



Explore how the authors of “The Bell Jar” and “King Lear” present the theme of madness

Phoebe Allen

Aston University, Birmingham

allenphoebe716@gmail.com

Received: 30 Jul 2024; Received in revised form: 31 Aug 2024; Accepted: 05 Sep 2024; Available online: 10 Sep 2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The following paper will explore the literary and subsequent social significance of madness in literature, notably “The Bell Jar” and “King Lear” since their authors have both similarities and differences in their approaches and contexts surrounding this theme. This paper attempts to explore the how, what and why when it comes to both authors’ approaches to the theme of madness, delving into debates such as the power of social construction in literary media, and addressing timeless social disputes such as gender and age inequality. Ultimately this paper not only explores how the authors of “The Bell Jar” and “King Lear” present the theme of madness, but why, it’s still important to understand*



Keywords— *Lexis, Social construction, Madness in literature, The Bell Jar, King Lear.*

INTRODUCTION

Madness is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a “serious mental illness” or “a state of wild and chaotic activity.” (Editors, 2004).[1] Madness is a prominent literary theme as it can easily be related to the audience’s and author’s personal lives. In ‘Narrative Threads of Madness’ Bernaerts, supports this by stating. “Madness is therefore always connected with considerations of artistic and literary production.” (Bernaerts,2009)[2] The authors of ‘The Bell Jar’ and ‘King Lear’ present the theme of madness primarily through their protagonists, Lear and Esther; supported by minor characters. Themes such as vulnerability illusion, age, and relationships highlight the impact of madness not only in the texts, but in wider society. As these texts were written in different genres and forms the execution of these themes, characters, and techniques do vary. as does the way the audience interpret them, which changes over time. Regardless of literary and contextual differences both Plath and Shakespeare present the theme of madness with the intention of warning society against mistreating the vulnerable and ultimately becoming a vehicle for madness themselves.

[1] Editors, O. (2004) *The oxford english dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[2] Bernaerts, L., Herman, L., & Vervaeck, B. (2009). Narrative Threads of Madness. *Style*, 43(3), 283–290. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.43.3.283>

Both authors present madness as the rawest form of human vulnerability. Lear is a classic tragic hero, beginning the play as a powerful ruler. Lear’s high status is vital to the classical tragic hero according to Poetics, (Aristotle,1917).[1] as his downfall is more dramatic. Shakespeare amplifies Lear’s mental vulnerability through The Fool, Lear’s only companion for much of his madness, (in itself depicting the extent of Lear’s mental decline.) The Fool acknowledges the madness in dividing the kingdom among his daughters, in Act 1 Scene 4. This is ironic since fools were seen as uneducated entertainers. Regardless he speaks more rationally than the educated and currently eloquent Lear, subverting from the Great Chain of Being. The Fool uses his “coxcomb” to represent Lear’s kingdom. Comparing the crown to a coxcomb is likely a comical insult to the King, providing satire to those who disliked King James I, specifically his merging of Scotland and

England. From a more contemporary Marxist perspective, Shakespeare could be attempting to highlight the out-of-touch bourgeoisie in contrast to the intelligent but exploited proletariat. "If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There mine; beg another of thy daughters." The Fool is pointing out that Lear gave all his power to Regan and Goneril and must now "beg another of thy daughters" and live under them. This idea isn't natural within the context of Jacobean England, since a man should have ownership of both his land and daughters. As the play and Lear's madness progresses, Lear increasingly appreciates The Fool's insight and support. Upon the news of his death in Act 5 Scene 3, Lear is devastated. "My poor fool hanged! No, no, no life!" The exclamation marks show the extent of his emotion, and the repetition of "no" shows his disbelief towards this cruel reality. Thus, Goldsmith's claim that The Fool "is Lear's alter ego, his externalised consciousness" fails to acknowledge The Fool's autonomy and motivations. Marxist critic Halvorson recognises this, stating "The profound wisdom and insight of Lear's fool enables him to expose the foolish thoughts and deeds of those who inhabit the higher ranks of society." (Halvorson, 2016).[2] Perhaps Shakespeare in nodding to the intellectual empowerment of the laypeople, who far outnumber the foolish wealthy.

