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Critical Analysis

Schizophrenia in *Diary of a Madman*

Mental illnesses have been around since the start of human existence, but they have not been treated accordingly until about the last century. Torture was the cure to any mental disease up until around the 1900's. People suffering from mental diseases were feared of because others assumed that they were possessed by demons. Schizophrenia, for instance, was not officially labeled as "schizophrenia" until 1910. In Nikolai Gogol's novella, *Diary of a Madman*, the narrator has schizophrenia and he writes a diary about his life and how he perceives his surroundings. The novella is written in 1835 when there is no proper way of distinguishing mental diseases. At the time, Gogol is even considered a "comedic writer", so the narrator in his novella is supposed to entertain the audience because he is seen as the town's fool and everyone sees him as a joke. The audience reading this in the 1800's views it as humorous because crazy people are laughed at rather than helped. Even when they are being "treated", those methods are now considered as abuse. Luckily, human knowledge on psychiatric disorders has greatly expanded and treatment methods today are beneficial. Schizophrenia is treated by medicine, therapy and many more civil ways. Other sources have found evidence that there are new ways being discovered to help cure schizophrenia. Gogol's use of first-person point-of-view, metaphors, and characterization helps the audience depict the narrator in the novella, and how schizophrenia is perceived at the time compared to how that has changed today

Looking back into writing, Gogol's novella is one of the oldest pieces of literature that describes a schizophrenic narrator. Since schizophrenia is not a clearly distinguishable illness during the 1800's, a question that comes to mind regarding Gogol's novella is: How did Gogol manage to describe the thoughts of a schizophrenic individual with so much accuracy and detail? A journal study was done on *Diary of a Madman* by Eric Lewin Altschuler called "One of The Oldest Cases of Schizophrenia in Gogol's Diary: Diary of a Madman (Looking Back)". Because of a lack of medical knowledge regarding mental illnesses at the time, it is hard distinguishing what is going on in a crazy individual. According to Altschuler's study, "the 'mad' ravings of a local town 'fool' could have been... substance misuse or withdrawal, vitamin deficiencies, or heavy metal poisoning" (1). At the time, diagnosis of a sicknesses is focused on the more visible or common factors. For example, if someone has a cold, their "medicine" is to drink a tea with a specific herb that is found to relieve symptoms. Cures are so basic, so it is not astonishing that people with complex diseases are feared and mistreated. In Gogol's novella, the narrator is taken into a room where he gets tortured. The doctors shave his head, abuse him with a stick, and pour cold water over his head. "They're pouring cold water over my head... Why do they torture me so? What can they want from a miserable wretch like me?" (Gogol 195). In the way the narrator is crying out in pain, Gogol shows how mental illness is treated during this time. These methods would almost never work but instead, they would just mentally damage someone even more. Fortunately, treatments used now are completely different and more effective.

Nowadays, schizophrenia is being treated with medicine, but even new methods are being found to work better than medication. A study was done on the effect that yoga has on schizophrenic individuals as mentioned in the article "Efficacy of Yoga as an Add-On Treatment of Schizophrenia", by Raunaq Chawla. It has been found that yoga helps relieve symptoms, bringing schizophrenic individuals into a more stable state. There are two types of symptoms

associated with schizophrenia: positive and negative. Positive symptoms are excesses in one's behavior such as delusion and hallucinations. Negative symptoms are deficits in an individual's behavior consisting of bad speech and catatonic behavior (Chawla 267). Medication given to schizophrenic patients helps mainly with the positive symptoms, but it often worsens negative symptoms. Yoga is seen as a "profound science of unfolding the infinite potential of the human mind and soul" (Chawla 268). Yoga relaxes people and brings them inner peace in ways that medication cannot. In a research study, schizophrenics are placed in yoga classes and the effects yoga had on them is recorded. Patient's results are found to show "improvements in the quality of life and reduction in the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale... [there were] secondary outcomes like reduced aggression" (Chawla 268). Patients that took only medication are found to not be doing as good as patients that are taking both their medication and practicing yoga. Biologically, what yoga does to a schizophrenic individual is it increases oxytocin levels which initially increases their estrogen level. Since men are four times as likely to be schizophrenic as women, studies show that estrogen has a large impact of the development of the disorder in an individual that biologically possess it (Diaz's Lecture). Another aspect in a schizophrenic's life that yoga influences is social functioning. "Most yoga studies have been able to find improvement in social functioning" (Chawla 269). This is because yoga is practiced with a personal trainer and since it *does* decrease negative symptoms, it makes an individual socialize more rather than have social withdrawal. Considering everything, yoga has many positive effects on schizophrenic individuals and can help decrease both negative and positive schizophrenic symptoms in an individual.

Gogol's use of first-person point of view in his novella shows his significant knowledge on this specific illness without it being acknowledged as "schizophrenia" yet. In fact, at the time that Gogol's novella is written, schizophrenia is not even distinguishable from other illnesses.

