



The Evolution of Mental Health in Literature: A Comparative Analysis of Jane Eyre, Winnie the Pooh and A Beautiful Mind

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Abstract: This paper looks at how mental health has been shown in literature and over time by comparing Jane Eyre, Winnie the Pooh, and A Beautiful Mind. The study explores how these works, created in different times and settings, reflect changing ideas about mental illness.

In Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847), mental health is shown through characters like Bertha Mason, who represents madness in a Victorian context, often isolated and misunderstood. The novel reflects the era's limited understanding of mental illness but also offers a more compassionate view, particularly through the character of Jane, who faces emotional struggles and societal pressures. A.A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh (1926), although a children's book, touches on mental health through characters like Eeyore, who symbolizes depression. Milne's portrayal introduces the idea of emotional struggles in a way that children can understand, highlighting different aspects of human emotions.

The novel A Beautiful Mind (1998), based on the life of mathematician John Nash, offers a modern portrayal of mental illness, specifically schizophrenia. It focuses on the impact of the illness on Nash's life and relationships, showing both the challenges and the importance of support from loved ones. This reflects a more current understanding of mental health, especially regarding the stigma and treatment of psychological conditions.

By comparing these works, the paper shows how the portrayal of mental illness has evolved from being stigmatized to being shown with more empathy and understanding. The study emphasizes the role of these stories in shaping public attitudes about mental health.

Index Terms - English literature, mental health, society, societal evolution, psychology, destigmatization

I. INTRODUCTION

The medium of literature has long been used as a lens to preserve and study human history. Literary works serve as an encapsulation of not only the author's individual thoughts and creativity, but also of the society they belong to, the era they were born in, and the culture they were raised in. We use literature as a stepping stone to the past when we want to learn when and how humankind has evolved into modern society as we know it, and what we want to learn from the past to continue progressing as both a species and a civilization. This has worked in favor of the research of mental health, which has been a widely misunderstood and misrepresented topic in creative mediums for a very long time due to lack of research. This lack of research was due to the field of psychology being established much later than its fellow modern domains, a fact that may possibly be attributed to differences in the perception and interpretation of mental and behavioral abnormalities across regions and cultures, leading to misunderstandings that took longer to

unite and be formulated into a quantitative discipline. The interesting history of the perception of mental health, even before it was termed as such, can be analyzed through popular literature from past eras as they are most likely to showcase the common understanding of what behaviors were considered odd, atypical and perhaps even savage. Since this paper aims to analyze the growth of mental health, it will delve into select works of popular literature of different eras and create a profile of the general concept of mental health at the time, which will be aligned into a timeline regarding said growth. These texts are Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, and Sylvia Nasar's *A Beautiful Mind*.

II. The Significance of the Madwoman in the Attic

The character of Bertha, more commonly known as the madwoman in the attic in Bronte's popular novel *Jane Eyre*, has gained attention for not only being a fascinatingly mysterious character and a very important plot device in the story of the novel, but as a representation of the Victorian era's extremely limited understanding of mental health, or as it was then known, "madness". The Victorian era is said to have been a time when humane concern began to show itself alongside the general attitude of disgust and revulsion for mad people. In fact, Bronte's works are listed by certain articles as some of the more enlightening works of the period as it shows (Beveridge, Allan, and Renvoize, Edward. "The Presentation of Madness in the Victorian Novel." *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists* 12.10 (1988): 411–414).

An important observation to be made is that madness was only written about in two formats: a scientific paper or fiction. In other words, the concept of madness could only be discussed when it was logistical or fictional in nature. Real people could not be discussed in tandem with madness as it would essentially be pointing fingers. Such an accusatory act would result in social exile and alienation, bringing back the earlier point of madness being viewed as a kind of contagion that had to be avoided. This standard was imposed far more heavily on women than men, who have always been held to stricter and sometimes nonsensical standards all throughout the development of human society, a fact that only began to be protested by the feminist movement later on in history. The evolution of society has always been influenced by literature, whether it be political, social, cultural, or academic; the questions raised by modern readers of historical literature are proof of that.

III. Theories of Representation in Winnie the Pooh

Winnie the Pooh was first introduced as a children's book by English author A.A. Milne, illustrated by E.H. Shepard, and first published in the year 1926. It quickly received both acclaim and success, becoming a beloved children's book due to its light, easy-to-read prose, and humorous storylines.

