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AP English

1 March 2023

### Everything, Everywhere, All at Once

Chasing a dream endlessly, unwavering and fervent, is a rarely insulted endeavor. And to understand the meaning of life – its secrets, definition, and limits – has been just dreams for philosophers of centuries past and centuries to come. So to combine these two efforts and place them in the mind of a single great scientist would seem almost like a gift from the heavens; the possibilities of discovery and knowledge taken to the very edges of human imagination. Or rather, this is how the scientist viewed himself and his intellect. Frankenstein was his name, and he believed it was his life’s mission was to create life out of death – he wanted to play god in a world set against him, to prove himself by doing the impossible (Shelley). His goal was noble, but his motive was impure - guided by pride alone and forcing himself to the brink of sanity, he makes the perfect picture of a mad scientist: evil, selfish, cunning, and above all, ingenious. The monster he created was hardly human, so grotesque that the horror overshadows the accomplishment. Frankenstein’s legacy with his achievement and with his putrid monster, horrifying and ingenious all at once. Truly, a mad scientist.

Madness has many different connotations; above was the story of a scientist whose madness was made of passion and fear, however, as it is found in most dictionaries, madness has a twofold definition: the first refers to “madness” as actions led on by overwhelming and uncontrolled emotion, while the second refers, broadly, to behaviors or a state of mind brought on by mental disorders (“Madness,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary). In the sense of the latter

definition, madness is a highly unscientific term. No one is diagnosed with “madness” anymore because true madness can refer to anything from bipolar disorder to Alzheimer’s disease; as a modern understanding of the brain developed, madness became fairly antiquated as a word and is now replaced in academic contexts by the name of the proper diagnosis. But the first half of the definition, referring to emotional madness, is still common – attributing irrational, unthinking actions to “madness” is much easier than naming a disorder or giving a motive. So in much of storytelling, the word madness is used liberally for the sake of mystique and simplicity, but this comes at a price: people misunderstand madness, fundamentally. They see it as a complete loss of humanity, someone far past the point of no return. Madness carries with it negative connotation, seen some of the first listed as synonyms of the word: insanity, lunacy, and instability (“Synonyms and Antonyms of Madness,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary) – but madness as it is outside of fiction, while something to be wary of, is neither something that strips a person of their humanity nor a force of pure malice.

In the real world, maybe the most common thought of “madness” disorder is schizophrenia, since schizophrenia twists the mind into a disturbed shadow of its former self: an incurable disease marked by unceasing hallucinations, delusions, scattered thoughts, and erratic behavior – uncontrollable and all at once. It’s a hereditary disease, meaning it is passed down through family lines, making some with a family history of it more likely to be touched by the disease than others (Hammer). The way schizophrenia affects the mind, however, is not linear. While most patients only begin showing signs of the disease in the later years of their life, an astronomically unfortunate few experience symptoms before even their teenage years begin, with diagnoses coming as early as highschool. Living with schizophrenia is living inside a crushing nightmare. To have to face that reality at such a young age and bear it for the rest of

their lives is a burden few people are strong enough shoulder. But no one gets a choice; nature will take its course regardless.

Born into the world with a condition she didn't and couldn't know she had, Michelle Hammer was diagnosed with schizophrenia by early high school, though she recalls having hallucinations as early as seven years old: a motorcycle man, riding power lines as she watched from inside a car. As she grew older, the hallucinations intensified both in realism and frequency; she experienced mood swings and constant paranoia on top of that. For someone so young, her life was a spiraling nightmare, a fact she was well aware of. But she refused to seek help, persuaded by the hallucinations themselves that everyone around her was faking their good will and that any attempt to better herself would only worsen and weaken her over time. Michelle became convinced that she was a lesser kind of person, abnormal and not worth the love of others. By sophomore year, she didn't even see herself making it past highschool. Eventually, she did receive the help and treatment she needed. With medication and therapy, though her problems still remain largely the same, she has learned to live with it and work through it – she is not subhuman; her condition doesn't define either her or her humanity. She lives as normal a life as she can, working to spread the message that schizophrenia is not something diabolical, but instead something to be lived with and understood. (Hammer).

