Schizophrenia: Stigma and the Impact of Literature

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Introduction
I was diagnosed with schizophrenia on February 21, 1995, I was 22 years old, and my reaction was initially a shock. Still, within the parameters of coping with such news, the word “mad” surfaced in my mind. It was not just the word; my mind actually did a complete reversion to my childhood, particularly to 2 stories: Alice in Wonderland and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. My focus was the mad hatter parties, in particular, the absurdity of unbirthdays and the trivialization of madness. I was pretty amazed that my initial reaction was to revert to Carroll’s works. I realized that the terminology used to refer to the “madness” in the novel was not as outdated as it may seem. The terms are easily transferable to modern day psychology. The question remained: how would a “mad hatter” or being “mad as a hare” be described in 21st century vocabulary?

Back to my original inspirations Jekyll and Hyde and Alice in Wonderland, these instantiate the 2 main forms of modern ignorance regarding mental health. People still regard it as comical, or even dangerous. Those who read Carroll may not realize that they are making that kind of association, but they are; the 2 notions of madness are equally misleading.

So why does this trivialization of madness matter? Certainly, there is an aspect of madness that may seem to some as interesting in lieu of the fact that they do not know what is really at stake. I, for one, realized after understanding my condition that my brain tended to feel responsible for the entire world around me; even issues that had nothing to do with me would prompt me to think that I was responsible. I felt that I had caused September 11. I was egocentric and, to a point, narcissistic without the pedantry; it was just the way my brain reacted. Surely my thoughts would have made amazing comedy sketches. Yet, there is so much more than just the irrational thinking: all thinking comes from a common source—what source were my thoughts coming from? Was it guilt? Was it masochism? Was it a fear of God, or a fear of myself? What was the problem with the Mad Hatter? What was his schema—that source of thoughts, that thought soup, that leaked his thought into such expressions to the world? What follows is the thought process I went through to understand the stigma.

A Mad Tea Party
The problem with trivializing the condition of the mad hatter and considering it as “eccentric behavior” means that the mad hatter had a choice to act the way that he is. Eccentricity may be a characteristic displayed by some mental patients, but being eccentric itself is a behavior choice. If we look at the mad hatter’s condition under a modern day perspective, it is clear that he had not much choice in acting the way that he did: he was truly sick. Calling him eccentric diminishes his true issues. That is where trivialization becomes a problem. Yet Mark Richards from the Lewis Carroll Society argues:

“I don’t think I would describe any of it as a negative image of mental illness, since there is a kind of innocence about it - the behaviour tends to be more eccentric rather than truly troubling. Carroll is certainly not alone in this trivialisation of madness … books, films and television readily give a character a few signs of madness in order to get an easy laugh. Monty Python and Father Ted rather spring to mind.”

My reaction to this was to look into the characters and why they were thought to be mad. It turned out that Mad as a March hare looked to be just an example of ignorance. A hare in rutting season does look manic, and the analogy is interesting because appearances like that are about as far as anyone usually probes into madness. Mad as a hatter has some basis in fact, as research shows mercury vapors do indeed cause mental illness. The 2 characters and their labels are known as much today as in the Victorian period and so we are led to ask what they meant back then just as much as we would question any other labels today.

My next thought was that Carroll’s literary representation has a timeless quality of a literary classic. It will be remembered long after Father Ted has been forgotten. The tea party may also be compared to the everyday use of TV labeling that creates a general and popular usage, but I think Carroll carries more intellectual weight.

Secondly, the tea party forms part of our general knowledge and because we all think of it as this we are reinforcing the image it creates. Its public image is enhanced by constant media portrayals as in recent films.
like Alice in Wonderland, with Johnny Depp. Finally, we read the mad tea party as children and we are introduced into a false picture of madness which few of us would take time to question when we are older. Any attempt to properly explain the tea party will seem like a drop in the media ocean.

**Mad. Not Mad**

So the images of the scene we absorb are that it is zany, topsy-turvy, mock solemn, wonderfully bonkers, and eccentric, all of which are importantly misleading. However, what if we cannot link this to being mad? Mark Richards again:

“There is, though, a distinction between the absurd (unbirth-days) and the mad (the Hatter and March Hare). Many of the characters are a little strange to us, but it is only really the Hatter and March Hare who can be described as “mad” - as in the two phrases “mad as ...” from which the characters come. What makes it all less worrying than it might be is that the terms “mad” and “madness” are seldom used in reference to mental illnesses or permanent mental disabilities. I don’t think many people today would use a phrase like “he went mad” about someone and the terms have taken on a rather arcane feeling.”

The problem here is that under these specific circumstances, we would not use the word mad, but society and media use the word more generally and historically. Although the word mad was also eventually dropped by psychiatry in favor of more scientific terms like psychotic mad is still labeled with many other proper and slang words. The O.E.D. of Slang states:

“There is a continuum of usage between mad in the clinical sense at one extreme, and foolish or strange at the other. For convenience, the continuum is divided into two here, mad and crazy, eccentric, and words are assigned to the one to which they most typically belong. But many are capable of being used in both senses, with several gradations of meaning in between.”

So it seems that only some readers of the mad tea party would have insight into “mad” and here in the UK Mad Pride have set out to reclaim the word. Putting Richards point to them they replied: “The word mad is very dated indeed. Psychiatric hospitals are no longer referred to as madhouses—and haven’t seriously for 100 years or so. But it is still bandied about as a term of abuse.” Interestingly, this attempt runs up against the problem that “mad” and other such terms have been general use so long that we tend to think of them as proper labels.

Yet madness, far from being out of date and no longer used by psychiatry, has appeared in great works of philosophy, such as Madness and Civilization by Michel Foucault, and is regularly used by mental health charities like Mind in the United Kingdom. In sum, it still has some general usage.

**Mr Hyde**

The other great literary character that sprang to mind on my diagnosis was that of Mr Hyde and how this lends false authority to the notion that schizophrenia is a split personality. This indeed reinforces the widespread misunderstanding that the word schizophrenia itself means some sort of schism within the mind or self. That divide in the self is visible in the story of Mr Hyde itself as one half of the character is dangerous and this lead to the understanding common today that schizophrenia is something psychopathic. Again this had the authority of deriving from the work of another literary giant.

**Conclusion**

The images image of the hatter, Mr Hyde, and those other famous characters made by the media to look comical and laughable reinforce the notion of madness as something to instill comic relief or as fascinatingly dangerously: How can something that destroys families, relationships, and friendships be considered “funny.” There is nothing laughable about losing one’s direction in life. There is no joke in one’s brain playing such vile tricks to take you to an anxiety point that may result in suicide. Comical? Perhaps…to those who ignore the personal experience. Get in their shoes, and think otherwise. Then we may start to further explain and overcome stigma for the newly diagnosed.