus*. Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 2003. Print. The World's Best Reading.

What actions are ruled as mad? Dr. Frankenstein challenges pre-conceived notions about human nature with his monster, each of whom (both he and the monster) are viewed as crazy. Most relevant to this collection, however, is the perception of the monster and his actions as the malicious behavior of a crazy creature. It can be argued that his actions are based on revenge, in reaction to the society around him that does not accept him, even though he grows to be loyal and educated (both standards deemed important by society). He is ostracized and feared because he is different and, thus, feels as much isolation as Frankenstein himself.

16. Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston (Mass.): Little, Brown, 1991. Print.

This classic presents Holden Caulfield as an impulsive teenager who is, as evidenced by the final scene, mentally "sick." Caulfield's struggle with his sense of belonging exemplifies an internal definition of social "madness," by not identifying with the culture around him and separating himself from his surroundings. When he is defined externally as "crazy," he denies it and struggles to acknowledge it fully. This is a common reaction among people defined as "crazy," but Holden illustrates a little of both social and mental madness.

17. Larsson, Stieg. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Trans. Reg Keeland. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Print.

Lisbeth Salander is a modern example of the abandoned and ostracized character, written off as crazy due to her aggression and her subdued, angry state. Manipulated and taken advantage of by many people, this girl shows what it is like (in a dramatized sense)

to live with slight insanity (e.g. the infamous rape scene) in today's culture. While dark, the text sheds light on insanity in many forms, including masochists and torturers.

18. Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 1987. Print.

Inoperative and shunned, the group known as “the Watchmen” are labeled as crazy vigilantes in strange suits. While they are labeled as crazy, there are two instances of more literal “madness” within the story: Rorschach (a clear reference to psychology simply in his name) and The Comedian. Each are labeled as crazy and do seemingly “mad” things (The Comedian, especially, is nihilistic and absolutely pessimistic about the nature of man), yet seem to be the most level-headed, realistic characters presented.³

Vigilantism is a fascinating branch of socially projected “madness,” as the vigilantes are inherently working outside the social order (and thus are usually ostracized) for what they deem to be the greater good. *Watchmen* displays this theme, as well as demonstrates the range of mediums that a good story can be told (as this is a graphic novel). Perhaps its format itself is a sign of fighting against social notions of how a story “should be” told in a book.

³ Also worth noting; *Watchmen* confronts what happens when those who are ostracized are the only ones protecting society. But even then, “who watches the Watchmen?”

BOTH / the “and”

19. Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Knopf, 1993. Print.

As Joseph Conrad takes us deep within the jungle, the reader watches human nature crawl out of each character, dissolving previously conceived notions of sanity and respectability. This exploration of human nature and the human mind demonstrates the darkness in both people and in society. Madness within this text is demonstrated by Kurtz, as well as society (as brought up at a dinner party on the Thames within the first pages).

This, more than most texts in this collection, demonstrates the devolution of man. As the crew literally delves deeper into the dark jungle, they lose their sense of society and of conduct, reverting back to what Conrad would argue is the true human nature: simple, survival-based, and manipulative (e.g. Marlow’s lie in the concluding pages).

20. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume Book, 1994. Print.

Within literature there are few portrayals of children that are as haunting as the desires and unfortunate madness of Pecola. Delving into themes of race, beauty, gender, and molestation, it demonstrates how perceptions and expectations pushed on a young person can drive them to any length, particularly when they are evidently mentally unstable. Self image is a large issue within today’s culture, embodying mental illness that range from eating disorders to plastic-surgery addictions. Yes, this book is included in the collection because it is an impactful story of madness, but it also speaks to more modern, less noted illnesses.

21. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, and Sidney Monas. *Crime and Punishment*. New York: New American Library, 1968. Print.

Raskolnikov’s classic murder of his landlady forces him to descend into madness, living with the greatest consequence of his actions; his guilty mind. Irrational and

delusional, Raskolnikov justifies the murder believing to be a superman of sorts (perhaps indicating extreme bipolar disorder, with extremely elated highs and very depressed lows). The novel represents madness in a few degrees, with the unlikely voice of “reason” being Svidrigailov; however cynical he is, he accepts that one cannot force reality to conform to desire. He accepts the world as it is, and, thus, is the only character to die with dignity. Within this collection, *Crime and Punishment* stands as a beacon of unfortunate optimism – even a potentially mad man channels morality, in the end, accepting the consequences of his actions.