Michelle dedicates her life to correcting misinformation on schizophrenia and like disorders because of misrepresentation. One such example is seen in the TV series *Arcane*. In this series, one of the protagonists, Jinx, sets off a bomb as a vain distraction to help save her family. However, the bomb she made was far more powerful than she anticipated, and Jinx ends up with the blood of everyone inside the building on her own hands. The show then skips a few years into the future where Jinx has become irritable and unrecognizable from her former self,

paranoid and hallucination-prone – mad, in other words. The memories of the day she killed her family haunt her continuously; she hears their voices in her head and sees them in crowded streets – these hallucinations and memories wear down Jinx and her character deteriorates, becoming unstable, unpredictable, and volatile (*Arcane*). Jinx, in the series, is depicted in a way that evokes fear. She is not the villain of the show, but still seemingly the most dangerous member of the cast. This is the kind of depiction that does the most damage to outside perception of madness: when it is presented as a force of evil, as something that causes only harm, no room is left for true understanding of the source of madness. In a way, this negative-only portrayal isn't wrong. But it isn't right either, because madness isn't as permanent as it seems. Disorders like Michelle's can be worked through, and trauma like Jinx's can be helped with therapy. Healing, however, does not make a story as entertaining of a story as deterioration does, so often madness is left unexplained and only used to further the terror or the inhumanity of a character.

Misrepresentation is especially common in a second so-called form that madness can take in the real world: obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD. Someone with OCD is very commonly perceived as someone who simply wants order and organization in their lives, but in reality, the way OCD's symptoms manifest in a diagnosed patient are far more severe. To understand OCD fully, start by breaking down the name. A compulsion is an urge to do something that directly contradicts a person's conscious wishes. To obsess over such compulsions is what makes OCD a true disorder and what gives it the essence of madness.

In my interview with Mr. Haders, my art teacher, he mentioned his father who suffered from OCD. As a kid, Mr. Haders didn't understand his father's disorder because no one in his family explained it to him; he only learned after he had moved away what his father's life was

like. One of his father's "rituals," as he had called the compulsions, was only taking a certain number of steps between his car and the front door when he got home after work. If he took one too many steps or deviated from the correct path, he would have to restart back at his car door – again and again, forcing himself against his will until it was done correctly. My teacher's mom always told him, when he asked, that his father had probably just forgotten something in the car. He knew this couldn't be right, but because it was never explained, he gradually learned to ignore the strangeness. As he got older and learned on his own what exactly was wrong with his father, he realized how much suffering was going on beneath the surface that both his father and mother worked to hide. He realized that his father didn't get drunk almost every night by choice, he learned that it was a part of his disorder. He learned that his condition wasn't recognized at his workplace, which meant a near-constant suffering he was forced to endure silently.

The kind of chokehold that OCD held over the life of Mr. Haders' father is reminiscent of madness. The way he would force himself, (or rather, was forced), to do things over and over until they were utterly perfect or to live his life in involuntary repetition; his behaviors, in this way, lend themselves to the "uncontrollable emotions and actions" side of madness's definition, and, as indicated by the name, OCD is a mental disorder. It could be a paradigm of madness, fitting squarely into both aspects of the definition. Yet calling someone with OCD "mad" because of something utterly outside of their control is wrong. It puts a label on them, unfairly singling out a trait of theirs to be judged – a misunderstood trait with an established negative connotation to its name – before all else. It is inappropriate to call someone with OCD mad, but erratic behavior makes this label easy to apply to patients of the disorder, only furthering the misunderstanding of a medical condition.

