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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Madness and Difference: Politicizing Insanity in Classic Literary Works

GREGORY SHAFER

"Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence."

—Edgar Allen Poe

"Madness in great ones must not unwatched go."

—*Hamlet*

When we speak of madness in literature—whether it springs from the works of Shakespeare, Hesse, Poe, or Kesey—we invariably probe a state of being that transcends the normal, the average, the expected and polite. Madness or insanity is, by definition, a severe and perhaps dangerous state of mind, leading the possessor of the madness to break rules, threaten the status quo, and provoke a general state of anxiety and unrest. Of course, at the same time, the madness extricates those afflicted from society's fetters, liberating them to do what is right rather than what is normal.

And where would we be without madness? Hamlet flourishes most when he is mad, finding it is perhaps the only viable way to expose the treachery of his uncle. Montresor's insanity creates a venue for the most chilling and triumphant murders, and McMurphy's carefully diagnosed derangement frees him to question the real insanity of Nurse Ratched and the system in which he lives. Hawthorne's most celebrated character is Hester Prynne, a woman who is seen as both sinful and mad, and who uses this moniker—and the scarlet letter that symbolizes it—as a "passport into regions where other women dare not tread" (p. 144). Put simply, madness empowers because it invites the bizarre, the unusual, the brilliant. Because it operates outside of carefully regulated spheres of acceptability, it suffers none of the impediments that are part of the polite mainstream discourse. And while it often lacks the expected decorum or propriety, it also tends to explore the vistas of thought that were off limits to those who are "sane."

With that said, I would like to argue that we, as teachers of literature, have a moral responsibility to teach madness, encourage it, and revel in the extraordinary liberation and empowerment that it engenders. Madness as a social construct, as a structure that limits and marginalizes people, deserves to be explored so students can come to terms with the political character of such polarizing words and the need to deconstruct and challenge their effect. Further, in a world where bombs are used to "liberate" a nation and where a Patriot Act leads to spying on the innocent citizens it is suppose to protect, an interrogation of madness and its ideological significance could actually save us as a society.

Madness, Politics, and Hamlet

A first step in designing a class around the concept of madness is to establish the fact that madness is often a subjective and political term. It does not always flow from antiseptically clean and dispassionate science but from political artifice. To understand this, it is often helpful to share some fundamental elements of structuralism and semiotic analysis, beginning with the point that "from a structuralist and semiotic perspective, there is nothing transparent about language. It is thick with political beliefs, social values, unreflected-upon judgments, and profound biases" (Hall, 2001, p.138).

Indeed, structuralism suggests that while "we may naively believe that we control language," it "largely controls us" (Hall, 2001, p.138). It does this by creating a confluence between language and power—by ascribing words with political meaning and using those words to regulate its society. According to Foucault, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together," (Foucault, 2006, p.352).

Of course, King Claudius understands this and begins to establish his power over Hamlet through the use of a political discourse that paints the Prince as the other, as someone who is different, and, as a result, dangerous. This begins the battle between Hamlet and his uncle as they grapple with discourse to

gain an advantage over the other. Insanity is the focal point and both are using the word to craft a sphere of power over the other. Again, Foucault is helpful in explaining the complex nature of discourses:

Discourse is not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (as cited in Storey, p. 102).

This, of course, is also true when we explore the world of insanity. As with many signs in our language, it is packed with a history and social significance that leads us to see it certain ways. Insanity is the antithesis of logic and reason. It is associated with hysterical women, dark people, creative thinkers, and future icons. But no matter who is given the moniker, one thing is certain: once branded with the word, a person will never be accorded the same power which was granted earlier. Instead, she is relegated to an otherness that justifies acts of cruelty. Truly, to explore madness from a structuralist perspective is to examine the sign in all of its ideological colors and to probe its political potential.

In *Hamlet*, I would argue, insanity or madness is completely a political term, used by both Hamlet and his uncle as a way to accomplish specific goals. The King, for example, deems his nephew's "transformation" as insanity because he is dangerous, because he is asking too many questions—because he is imperiling his murderous enterprise. Further,

once Hamlet is branded mad, he is no longer subject to the same rights and privileges given to the rest of society, which will justify his later murder. In many ways, madness or what comes to be called his "unnatural state" has more to do with his political opposition to the King than any mental condition.

