

Short Paper

Redefining Madness

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Abstract

This work does not provide a brief overview of madness and literature in a chronologically ordered fashion. The work does not question the writer's mental state and its reflection in their works. Neither does a search for a scientific definition of social reality appear to be of major concern. The main emphasis is made on the idea of "madness" in literature. The attempt to define "literature" presents parallel uncertainties while trying to define "madness". Madness is not initially a fact, but a judgment. It is historically and culturally predetermined.

Keywords

Madness, irrationality, sanity, sobriety

1. Introduction

-435-

Much Madness is divinest Sense-

To a discerning Eye-

Much sense-the starkest Madness-

'Tis the Majority

In this, as All, prevail-

Assent-and you are sane-

Demur-you're straightway dangerous-

And handled with a chain-

Emily Dickinson

c. 1862 (1890)

As many studies demonstrate, synchronically and diachronically, our society has always been concerned with the subject of madness. The concept of madness and its literary depictions have been thoroughly revised according to the reevaluation of sanity vs. abnormality relationship as the history of political resistance and social criticism manifest.

The writers' fascination with the theme of madness has resulted in a germinating investigation of the irrational. The idea of the insanity as an intruder reigned for a long time, almost entirely unchallenged. However, the studies by contemporary critics reveal that by the twentieth century those utterly constructed frontiers between two historically accepted opposites – sanity and madness- have been gradually deteriorating.

Madness is associated with intensity. Therefore, due to its condensed structure, the short story format appears to be the most interesting for the analysis. Near the end of the nineteenth century, the experimentation and experience in the treatment of madness in society and literature became fascinating. Jimenez (2019) examined how the concept of “madness” was perceived in the 19th century based on Edgar Allan Poe's “Tell-Tale Heart” and Charlotte Perkins' “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

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2. Literature and Madness

“What is literature?” inquires purposely the author of *Linguistic Criticism* Roger Fowler, making it clear that this question seems to be hypothetical. Moreover, it is the awesome question just because it turns out to become “the unanswerable one which only constitutes the presupposition “Literature exists” (p. 237). But how do we really define it? In the simplest (terms, it could be said that a literary text is a piece of writing with its own idiosyncrasies. Is it a pervasive definition of literature? Apparently not. “Fortunately, linguistic criticism is able to bypass this particular intellectual hurdle”, continues the same author reassuring us if only slightly in terms of giving a distinct interpretation. “...whatever ‘Literature’ is, it is a fact that the texts which are regarded as literary are in any case language” (p. 237). The same critic comments earlier in the book that a much richer notion of discourse is more appealing to the conception of a literary work: “a piece of language in real use is more than a text put together by the linguistic conventions” (p. 93). Although Fowler's position is understandable, it does not help us, however, to define literature, but it rather establishes the hierarchy between orality and writing very severely, attached by such post-structuralist thinkers like Derrida.

Readers while dealing with literary creations undergo more than a simple process of decoding what is there on the surface within the framework of a text. They deploy their diverse sociolinguistic repertoires of cognitive psychological experiences, often represented in the Greek word schemata, into the evaluation of particular notes of discourse. The existence of Chomsky's theory of universal grammar and “linguistic competence” as one of the essential terms in it, prompts the quest of an analogical universal principle of “literariness” and “literary competence”.

However, this quasi aspiration appears to be misleading, since it is very implausible to assume that there is some universal literary competence, which would eliminate a general irregularity in the

reception of literary works by all readers regardless of their historical and cultural background. Literature is viewed as Social Discourse. The reader interacts with the text. Therefore, literary works are very much the products of the dominant economic, political, social, and ideological transformations within a time in history. A text is surely not a timeless artifact, but an outcome of relevant, underlying historical and social schemata. It is known that “time flies”. And thus, the critical treatment of a mystically indefinite notion of literature is a quickly advancing process.

This attempt to define “literature” presents parallel uncertainties when we try to define “madness”. “The most obvious and natural question that arises at this point is what is madness: how is one to define a concept charged with centuries of political, social, religious, medical, and personal assumptions?” (Feder, p. 5). Madness exists only within the interior of a binary opposition. In other words, if there is no sanity, there is no madness. There might be a collision between these two abstractions as illustrated in further discussion but it is vital for the definition to maintain this dualism. “Madness can only occur within a world of conflict, within a conflict of thoughts”, notes Shoshana Felman (p. 206). The question about madness resembles the question about literature in a similar fashion: What is it? And what it is not? George Rosen in his *Madness in Society. Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness* states: “...the psychiatrist dealing with such data is often at a loss to determine what is normal and what is abnormal” (p. 3).

Once again, the interpretation depends on the knowledge imbedded in discourses, the apprehension of the belief and virtues of cultures and periods. Fillingham (1993) noted that Michael Foucault argued that definitions of abnormal acts were culturally determined. In his famous work *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Foucault demonstrates the complexity of the phenomenon “madness”. It is not possible to describe the concept unambiguously if there is an implied interplay between synonyms with a range in connotation. “Whereas Hegel places madness inside thought, Nietzsche places thought inside madness” (Feldman, p. 206). Thus, the same author concludes later: “one realizes that the literary madman is most often a disguised philosopher: in literature, the role of madness, then, is eminently philosophical” (p. 206).

Let’s observe that modern dictionaries present a great variety of definitions for the concept of madness. Webster’s Desk Dictionary of the English Language, 1990 edition, does not minimize the challenge in finding a unanimous illustration of what to be mad implies: 1. Mentally disturbed or deranged. 2. Enraged or irritated. 3. Wildly excited. 4. Extremely unwise. 5. Excessively fond. 6. Enjoyably hilarious. 7. Affected with rabies. 8. A spell of ill temper.

It appears safe to assume that different dictionaries from different periods would not contain the same range of definitions. It makes the same idea itself very indistinct. The approaches to the treatment of madness varied tremendously through the history of mankind, including a total reverse in the perception. For example, madness is not initially a fact, but a judgment. It is historically and culturally predetermined.

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