Madeline Miller's *Song of Achilles* contrasts the negative view of madness seen thus far. Instead, it presents a different kind of misrepresentation: madness in a beautiful, romanticized way. The book is a modern retelling of the ancient Greek myth of Achilles: Achilles, born a demigod and son of a powerful king, is prophesied to be the greatest warrior of his generation. As he is falling in love with an outcast prince, Patroclus, a war breaks out in Troy. Achilles is forced to command his father's army in Troy, and his lover follows him to battle. But as the war stretches on for years, Achilles gives up on fighting. The tide of the war shifts from stalemate to loss, in a last ditch effort to get Achilles fighting once more, Patroclus puts on Achilles' armor and takes command of the army. But in the frenzy of the battle, Patroclus is killed. Upon hearing the news of the loss, Achilles' grief drives him into a state of madness: he keeps Patroclus's dead body in his tent, sleeping next to it and letting no one touch it, he kills his lover's murderer and drags the body around the city of Troy as if it were a spoil of war (Miller). His acts are sickening, but he is still seen as a hero. A hero of the war, and a hero of love: his grief turned to madness which turned to triumph. It is a tragically beautiful story, but still only a story. To let madness be accepted so simply is still misrepresentation. Madness should not be seen as a force of evil, it has been established, but it should not be seen as a force of good, either. It should not be feared, but neither should it be revered. Personal acceptance of madness is an important part of healing in the real world, but seeing madness portrayed positively may lead to premature acceptance – before treatment is received, simply seen as normalcy, can lead to great harm, not, as it is in the book, valor.

Healing is a journey that takes years, maybe even a lifetime. My aunt, Lisa Hemmer, is a practicing clinical therapist. She knows her clients like she knows her own kids, she told me, and she knows their disorders and emotional state just as well. When I asked, she told me that

never once in her career had she seen someone she thought of as mad: “When you see madness, you are seeing the shell of a person, not the true self.” According to her, a disease or disorder is not what defines a person and should never be. There is so much more to a person, and seeing someone as “mad” only because of what is visible and easily labeled is an extremely shallow and harmful kind of stereotyping. But as a therapist, she can’t help but to emphasize the importance of therapy: madness is neither good nor bad. It is simply a part of a person, but left unchecked it will lead to harm, of the afflicted or to those around them. To misconceive madness as inherently one or the other is stereotyping, a dangerous and too-common practice.

One person working to fight these stereotypes of madness is retired singer and performer Maureen McGovern. In 2018, at the age of 68, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Though she continued her performances until early 2020, the effects were visible to her and her team long before then. Most notably, she began to forget lyrics she had practiced thousands of times, eventually requiring a notebook during practices and performances. Despite the setbacks many might see as humiliating, she persevered. And when she announced her retirement, though it was emotional, it was far from sad or resentful. She admitted that at first, she was paralyzed with hopelessness and fear. But gradually she learned to live with it and became revitalized, living with a new sense of purpose. Shirtz, her accompanist, recalls the conversation he first had with her after the diagnosis: “There was a conversation and an excitement about, ‘Okay, so we can’t do this, but here’s what we’re going to do, and let’s figure it out.’ That just comes from her spirit.” (Kruh). The way McGovern responded to her situation is truly admirable and brave. She wanted to push her limits and keep on living until the very end; she accepted her situation as a new opportunity, not an ending. She received the help and support she needed, and continued living happily. She is a model of the way madness should be

handled: not with fear, anguish, or denial, but with acceptance. And for as much good as McGovern has done through awareness campaigns, acceptance of madness is still a new way to view it while fear of it runs thousands of years back.

The Bible, a foundational text for all of human civilization, claims that madness is the default for human behavior. Ecclesiastes 9:3 reads, “the same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead” (*Holy Bible*). To those practicing religion, this verse would support their belief in a god, as that god would be a guiding light for their chaos-driven souls. This notion gives the verse importance, but it also gains notoriety with the statement that madness is equivalent to evil, and thus antagonizing it. The harm these words can do is amplified by the context of religion: being mad, if equivalent to being filled with evil, can be seen as a form of possession. To potentially see a human person afflicted with a disorder, someone different yet still equal to all others – with the same soul as all others – as possessed by a demon, can cause irreparable damage, both to an individual and to all with a madness condition. The Bible, failing here to demonstrate an important difference, stigmatizes and jeopardizes the safety of innocent groups.

