

The Unrelenting Vision of the Unwell in Literature

I initially had three different ideas for this essay before I settled on the one that started writing itself immediately. By the way, that's usually when you've found the right topic. My first idea was to explore the relationship between anxiety and artists; to look at how anxiety manifests itself in the art and then look at how it possibly acted as a jump start to and/or hindrance to the creative process. My next idea was going to build off of Foucault's notion of the ship of fools and explore the differentiation between madness and insanity. However the idea that I eventually settled on was probably the least clear cut. It was perhaps through this desire to pin down what exactly I was trying to say that I realized I had my strongest concept for exploration. I wanted to look at art where insanity or psychosis wasn't the focus but the excuse. I was interested in works where the mental illness of a character acted more as a rhetorical device rather than becoming the central theme or focus of what was being examined, where this break from reality ends up gesturing towards a bigger issue within our collective or societal psyche. Although scattered at first, the more I thought about it, the sharper my thesis was coming into focus. I would explore art that uses psychosis or a perceived mental break from reality as a plot device to reveal the larger theme of the work.

Unlike Ken Kesey's One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest where the central crux of the book becomes to force the reader to question our notions of sanity and those who decide who is and isn't sane, this essay is interested in authors and texts where sanity is not the central question, but rather a signal towards the larger theme of the text.

In this essay I will focus on literature. I will continue to follow this thesis as long as I can, which is to say I will compose another essay regarding examples of this in film and possibly other mediums. However, here, I explore J.D. Salinger's seminal text; Catcher in the Rye, whose moody protagonist's break from reality becomes evident in the final pages, which in hindsight becomes a lens to view the entire book and exposes a United States of Hypocrisy, a Nation of Phonies, void of substance and meaning. I also explore J.G. Ballard's disturbingly prophetic Atrocity Exhibition, in which our narrator's mental break acts as a mirror held up to America, exposing a media-saturated nation that's deep-seeded obsession with sex and violence was starting to float to the surface through racy news headlines and repeated images of violence proliferated through a newly-polished TV-news cycle. And lastly I examine Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground, where our unnamed antihero offers an interesting perspective on modernity from the consumptive view of his bedroom window. It is through his sickness of the mind that we see a modern society so void of Absolute Truth that the intellectually enlightened are rendered immobile.

To begin, even I acknowledge that as time passes it becomes easier and easier to become dismissive of Holden Caulfield. And while I certainly understand this sentiment, I would argue that it is perhaps a dangerous one. While he certainly has a penchant for the melodramatic, it is within this teen angst that we hear something about our older, softer bodies that perhaps we don't like. In the book's final pages certain things come into clearer view for the reader. It becomes evident that Caulfield is not well, that we have been relayed events from a narrator of questionable reliability. His sickness, however, becomes the lens through which we see the whole book, but it does not become its overall theme. Rather, it is from the vantage point of this sick boy that we learn the bigger message Salinger is trying to convey. Holden's preoccupation with the "phoniness" in his classmates and surrounding world dominates his thinking. The book is a quest for a sincere soul in a world of hypocrites and liars, of fakers and conmen. Caulfield is betrayed at every turn and that is, in fact, the point. For he has to be betrayed because if he ever found his genuine soul, his vulnerable prostitute, the sincere former teacher, well, then the whole book would have meant something much different. Caulfield had to always want to be the Catcher in the Rye, although we the reader always knew he never would be. The secret brilliance of this book is that Holden will never grow up, he will forever be a moody teenager, and a distilled model of what I would argue is our purer, more earnest selves. Holden's sincerity drives him to his breaking point, for you can't keep both your sanity and your youth in Salinger's America.

From Caulfield's vantage point we see a portrait of America that, over sixty years later, is still accurate and relevant by exploring our weakened cornerstones and hollow dreams, the ones that Fitzgerald wrote about thirty years prior and that DeLillo would explore thirty years later; these American values that are both inescapable and unobtainable. Caulfield exposes America, and frankly, American capitalism, as a phony and hypocritical model of living, one that only breeds unhappiness and more importantly, untruthfulness. To Holden, the world's greatest betrayal is perhaps its lack of sincerity. To some, Caulfield's alienation becomes the focal point of the text and the book itself becomes a testament to alienation in youth, but the reality is his separation from society is simply a narrative tool used to show us something bigger about being Americans, about our frayed edges and the cracks in our marble; it becomes a means to show us the fallacy of our tragic and phony American Dream.