22. Orwell, George. *1984: A Novel*. New York: Signet Classic, 1990. Print.

My personal favorite book in the collection, *1984* presents Winston Smith and his ultimate loss in his fight against the Party. While this story does not present “madness,” so to speak, it does present being seen as radically different, as well as the adaptation of one’s “different” mind. His “craziness,” or retaliation and rebellion against the Party, is fixed when he finally accepts the medicine that is offered to him. An interesting perspective on the relativity of madness, as Winston’s craziness (in relation to the Party) is in fact the only “sane” voice in the book. But after all, who is to say what is “sane”? The reader? The society? The context?

The final image of Winston’s happiness is heartbreaking, perhaps more so than the grim image of the future, simply because it demonstrates that all humans are corruptible; all men can be broken, only to be rebuilt to whatever society deems fit.

23. Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. New York: Norton, 1986. Print.

Alex’s forced “madness” is similar to that in *1984* -- society implanting new ideas in the stead of undesired traits. However *Clockwork Orange* provides a narrative ending more optimistic than *1984*, with Alex returning to his previous mentality (albeit more reflective, as he contemplates his son).

Society projects and forces the madness upon Alex. Within the context of “The Devolution of Man,” this text goes two ways; society evolves to the point that it forgoes

laws and morals to survive and thrive (which the delinquent Alex would hinder), yet also the devolution of Alex, arguing that a person's nature is instilled within them.

24. Parks, Suzan-Lori. *In the Blood*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000. Print.

Based loosely on *The Scarlet Letter*, this story takes a dark turn as, at the play's climax, Hester murders her eldest son. Struggling with rejection and exclusion, this play demonstrates the mental toll of a community's perception. In a way, this play incorporates both mental and socially projected madness, as it is the projected "madness" (the perception of her as promiscuous) that pushes her to the brink, causing her to become irrationally violent and angry.

Wish List

1. Ward, Mary Jane. *The Snake Pit*. New York: Random House, 1946. Print.

Providing context to the mid twentieth-century's perception of "madness," *The Snake Pit* was at the forefront of the topic. Exploring the idea that the only way to "fix" an insane person was to shock them (long ago "by throwing them into a snake pit"), the novel explores how far technology came, but how little peoples' perception of the "insane" changed. Discussing the incivility and pure brutality utilized in mental wards, the novel goes to show how devolved man is in regards to madness. In reaction to a foreign and threatening mental state, man resorts to cruelty and insolence, stripping the subject of their humanity and dignity.

2. Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. New York, NY: Viking, 1973. Print.

Currently unexplored in my collection is the illustration of mental institutions. They are used throughout literature to illustrate the label of "madness," physically separating sick people from the general population. This is a projection of social norms and (particularly in the West) the idea of separating those who are not "presentable" (another common example is elderly/retirement homes).

This novel would help illustrate the idea of relative madness, as McMurphy (the protagonist) is arguably sane throughout his residency within the asylum. It is only when society projects their definition on him and attempts to "heal" him, through lobotomy, that he truly becomes socially incompetent and outwardly dead. In this sense, the novel also demonstrates the devolution of man through the pitfalls of social standards.

3. Lehane, Dennis. *Shutter Island*. New York: Morrow, 2003. Print.

A detective mystery, this book would provide a useful example of mental illness as a plot device. While the story uses an Alcatraz-like island filled with the "insane," as a setting, the shocking twist comes when the main character is revealed to be "insane,"

himself. It is common that “madness” will be slowly revealed or brought about over the course of a book (or they are known as “crazy” from the beginning), but it is a relatively common technique in modern literature to have a plot twist, insanity being one of the most common.

4. Ronson, Jon. *The Psychopath Test: A Journey through the Madness Industry*. New York: Riverhead, 2011. Print.

A real-world, journalistic point of view, the entire purpose of this novel is exploring what defines “madness.” Hare explores mental institutions, psychiatry, corporate institutions and government, resolving that a percentage of most powerful people are classic “psychopaths.” He also spends time inside a mental ward, spending time with patients described as “psychopaths” to better understand what defines a person as “mad” and why society has assigned labels to them as such.

5. Shikibu, Murasaki. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Arthur Waley. London: Allen & Unwin, 1926. Print.

This novel would provide a psychological exploration, yes, but more importantly would demonstrate the use of “madness” in the course of literary history. Sometimes called the world’s first novel, it not only delves into the human mind,⁴ but also the way in which such “madness” is dealt with in different societies (11th century Japan).

⁴ Hayashi, Yoshiro. "Mental Illness in The Tale of Genji." *Gifu University Institutional Repository* 51.2 (2003): 197--200. *Gifu University School of Medicine*. Gifu University Institutional Repository. Web. 5 Mar. 2012. <<http://repository.lib.gifu-u.ac.jp/bitstream/123456789/12413/1/KJ00000707024.pdf>>.