Maybe the worst offender of the fictitious portrayal of madness is seen in Greek myths, building on the religious theme. There are many myths that deal with madness as punishment, take Oedipus or Tantalus. Asclepius is another example of madness as a form of punishment, though his myth is lesser known. Eventually god of medicine, Asclepius was born mortal. During his time as a physician, he at one point healed an injured snake, and this snake, according to the myth, in return told Asclepius the secret to bringing back the dead. Armed with this knowledge, Asclepius began to resurrect his family. Hades, god of the Underworld, noticed



immediately. He at first sent a messenger to warn Asclepius of the consequences of his actions, and when that was ignored, Hades himself came to offer a final warning. Asclepius, though thoroughly scared, could not resist bringing back the dead. In his town, he was praised for his work. He was seen as a god amongst men, as he almost was. He weighed the praise of his peers against the threats of the gods, and decided to continue his work (“Asclepius”).

This act can be seen nobly; he was bringing the dead back to life, after all. But it is also an act of madness – he chose praise from his people over his own life, and he should have paid for it with his life, though he was ultimately spared and made immortal for unrelated reasons. This myth presents Asclepius in a heroic fashion; as it is an origin story for a god, it has to, but also for another reason: Asclepius never saw himself as mad. He felt his decisions were perfectly rational, he felt in control. But this was a lie, as he was guided by greed. And still he was immortalized, placed on a pedestal to be honored. Madness was being accepted, normalized and viewed in a positive light in a way it should never be.

Fiction so far presents two paths to present madness in: a terrifying nightmare or a beautiful emotion, though both stemming from people that stand alone and both cause harm in separate but noticeable ways. A rare balance between the realistic portrayal of madness and a lack of true experience, however, can be found throughout the Caretaker’s six-stage symphony, *Everywhere at the End of Time*. Through each of the stages, the Caretaker moves the listener through the excruciating experience of dementia. The first stage sounds nostalgic, happy memories being replayed. But, gradually, the sound becomes distorted, corrupted, and broken, mirroring the effects of dementia on the mind. This symphony gathered millions of listeners, the Caretaker’s ambition and ingenious is present throughout each stage. It brought a lot of positive attention to dementia as a disorder, almost as a way for the listener to immerse themselves into the

mind of someone with dementia, to experience the heartbreaking disease vicariously. The way the symphony walks so slowly through each stage helps break down the misconception of patients losing their humanity. It is clear through the reappearing sounds that a patient is left with only their humanity, that madness isn't overwhelming, but being fought constantly. It is a struggle of the human spirit, not a loss of it.

It is only in recent times that madness has begun to find its way out of the realm of fears and into the light of normality. But as it is historically seen as a greatly negative concept, madness, for now, remains a fear to most people. Largely due to misrepresentation and misinterpretation, but still, that fear is more commonly known than what is true. So for every source working to turn these precognitions on their heads, there are many, many more agreeing with an outdated view of madness. It seems a futile effort to flip the meaning, but as with all things, the facts of a situation will prevail over the opinions. But that will take time, likely decades. So in the meantime, there are other ways to sway a view of madness: perhaps the definition will change its meaning to something completely different. Sixteenth century author Miguel de Cervantes observed "too much sanity may be madness, and the maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be." Pure rationality, he says, is madness. No creativity, no wonder, is madness. This quote provides an alternate interpretation of madness, so perhaps while madness is still being misrepresented in fictitious media, it is best not to pay attention to every small gain or loss. It is more important to hope in the future, to believe in a life that should be, where madness is both accepted and perceived properly, neither feared nor worshiped.

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