Plath also presents madness as the rawest form of human vulnerability, through displaying its profound impact on life. The novel opens with Esther pondering the Rosenberg executions, which the reader may dismiss as an illogical fixation. However, "being burned alive all along your nerves" foreshadows her later electroshock therapy. Through hindsight the reader reflects on their own dismissal of Esther's mental struggles once they later come to fruition. This is strategically placed at the novel's opening implying that Esther has been fighting madness before the events of the novel, despite her functioning well externally. Yoko Sakane states "The Bell Jar is an autobiographical novel in which Plath projects herself in the female protagonist, Esther." (Sakane, 1998).[3] Plath originally published the novel under the pseudonym 'Victoria Lucas' as she didn't want her mother to be offended by the presentation of Esthers mother. When asked why she used a pen name she replied, "My mother is based on my mother." (Scott, 2023).[4] Moreover, Plath likely wrote 'The Bell Jar' to display madness in its rawest light and to have her own feelings be understood.

Contrastingly, Shakespeare presents madness as the rawest form of human vulnerability through Lear's realisation of his wrongdoings. Lear has an opportunity for redemption through the audience's sympathy towards a fragile elderly man. Lear's dismissal stems from his selfish nature, which diminishes in his maddened state. This is displayed in Act 3

Scene 4 when Lear sees the poverty in his kingdom, chastising himself while proclaiming: "O! I have ta'en Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp; Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel". "I" signposts Lear admitting his wrongdoing; however, he seems to be asking somebody else to implement these changes, perhaps realising he cannot improve alone. Shakespeare is possibly pleading for the support of society against madness. This is a vital aspect of Lear's overall peripeteia as he now sees the detrimental effects of his selfish extravagance and the error of his ways. In the throws of madness Lear is seeing clearly for arguably the first time, with Shakespeare using what society has labelled insanity as a path to reason and redemption. While Cordelia doesn't benefit from her father's madness feminists may argue it leads her gaining independence and power, while she is further empowered by her husband as respects her autonomy. Though ultimately Cordelia's unjust death is caused by her wicked (but sane sisters) not her father's insanity. Lear is given a final torment when he hallucinates Cordelia's lips moving after her hanging in the closing scene. "Look on her, look, her lips, look here, look here!" The repetition of "Look here" shows Lear's desperation to be seen and understood within his maddened state. Alternatively, he could be subconsciously seeking for his delusion to be humoured. After this claim he dies, with Shakespeare reinforcing the idea that death and illusion are merciful, since they act as protection from the harsh realities of life.

Nakedness is significant motif symbolising the vulnerability of madness in both texts. Concerning 'King Lear' Lennard notes the storm of Act 3 Scene 2. Specifically, Laurence Olivier's portrayal of Lear in 1983 in which he strips down to his underwear. "He was an old man, [...] and seeing that old man out in the storm affects you emotionally." (Lennard, 2018).[5] Lear's nudity in the storm depicts the vulnerable state his mental decline has led to, creating sympathy from the audience. The negative connotations nudity and mental suffering remain present in 'The Bell Jar'. Notably in chapters 19-20 when Esther experiences an almost fatal haemorrhage after losing her virginity, and in Chapter 9 when Marco attempts to rape her. Both events rapidly increase Esther's mental decline as she, along with mid-20th Century America, has a fixation on purity. "Purity was the great issue [...] I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line." Esther's "spectacular change" largely takes place after these instances of nudity, her descent into madness. "I crossed the boundary line" implies Esther is to blame for her loss of purity, though it's the men who have "crossed the line". A feminist may interpret Plath presents madness as a result of the patriarchy's sexual double standard. Thus, Plath depicts the painful transition into

womanhood that she and her female readers can relate to. Perhaps it's inclusion is an attempt to temper the sexual taboo both of her time and now, with the intention of making women feel less alone. Unlike Shakespeare, Plath utilises nudity to propose that it is a woman's sexual vulnerability that contributes to or even drives madness.

Both authors present the theme of madness through illusion. When Gloucester attempts to commit suicide in Act 4 Scene 6. Gloucester, who is now blind, is led by his son Edgar who first appears naked in Act 4 Scene 1, and while his father cannot see this assures the audience of his honest intention: hiding nothing from them. In 'King Lear' The naked "Poor Tom" is dismissed. Gloucester states "Tis the time's plague when the madmen lead the blind." Though he later relies on Poor Tom. Lear, while consumed with madness repeatedly calls this madman "philosopher." Lear now sees people's true nature, reinstating the interpretation that Shakespeare presents madness as seeing clearly. Notably, it's through the traumatising event of having his eyes gorged out in Act 3 Scene 2, that Gloucester sees the true nature of his treacherous son Edmund. In Act 4 Scene 6 Edgar claims the small ledge he brings his father to is a cliff. When Gloucester questions the flatness of the ground, Edgar replies "You're much deceived" which is true in a literal context as Edgar purposely manipulates him. The ease of Edgers manipulation emphasises the power of illusion once your perception relies on your mind, and how it can completely override reality. This is proven when Gloucester jumps and believes Poor Tom when he is told; "the clearest gods [...] have preserved thee." This reinstates Gloucester's faith in the God that he'd previously lost. According to 17th Century bibles suicide is a deadly sin. Therefore, Shakespeare's use of divine intervention against this sin would have a cathartic effect on the audience, implying that their lives have purpose as God saves the worthy from an untimely death.