In the same way, Hamlet is savvy enough to know that living within this word's social meaning will liberate him to probe and investigate, to ask questions that would otherwise not be suitable for a prince. Put simply, Hamlet is able to grasp the social structure of the word and all that accompanies it and use it as a device in discovering the truth behind his father's death. As he embraces the life of the insane prince, he becomes someone who is less limited by the protocol of royal life—someone who is free to challenge the way political machinations have led to his father's murder. He talks sarcastically to Polonius, scathingly to his mother, and cynically to Ophelia—all because he is no longer fettered by the moniker of the sane Prince. He refers to Polonius as a "fish monger" and engages in revealing linguistic games concerning the word "sun." Though he seems mad, Polonius sees "method" in it (2.2. 208-210). Reading this play and considering the way words limit and empower, students can glean much about how the language often controls us with the many expectations it brings to every sentence.

In reading *Hamlet* from this perspective, it is always empowering to show students how madness does not limit Hamlet but makes him better. Hamlet's outcast status—someone who is strange and unpredictable—makes him an ideal iconoclast for truth. Before his "insanity," he is a decidedly more docile, more passive man, someone who wishes death in his famous soliloquy

because he feels powerless to make a difference or to break the social pressures that ask him to celebrate a context that is analogous to an "unweeded garden" (1.1.135).

In the opening scenes of the play, Hamlet is persuaded to be sane, logical, and in tune with "nature." When he is addressed by his uncle the King, he is told that his mourning is not only excessive but a "fault to heaven, a fault against the dead, a fault to nature, to reason most absurd" (1.2.101). In other words, Hamlet is not only depressed but is committing a sin and offending the very father for whom he feels such pathos. Of course, it is a world that is corrupt and Hamlet quickly realizes that being "normal," that living as a participant in this environment will never give him license to question the authority and promulgate an alternative narrative of what is natural. It is precisely through his madness that Hamlet will be empowered to act as an oppositional force to the nefarious acts around him.

In exploring the notion of madness and its relation to Hamlet specifically, students become aware of the political nature that permeates this word and the way insanity constitutes a difficult but political way to contest a very real evil in the world. To see madness and nature as being political constructs is incredibly valuable for students who are dealing with homophobia and rampant sexism. On a daily basis they are told what is "natural" and how to act based on societal narratives that see words in what a structuralist would call "binary oppositions." Being *gay* in America has not simply been referred to as a sexual orientation but a word that connotes weakness, promiscuity, and sin. Other words, such a *woman* and *man*, also are revealing in how we have made them oppositional, imbuing one with power

and the other with a list of maladies.

In *Hamlet*, madness or mental inconsistency, is in opposition to not only logic and mental discipline but good citizenship and even religious practice. King Claudius establishes the binary oppositions for insanity early in the play, creating a linguistic and political reality that both of these men must use for political purposes. Again, students would be well served by understanding the ideals of semiotic analysis and the notion that “no sign possess meaning in isolation; it does so only through a series of contrasts and comparisons with other signs” (Hall, 2001, p.139).

Because Hamlet does not want to be defined by his fratricidal uncle, he must fight the sling and arrows of outrageous fortune and take arms against them. In short, he must assume the role of the Other, the person who lives outside of sane society but who knows that his fight is worthy of the struggle. This more ideological acumen is most conspicuously on display in Hamlet’s interactions with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who were once his friends but who have now come to interrogate him as representatives of the King. Hamlet quickly reminds them that his “wit’s diseased” so they should not expect a “wholesome answer” (3.2.328).

Later, he demands that Guildenstern play on the pipe that was brought in by the players. Of course, Guildenstern does not know how to play, but Hamlet’s demand is metaphorical and masked. As a slightly deranged member of the court, he can play with words, and, at the same time, speak plainly about the real reason why his friends are speaking to him. Hamlet knows they are there at the behest of the king and are trying to play him like an instrument. In his role as insane or madman, he operates in images and word play, never

revealing the full message to his enemies.