Moving on, Atrocity Exhibition, J.G. Ballard's 1970 novel-as-collage is disturbing in both form and content, in both the portrait of its own anarchic time as well as a deeply prophetic gaze into the future. Ballard, who in his own words looks a mere five minutes into the future, describes a flattened virtual landscape, one where a woman's curves mirror urban architecture of sky scrapers or office buildings or luxury lofts, where downhill races are viewed from the same vantage point as the assassination of a President of the United States. It's not so much that anything is possible in Ballard's America as it is a world where everything is of equal value; a statement reflected in our contemporary internet 2.0 world where one can view a mass school

shooting, an ISIS beheading and basketball highlights all on the same Twitter feed. Ballard's protagonist is an unwell doctor, and the texts of *Atrocity Exhibition* are to be read as disembodied articles from a scholarly scientific journal, (Ballard tells us that they are not necessarily meant to be read in any particular order) all the raving hallucinatory observations of an unwell M.D. who looks out his window and sees surgery in parking garages, the violence in geometry. Our narrator, however, is simply playing back a more intense version of the American media model that is already in place and, in some ways, is playing out the joke to its logical conclusion. He is picking up on the Freudian undertones that are already in place and displaying them in on neon billboards for us all to see as we speed by on our superhighways.

Ballard chooses not to explore the consequences of nor the reasons for our narrators' unsound nature, but rather uses it as a springboard, a mirror to show what Americans were not ready for then and are surely even less likely to want to accept now, no matter how true it remains. A nation built on violence and sexual puritanism, repressing its lesser natures can, with the aid of a well-oiled television news cycle, play back its most depraved and subversive fantasies unto itself in an endless feedback loop. Ballard's work often explores a world so scrubbed clean with the pleasures and luxuries of the modern world, characters so sanitized by the contemporary condition that their primal or baser natures explode out in hyper violent or sexual ways due to the repression. The America explored and reflected back to us in *Atrocity Exhibition* is an America that has been so sanitized that the explosion of violence and sex in the sixties were inevitable. JFK's assassination footage was shown ad nauseam and next to commercials for shampoo and beer and canned corn so his death was already trivialized, it was already stripped of its humanity by the media and Ballard's text only works to highlight that. The final irony is that the text was banned in the U.S. for years because of its lewd and violent nature which, in my mind, further proves and strengthens Ballard's initial thesis about America in the first place.

"I am a sick man, I am a spiteful man."

I would argue few books written in the last fifty years have the courage to level such a hefty first sentence, let alone one written in 1864. *Notes from Underground*, Dostoyevsky's most succinct narrative, feels like a shot of adrenaline when read in the 21st century. Dostoyevsky is already a prophetic writer of sorts, predating the Modernist movement in many ways with an keen attention to the subconscious, explorations of nihilism and what would become existentialist themes, and texts containing brooding anti-heroes. The unnamed narrator of *Notes from Underground* tells us from the start he is not well. There is no inferring his break from reality, it is omnipresent. He broods from his bedroom at the outside world. In this way he is not unlike *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle, for our *Underground* man also gazes from his apartment at a filthy world and looks at the sky, wondering when a rain will come and wash it all away.

However, our unnamed anti-hero is not as you may expect a brutish philistine, but rather a college educated, quasi-intellectual of sorts. It is precisely this education, his knowledge, which has rendered him full of rage. However, unlike Travis Bickle, our unnamed narrator suffers from a Hamlet complex, his sensitivity to the world and knowledge of its corruption and all its fallacies has rendered him immobile. In this way, his illness, which is most certainly of the mind, shows us the complexities of our modern condition; it is not necessarily a lament for simpler times when uniformed morality stood at attention, but rather a call to attention that these times have come and gone. The Underground man postulates a response from every angle, he muses on every point of view now that the moral imperative has vanished. In this way, Dostoyevsky and his Underground man were looking at what has only become increasingly more obvious in the digital age.

In some terse and cursory attempt at concluding this sprawling and loosely affiliated collection of thoughts one might call an essay, I would ask the reader to excuse a few things, mainly, its limited scope. That is to say, I am in no way arguing that these are the only examples of literature in which the mental illness of a character acts as a signal towards the bigger theme or motif of the book, but rather, that here are three examples of it that I feel I can articulate the best. I was drawn to this thesis for the larger, more unexplored nature of its question. Although I could argue that my thesis' roots go back to Cassandra in mythology, it is not as attractive as the "who really IS sane?" postulation most attempts at discussing mental health in literature portray. Not to say the one explored here is any more nuanced or subtle, but rather offers a different vantage point. If we are to examine what psychiatrist R.D. Laing states when he says, "Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through" – I would argue that these texts all look at characters who one could, on a surface level, be seen as in the midst of a "breakdown", but when further examined, are actually signaling to us a very prophetic break-through.