Similarly, Plath displays illusion through suicide attempts. In chapters 13 and 14 also display the conflict between the mind's perception of the world and that of reality. This is more specifically depicted through her body going against her mind. For example, when she tries to strangle herself and always loses grip at the vital moment. Or when she attempts to drown herself at sea, but her body always floats to the surface. This forms a metaphor of Esther fighting for her life as her mind takes over, which is contextually impactful considering Plath being suicidal herself and taking her own life two weeks after the novel publication. Giving the fictional novel a cold reality that is driven home to contemporary readers. Esther also finds solace when her mental instability removes her from mainstream society.

She is released from society's "bell jar" and housed with women who act "just the way they would in a college dormitory," which implies the women are carefree and released from society's pressures. Perhaps Plath is further warning of society's expectations for certain groups, as Esther is pleasantly surprised by the normality of the patients in the institution. This also (like the high status of King Lear) reminds the reader that madness spares no one. Notably, both authors utilise multiple characters to experience some level of madness, to show its presence in society. Moreover, both authors present the theme of madness through the primary theme of illusion.

Both authors present the theme of madness as a societal warning and social construct. Both King Lear and Esther are vulnerable due to their age, Esther as she is young, impressionable and rarely taken seriously. When Esther voices her concern to Marco, his blunt reply is "Don't be stupid," her feeling are seen as stupid and so she is stupid by default. Words within the semantic field of madness are attached to Esther very loosely the minute she doesn't conform to female standards. When she refuses Buddy's proposal he proclaims "You're crazy. You'll change your mind." This flippancy highlights how quick society is to label people as mad the minute they don't conform to societies norms. As a result, the reader is confronted with the social construction of madness, driven by men such as trainee doctor Buddy telling Esther is a "psychosomatic" when she tells him her sinuses are blocked. This is consolidated by Esther's increasing delusions once she believes she's unstable. For example, in chapter 10 after the failed proposal Esther states "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell." Referencing her personal desires and marriage as "two mutually exclusive things" displayed how at odds Esther is with societies expectations. She's now internalising, and accepting societies view of her. Plath acknowledges the social construction of madness through Esther's mother; "I knew my baby wasn't like that...I knew you'd decide to be all right again." The repetition of "I knew" ironically conveys society's lack of understanding towards mental illness, and it's only due to society's ignorance that the concept of "madness" exists. This could also be acknowledging the difficult choice of believing people's perception of you, and enquiring to the reader if this is a choice at all. "I shut my eyes, and all the world drops dead, I lift my eyes, and all is born again." The personification of "the world drops dead" implies that she wants the world, or rather the people in it to leave her alone. The continuation of the sentence through to "I lift my eyes, and all is born again" displays the everlasting exhaustion Esther is experiencing hiding her madness from society. This line was taken from a previous poem of Plath's 'Mad

Girls's Love Song' which Plath possibly chose as it depicts a longing for isolation amidst mental illness.

While Lear is elderly, he like Esther is impressionable and not taken seriously after the loss of his power and sanity. It could be argued that both are a result of his age. The Fool tells Lear "Thou shouldst not have been old til thou had been wise" in Act 1, Scene 5. "til thou had been wise" implies that Lear has never been wise and connotes to the idea of people's mental state worsening with age. Simon Russell Beale, who played King Lear in the 2015 adaptation claimed he played the role of someone who has "dementia" (Russell Beal)[6] which would explain Lear's fragmented prose. Therefore, it could be argued that Shakespeare's presentation of madness is a display of how any mental decline would have been seen in Jacobean England.