Why look you now, how unworthy a thing / you make of me. You would play upon me; you / would seem to know my stops; you would pluck / out the heart of my mystery; you would sound / me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; / and there is much music; excellent voice, in this little / organ, yet cannot you make it speak. (3. 2. 371-380)

For Hamlet, insanity is a political decision, and it is clear that his new moniker as mad is part of the weight that must be endured by any individual who is willing to question a corrupt or oppressive regime. Hamlet comes to embrace his new status and revels as the person who can probe like the gravediggers do later in the play. Madness, then becomes a word that is used to subordinate him but that can also be used as an element of strength. A Foucault reminds us, “discourse transmits and produces power. It reinforces it but it also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (as cited in Story, p.102). For Hamlet, insanity is a sign that leads to undermining the power of his uncle, as he takes control of the language and uses it for his own advantage.

Many of my students see the striking connection to modern-day words that are used as ways to normalize them and prevent them from living as complete individuals. Words like *bitch*, *fag*, *nigger*, *boy*, *slacker*, *burnout*, *ho* are often used to treat the person as deficient. But as many students pointed out, all of these words are aimed at certain people who oppose a power structure, who seek equal access and rights, and who have historically been made

to feel ashamed for their association to these words. Much like the word *madness*, they are political terms, designed to reproduce a system that serves some while marginalizing others.

Of course, once they become aware of the ideological game that is being played, they can use these words to empower themselves and their causes. In the same way that Hamlet thrives as the mad and dangerous prince, many students pointed to the way words like *fag* and *nigga* have come to be inverted or flipped as a way to make them sources of strength. “I take great satisfaction in being called a bitch,” said a student in my literature class. “It reminds me that I’m not being passive and that I am a woman in a man’s world.” Added another African-American student, “I think there is no greater source of unity and power than the word *nigga* between two people who have experienced intolerance and who understand the history of racism and who are united to oppose it.”

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and the Two Sides of Insanity

No other literary work more powerfully explores the world of madness and insanity than Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. As with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *Cuckoo’s Nest* delves into the political aspects of such words and the status of the people who are branded with these maladies. More importantly, *Cuckoo’s Nest* suggests that the asylum that is the setting for the novel is also a microcosm for a world that often is crazy, manipulative, and mendacious—a world that prevents revolt by labeling iconoclasts as deranged and unstable.

Kesey’s McMurphy is the strong-willed, outspoken protagonist. When he comes to the clinic he immediately

questions the schedule, the restrictions and demands that the men be given time to watch television. He wonders about the pills he is given. He implores the Big Chief to play basketball and to speak. In *Cuckoo's Nest*, words and clinical diagnosis have literally taken away the voices of many of the inmates, who have committed themselves to a life of passive, obedient insanity. Chief Broom begins the novel and one immediately recognizes the spiritual paralysis that can come with accepting one's moniker of mentally deranged and how it can lead to living within a corrupt system.

The Chief has established a state that renders him almost inhuman—an entity who neither speaks nor hears. Having accepted his madness has allowed him to shroud himself in protections that negate him as an active individual.

In many ways, the Chief is like Ellison's invisible man, with his lack of status and his complete personal negation. But this is what insanity—as a political tool—does to its victims if it is not exploited and used as away to live outside of the system. It offers placid impotence in an imperious world. It relinquishes power to the Big Nurses of the society, who stand behind their windows," making notes on what goes on out in front of her in the day room during the next eight hours" (p. 4).

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest continues the theme of insanity as a double-edged sword—a political phenomenon that can be used as an instrument of liberation and empowerment or oppression and impotence. While Hamlet successfully operates outside of the orderly world of royalty—and interrogates others with that power—Chief Broom begins *Cuckoo's Nest* as a man who is paralyzed by his status as "crazy." Like Melville's Billy Budd, he has lost his voice

and much of his time is spent observing in perpetual fear, sensing the machine and trying to clear his mind of the fog that is part of living this life.