While there are some variations, the general consensus in the current theory is that the titular protagonist Winnie the Pooh suffers from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, abbreviated as ADHD, a disorder where one is unable to maintain attention or focus on a particular concept or idea for extended periods of time. The disorder is characterized by hyperactivity, difficulty focusing, fidgeting, mood swings and short attention spans. This can be observed in Pooh, who is unable to focus on a single task for more than a short period of time and in several instances, gets distracted by a butterfly going by, even abandoning his work to follow it. There are also some theories of Pooh possibly having an eating disorder, seeing as he has a constant, nearly insatiable craving for honey which often leads him into tricky situations. The other characters of the series, who are all residents of the Hundred Acre Wood, are also hypothesized to have and be inspired by other disorders. For example, Pooh's friend Piglet is depicted as a very anxious character who is prone to worrying about everything. This series can be considered a turning point in the understanding of mental health, where disorders are not explicitly detailed or mentioned but are depicted as parts of a larger personality and in a format that is appealing to children and thus acceptable for adults. Other contributing factors include the modernization of science which led to a larger scope in research of personality development and obstacles in said development.

IV. The Odd Genius of John Nash

While there was visible progress in the perception of mental health and illness, there was still an air of sympathy surrounding the community of mentally ill people. They were viewed as a disadvantaged section of society that required additional help and guidance to live regular lives. Mental illness was viewed as a debilitating condition, which is not always the case when provided with proper equipment and treatment. A piece of literature that revolutionized and helped change this belief was the biography *A Beautiful Mind* written by Sylvia Nasar, based on the real story of Nobel Prize-winning mathematician John Nash. The biography shows the development of Nash's condition, schizophrenia, as he grows from a student to a professor, and explains in detail how he faced obstacles on his path to success in both the professional and personal spheres of his life. It's an especially compelling story whose impact is made even more impressive when one realizes how important it was to change the tides of common belief regarding the lives of people with disorders. It was proof that such people are not only capable of normal, regular lives, but of much more than that. Nash's story provided a completely new perspective on not only schizophrenics but all kinds of illnesses, mental and physical. It brought about the notion that such people are not helpless or of inferior capability than any other human and do not necessarily require guidance for all tasks. It takes their status from the bare minimum to equals and acknowledges their strength in handling an irreversible condition while tackling the idiosyncrasies of human life. The mainstream success and critical acclaim of *A Beautiful Mind* shone a new light on the study of mental health. It appealed to a generation of people who were witnessing the expansion of scientific research and increase in circulation of scholarly articles, a boom supported by mass printing and increased levels of literacy worldwide.

V. Creating A Timeline

With the completion of three separate analyses for the three primary texts, we may begin creating a timeline to trace the evolution of how mental health and behavioral abnormalities have been portrayed in literature over the years. This essay traces the evolution of mental health and behavioral abnormalities in literature, focusing on the Victorian era, the rise of psychiatry, and the influence of children's literature.

During the Victorian era, mental illness was viewed through a religious and moral lens, often labeled as "madness." This perception contributed to the stigmatization of those with mental health issues, who were either secluded in asylums or hidden away, as seen with Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Women, in particular, faced unfair diagnoses, with terms like "female hysteria" being applied to rebellious or sexually expressive behaviors. Fiction, due to societal constraints, was the primary medium to discuss mental illness, with works like *Wuthering Heights* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* highlighting madness in varied contexts.

Simultaneously, psychiatry began to gain traction, with scholars advocating for a moral and research-based approach to treatment. This shift, along with the impact of World War I, opened up avenues for new ideas and literature, including *Winnie the Pooh*, which depicted characters with mental health challenges in a way that encouraged understanding and empathy. These stories helped destigmatize mental illness by portraying it as part of a complex, realistic personality rather than labeling it as "madness."

In the 20th century, works like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Norwegian Wood* continued to explore mental health issues, receiving positive reception and contributing to the public's evolving understanding. Sylvia Nasar's biography of John Nash, *A Beautiful Mind*, was a key moment, as it showcased a real-life story of overcoming mental illness and achieving success, further challenging negative stereotypes. Today, mental health is an important topic in both professional and personal spheres, thanks to decades of research, activism, and literature that have helped normalize mental health challenges and promoted understanding and support.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has explored the portrayal of mental disorders in three different works of English literature: Jane Eyre, Winnie the Pooh, and A Beautiful Mind. The study of these texts has allowed us to compare the representation of mental health of each to see how it has progressed over time. We are able to see the progress and development of characters facing mental health struggles in literature from a personal and social perspective. Together, these three works show the evolution of how mental disorders are portrayed in literature. In Jane Eyre, mental illness is stigmatized, stereotyped and feared, while in Winnie the Pooh, it is shown as something more familiar yet simplified to maintain appeal. In A Beautiful Mind, mental illness is portrayed with greater depth than ever before, which became the modern understanding. This shift symbolizes the broader changes in society towards the acceptance of mental illness, from a time of fear to a more understanding approach. The way mental illness is represented in these texts also shows how the medium of literature has developed the capacity to depict psychological depth. Characters like Bertha, Pooh, and John Nash help readers understand the struggles that come with mental health problems. These characters are not just representations of mental disorders; they show the humanity and complexity of those who live with their respective challenges. As society's understanding of mental health continues to evolve, it is possible and likely that future literature will further expand on these themes, offering better and more nuanced portrayals.

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