Like Esther, Lear is made to distrust his sanity. However, Lear forcefully confronts Regan and Goneril, a confidence the misogynistic 1960s has left Esther lacking in. Lear pleads; "daughter, do not make me mad." Implying that madness is a result of external factors. Shakespeare possibly blaming those who refuse to help vulnerable people, (especially families) as the vehicle of madness, and that madness is a state that society drives people to. Evidently, Lear isn't completely mad as he notices the manipulation and pressure around him. However, his descent into madness continues, so convinced of it but he pleads with himself; "O! let me not be mad, not mad." Lear's repetition of "not" and "mad" throughout the play convey that he still sees himself as sane. Thus, Shakespeare raises the question, is madness defined by those who experience it, or those who witness it. Both texts protagonists become increasingly unstable the more they view themselves this way. It's for this reason that King Lear and The Bell Jar easily classify at a morality play and novel. The young members of society are told to protect their vulnerable and elderly, in the same way parents are told to be present for their children.

Unlike Lear, Esther is constantly reminded that she is an inferior through her mother, who unlike Lear fails to recognise her parental misjudgement, sending her an article titled; "In Defence of Chastity". Esther is unable to accept the unfair sexual double standard for men. Some contemporary readers may find this outdated however it will resonate with many. Plath may be insinuating that the poor actions made by Esther's mother, are much more societal flaws than her own. Moreover, through highlighting society's role in the construction and implementation of madness both authors present the theme of madness as a social construct. As a novel 'The Bell Jar' can rely on the reader's imagination. The first-person narrative in The Bell Jar gives the reader access to Esther's internal dialogue. As Esther descends into madness the dialogue from other

characters becomes increasingly infrequent, depicting her isolation from the wider world and inability to live outside the troubles of her mind.

Shakespeare presents madness by altering the delivery of Lear's dialogue. At first, Lear speaks in iambic pentameter, the consistent meter aligning with his power and control. This eloquence decreases as his madness progresses, speaking in simple prose for majority of the play. Upon Cordelia's death in the final scene Lear's opening dialogue is "Howl, howl, howl!" This exclamation depicts Lear as having been reduced to an animalistic scavenger, with innocent prey in his arms killed as a result of his failings. O'Toole states that this injustice is "the whole point of the play's structure." (O'Toole, 2020).[7] Therefore, Shakespeare not only creates a tragic hero, but conveys that madness spares no man. Moreover, the authors of 'The Bell Jar' and 'King Lear' present the theme of madness as a social construct and societal warning. This is achieved through exploring gender division, ageing and relationships, which their strategic structure enhances.

[1] A. (1917). *The Poetics of Aristotle*. United Kingdom: Macmillan.

[2] Halvorson, C.Y. (2016) *Shakespeare's fools*, OUPblog. Available at: <https://blog.oup.com/2013/04/april-fools-day-shakespeare/>

[3] Sakane, Y. (1998). The Mother, the Self, and the Other: The Search for Identity in Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" and Takahashi Takako's "Congruent Figure." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, 14, 27-48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772124>

[4] Scott, I. (2023) *Sylvia Plath's 'The bell jar' was originally published under a pen name*, National Library of Scotland Blog.

[5] Lennard, J. (2018) 4. the role of lear, MASSOLIT. Available at: <https://www.massolit.io/courses/shakespeare-king-lear/the-role-of-lear> (Accessed: 10 December 2023).

[6] Russell Beale, S. (2015) *King lear: The language of madness*, YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFA5aLjTwZs> (Accessed: 05 April 2024).

[7] O'Toole, F. (2020) *Behind 'king lear': The history revealed: Fintan O'Toole*, *The New York Review of Books*. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/19/behind-king-lear-history-revealed/> (Accessed: 05 April 2024).

CONCLUSION

Furthermore, the authors of 'The Bell Jar' and 'King Lear' present the theme of madness both primarily through the protagonists, Lear and Esther. Themes such as illusion, age,

relationships and redemption highlight the prevalence of madness not only in the texts, but in wider society. Both Plath and Shakespeare present madness with the intention of warning society against mistreating the vulnerable and ultimately becoming a vehicle for madness themselves. As these texts were written in different forms the execution of these themes, characters, and techniques do vary; as does the way the reader or audience will interpret them, which changes over time. Regardless of their differences both Plath and Shakespeare present madness with the intention of warning society against mistreating the vulnerable and ultimately becoming a vehicle for madness themselves.