In this sphere of insanity, then, the men live lives that are similar to the panopticon that Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish*. The Panopticon is a huge tower that operates at the center of a prison—a prison that was meant to incarcerate lepers and the insane. The Panopticon is the quintessential instrument of control over those who have been deemed different and who have been segregated from society. As the word implies, it works as ubiquitous

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eyes, watching to see that people do not violate laws of normalcy. And, of course, as long as those in power have the ability to define difference as abnormal and insane—and are able to quickly find it through the Panopticon—they can eradicate any democratic change or disparate voices.

Insanity, then, can work as a license to operate outside of the polite and restrictive lines of society or as a way to expunge difference and disenfranchise people based on the labels they are given. As Foucault argues "if you are not like everybody else, then

you are abnormal, if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal, and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing" (Foucault, 2006, p. 352) The members of the ward in *Cuckoo's Nest* are willing participants in their insanity, accepting it with all of its inherent limitations and disparaging notions. They know they will be taken care of by Nurse Ratched and that their world will be regulated to fit her desire for complete power. Insanity has usurped them of their voices, their decision making process, even their ability to think. This is the decision they make to be defined in the world of the Big Nurse.

When McMurphy enters, one sees the insanity that is reflective of Hamlet, an insanity that can be used to combat entrenched oppression. McMurphy is adept at using his abnormal status as a vehicle for questioning ward policies that have long kept the men medicated, obedient, and most importantly—afraid. He questions the music being played and demands to hear the World Series. Within a short period of time, he has introduced the notion of a vote to the others.

The hell with the schedule. You can back to the bloody schedule next week when the series is over. What do you say, buddies? Let's take a vote on watching the T.V. during the afternoon instead of at night. All those in favor? (p. 114)

What is fascinating about *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is many of the patients are very able to speak for themselves. They appreciate the notion of the vote, but they know that emerging from their safe world of insanity will come with dangers and responsibilities.

When McMurphy asks Harding why he is afraid simply to vote, he learns that Harding, while being an intelligent man, is scared of what might happen, of what could be “cut off” if he ventures out of his safe world (p. 117). The same is true for much of the rest of the population. They know what is happening to them and have accepted it. The Big Chief has narrated that the facility is not a place to get better but a slaughterhouse, a place where one’s entrails are removed. This can be seen as a metaphorical image, in which the essence of their individuality is being removed by the society in which they have chosen to live and be defined.

Thus, McMurphy must keep pressuring them, pushing them from their complacency and into a place where they are willing to take risks as individuals—where they are willing to use their insane status for political change rather than subjugation.

What both Hamlet and McMurphy do as insane or mad individuals is identify and use language as a way to change an unjust society. To do this, they must first identify the political way that language is used to disaffect certain people from their world. Of course, students come to quickly see the significance for their lives, which is why this unit can be so edifying. While both McMurphy and Hamlet wage a linguistic and political war against those who would use signs or words to silence them and enervate their power, there are modern wars that students are fighting to maintain their individual dignity and sense of personal empowerment. They come to see that “language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it” (Harris, 1988, p. 39).

And how else is language used to control us and define our beliefs? While examining insanity in literature and its

structuralistic importance to readers, one can examine and deconstruct other images and related words that have come to dictate our visions and values. In his essay about the English language, Ossie Davis discusses how blackness has been defined in culture and the way it has taught its users to hate blackness and see evil and malevolence in it: “The word Blackness has 120 synonyms, 60 of which are distinctly unfavorable and none of them even mildly positive.” Later, Davis concludes his linguistic diatribe by suggesting the following:

He who speaks to me in my mother tongue damns me indeed. The English language—in which I cannot conceive of myself as a black man without at the same time, debasing myself is my enemy, with which to survive I must always be at war. (p.52)

What about women? As part of the class, I introduced students to a short history on the execution of witches in America and the reason why women were so closely connected to witchcraft and evil. From early history, the word *woman* was defined as an obedient servant, as a gender that was docile, pretty, passive, and conciliatory. When those words were replaced with words like *determined*, *outspoken*, or *aggressive*, many in Western culture accused that abnormal or uncomely woman of being witches—an ideal political term to stymie women who sought to be more than subordinates to a man.