REFERENCES

- [1] (1917). *The Poetics of Aristotle*. United Kingdom: Macmillan.
- [2] BBC (2023) Shakespeare: Rise of a genius - series 1: Episode 3, BBC iPlayer. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0gjl3v3/shakespeare-rise-of-a-genius-series-1-episode-3> (Accessed: 10 December 2023).
- [3] Bennett, J. W. (1962). The Storm Within: the Madness of Lear. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 13(2), 137–155. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2866783>
- [4] Bernaerts, L., Herman, L., & Vervaeck, B. (2009). Narrative Threads of Madness. *Style*, 43(3), 283–290. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.43.3.283>
- [5] Cusack, C. M. (2018). Self-Murder, Sin, and Crime: Religion and Suicide in the Middle Ages. *Journal of Religion and Violence*, 6(2), 206–224. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26671571>
- [6] Driscoll, James P. *Identity in Shakespearean Drama*, Bucknell UP, 1983.
- [7] Editors, O. (2004) *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8] HARKINS, M. (2018). The Politics of Old Age in Shakespeare's King Lear. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 1–28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90026340>
- [9] Halvorson, C.Y. (2016) *Shakespeare's fools*, OUPblog. Available at: <https://blog.oup.com/2013/04/april-fools-day-shakespeare/> (Accessed: 05 April 2024).
- [10] Historical Context for King Lear by William Shakespeare | The Core Curriculum (columbia.edu)
- [11] Holland-Batt, S. (2022) Sylvania Plath, the Bell Jar, 1963, Faculty of Arts. Available at: <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/engage/community-education/melbourne-masterclass-10-great-books/sylvia-plath,-the-bell-jar,-1963> (Accessed: 06 December 2023).
- [12] Jorgensen, Paul A. *Lear's Self-Discovery*. University of California Press, 1967.
- [13] King Lear: The Attack on Fatherhood and the Destruction of Hierarchy - Mitchell Kalpakgian - Catholic Social Science Review (Philosophy Documentation Center) (pdcnet.org)
- [14] Kott, J. (1966). *Shakespeare our contemporary*. United Kingdom: Norton
- [15] Lennard, J. (2018) 4. the role of lear, MASSOLIT. Available at: <https://www.massolit.io/courses/shakespeare-king-lear/the-role-of-lear> (Accessed: 10 December 2023).
- [16] O'Toole, F. (2020) *Behind 'king lear': The history revealed: Fintan O'Toole, The New York Review of Books*. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/19/behind-king-lear-history-revealed/> (Accessed: 05 April 2024).
- [17] Otilingam S. (2007). The psychiatry of King Lear. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 49(1), 52–55. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.31519>
- [18] Rebecca Schuster (Author), 2005, *Madness and the absent father - Analysis of Esther's mental illness in 'The Bell Jar'*, Munich, GRIN Verlag, <https://www.grin.com/document/53182>
- [19] Russell Beale, S. (2015) *King lear: The language of madness*, YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFA5aLjTwZs> (Accessed: 05 April 2024).
- [20] Sakane, Y. (1998). The Mother, the Self, and the Other: The Search for Identity in Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" and Takahashi Takako's "Congruent Figure." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, 14, 27–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772124>
- [21] Scott, I. (2023) Sylvania Plath's 'The bell jar' was originally published under a pen name, National Library of Scotland Blog. Available at: <https://blog.nls.uk/sylvia-plaths-the-bell-jar-was-originally-published-under-a-pen-name/#:~:text=Plath%20assured%20them%20that%20the,is%20based%20on%20my%20mother.> (Accessed: 10 December 2023).
- [22] Shakespeare in lockdown: did he write King Lear in plague quarantine? | Theatre | The Guardian
- [23] Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Edited by Jay L. Halio, Cambridge UP, 1992.
- [24] Stephanie de Villiers (2019) *Metaphors of Madness: Sylvia Plath's Rejection of Patriarchal Language in The Bell Jar*, *English Studies in Africa*, 62:2, 1-11, DOI: 10.1080/00138398.2019.1685200
- [25] Plath, S. (1953) *Mad girl's Love song*. Mademoiselle.
- [26] *The Bell Jar: Sylvia Plath's Descent Into Madness* (curiosityshots.com)
- [27] The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, & Katherine Eisaman Maus
- [28] *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Dobson & Stanley Wells
- [29] Wasserman, J. (1976). "And Every One Have Need of Other": Bond and Relationship in "King Lear." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 9(2), 15–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24777071A>. (1917). *The Poetics of Aristotle*. United Kingdom: Macmillan.
- [30] Toronto Student (2018) *A New Perspective on an Old Classic: The Language of Aging In Shakespeare's "King Lear" – Aging and the Arts* (utoronto.ca)