Again, as with the word *insane* or *mad*, *witch* can be employed as an ideological weapon, as a way to maintain an unjust society. According to Carol Karlsen in her book *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, “it was not just pride that most fundamentally distinguished

witches from other people; it was female pride in particular” (p.150).

Students and Insanity

Once one establishes insanity as a political term—one that is given meaning by the people who use it—students can read literature and explore their own lives for the use of insanity and otherness. In particular, many African-American students are encouraged to read and write about Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and the mental breakdown of Pecola Breedlove. For Pecola, insanity comes as a result of a racist world that fails to present her with alternatives to her life as an African-American girl. Much of her life is devoted to attaining the inherent “goodness” that she has been taught to see in whiteness. Her insanity is also political in that it cannot be separated from the cruel and racist world in which she lives. One of the best essays written in my class was in response to Pecola and the significance of her mental breakdown. Dorcelle, an African American in my class, argued that

Pecola struggles with a racist language which prevents her from being a person. She cannot be white and blackness has come to be a dead end. She can never have blue eyes, she can never be white, which means she must deal with all of the negative cultural feelings that are part of blackness.

A second student looked at madness and insanity through the Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and the insanity it delineates. As with *The Bluest Eye*, “The Yellow Wallpaper” invites students to see insanity as a political term, as a symptom of a larger disease called oppression. Indeed, the narrator’s insanity, her obsession with the designs on the

walls, are a direct reflection of her status as a woman who must remain calm and satisfied in a stultifying marriage.” How often,” wrote my student, “have women been seen as crazy simply because they were unhappy in their lives as second class people in a relationship? The word hysteria comes from the ‘diagnosis’ by a man of a woman’s malady simply because she was unhappy.”

Perhaps the best essays, however, came from the political use of the word *nigger* and its use and impact on society. While all language is rife with political power that transcends the denotative definition, the word *nigger* has become an inflammatory, omnipotent linguistic tool. It is the reason why Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has always been a controversial novel. Despite the loving relationship between Huck and Jim, the use of the word *nigger* becomes a focal point for anger and consternation.

With that in mind, Stacey wrote a provocative paper on the “The Pro-Teian N-Word” based on the title from a chapter of Randal Kennedy’s book *Nigger*. Stacey’s focus was the chapter that looked at the various uses of the word and the way its symbol had come to be an inexorable weight on the backs of any person of color. In his paper, Stacey referred often to the many ways *nigger* has become a political tool, creating a kind of curse—not unlike the word *insane*—when it comes to black and brown people. Of special interest for Stacey was the poem that was quoted in the book and that was familiar to many of his older relatives:

If you’re white, you’re right
 If you’re yellow you’re mellow
 If you’re brown, stick around,
 If you’re black, step back
 (as cited in Kennedy, p.37).

As Stacey concluded in the final paragraphs of his paper, words have meanings well beyond their sounds and can contribute to a master narrative that makes some people better than others. “Colors are not simply colors but political markers, a language of power. It is up to us,” he added, “to fight the racism that is part of our language.”

Final Thoughts

Insanity—as with many words in our language—is based on what Derida called difference—that meaning is made through the privileging of one term over another. The native American is historically given the term *savage* as a way to contrast him with the civilized white man. Man is given words of strength while women are named after flowers and treated as the inferior of the two opposing terms. In studying insanity and literature, my students came to see the ideological aspects of language, appreciating the way modern day oppression is often a politically constructed phenomenon. Inanity does not have to mean one is irrational. It can be a place in which rebels operate in contesting the immoral aspects of their world. Indeed, what we learned above all else is that language is socially constructed, it can be used not simply to keep us down but to create a more just and equal reality for all. Henry Giroux has argued:

As teachers we can never inclusively speak as the other, but we can certainly work with diverse others to deepen their understanding of the complexity of the traditions, histories, knowledges and politics that they bring to schools. (p.63)

As teachers, we need to realize that as educators, have a specific

responsibility to show the way language creates inequities and can be used to empower those marginalized groups.

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