Gogol eliminates ideas suggesting that the narrator could have been a drinker because at one point in the diary, the narrator mentions that he never drinks (176). According to the journal study done, “this exclusion is important as alcohol misuse or dependence is not uncommon in Gogol’s writings” (Altschuler 2). This supports the idea that the narrator is clearly schizophrenic because the symptoms are so clear. For an individual to be diagnosed with schizophrenia, they must have at least 2 out of the 5 symptoms: “ i) Delusions, (ii) hallucinations, (iii) disorganized speech, (iv) catatonic behavior, or (v) negative symptoms” (Altschuler 3). In Gogol’s writing, the narrator had 4 out of 5 symptoms. He faced delusional beliefs and hallucinations in which he thought that two dogs were spying on him and writing bad about him in their letters (183-184, 186 Gogol). Disorganized speech was shown through the way he would write the dates in his diary. His first diary entry was labeled normally, as “October 3rd” (174 Gogol). By his last entry, when he was being “treated” in the hospital, the spelling of the date, visually, does not make sense. He wrote “Da 34 te Mth eary Ðəqɪnɐɪɹ 349” (195 Gogol). Signs of catatonic behavior are shown when the narrator stops going to work because he believes that he is the lost king of Spain. He gets a call from one of the administrative clerks working at his office asking him why he has not shown up for three weeks. “So, I went— just for a joke” (190 Gogol). The only symptoms that the narrator did not experience are negative symptoms. All his symptoms are “positive” symptoms meaning that they confirm him being schizophrenic. This supports the idea that Gogol’s use of first-person point-of-view in the diaries plays a big role in portraying the narrator’s schizophrenia.

First-person point-of-view makes the audience see the world through the narrator’s eyes making it very clear that the narrator is different from the average person. The narrator in the novella writes his diary as if he is conscious of his surroundings, but what he believes are his surroundings is just his imagination. He recalls fish talking, and cows talking, and writes about

how a dog named Medji is speaking to him, showing that he is delusional (Gogol 176). Later in his writing, he elaborates on finding letters two dogs have been writing to each other. He is amazed by the way the dogs write. “The letter is quite legible, though the handwriting looks a bit doggy...The letter is impeccable written. The punctuation is correct and even the letter ‘ye’ is in the right place” (Gogol 183). This is a symptom of schizophrenia known as a “visual hallucination” because his perception of what is happening is being altered. He continues to read the letter in amazement and compares it to the way that he writes. He says “you can see at once it’s not written by a human. It starts off all right and then lapses into dogginess”. At the time, people have no specific symptoms pointing a mental illness out as “schizophrenia”. It is implied that the narrator is hallucinating since he is schizophrenic, but the way Gogol writes about it is so accurate that it does not make sense how he was able to implicate it into his novella. There is so much detail with every situation that goes on in the narrator's head and Gogol was able to describe it so perfectly, literally placing his audience into a schizophrenic individual's mind. Gogol’s use of first-person view plays an important role in how he expresses schizophrenia in his novella.

Schizophrenic patients often struggle with distinguishing their hallucinations from reality. The narrator in *Diary Of a Madman* writes about how the dogs are writing letters to each other and it is his mission to read them. The dogs resemble a metaphor for the narrator’s loneliness. Dogs are viewed as social creatures, even claiming the title of “man’s best friend” so the narrator tries to befriend these dogs. Reading their letters, he finds them talking bad about him, making fun of his cleanliness. Another aspect in the diaries that these dogs stand as a metaphor for is cleanliness. Dogs are generally not the cleanest animals, but the narrator describes them as the most pampered and spoiled dogs ever. He compares himself to them because he feels inferior to them on the social hierarchy scale, but he still sees himself as if he were on the same mental

level. He lacks socialization with other humans, so he settles for the dogs. In the 1800's, people that are crazy are just seen as the "town's fool", meaning they are laughed at. This leads to a lack of human interaction because nobody wants to be friends with a towns fool, so he is left alone. While reading the dogs' letters, the narrator writes "I need *people* not dogs! I want to see a human being". Realizing that others do not take him seriously is extremely demeaning. The way Gogol implicates this into the novella is magnificent because he uses dogs and people as metaphors for the social hierarchy scale that is present at the time and how it effects the narrator.

Gogol uses characterization to help portray schizophrenia in his novella. The narrator believes and tries to convince others that he is the king of Spain to try and make others see him as more than they see him now. While he is at work, he says "If only you knew who's sitting in the same office with you... God, what a fuss you'd make" (Gogol 190). His schizophrenia makes him believe his delusion that he is the king of Spain. Even before believing this delusion, he sees that the way others treat him is different than the way others are treated in his society. Now he uses his delusion of him being the "king of Spain" as an excuse as to why others treat him differently. He convinces himself that the way he is being treated is different now because he is someone special. If someone looks at him with a surprised look on their face, he believes that it is because the "king of Spain" is sitting in front of them rather than the fact that he is acting weird like usual. Characterization is a positive excuse as to why the narrator gets treated the ways that he does because of the social scale present at the time. He wants to be more to everyone around him rather than a "towns fool". This characteristic of schizophrenia has always been around, because it helps individuals feel better about themselves. Gogol's use of characterization helps the audience acknowledge the presence of schizophrenia in his novel.

With the use of first-person point-of-view, characterization, and metaphors, Gogol clearly portrays an individual struggling with schizophrenia in his novella. His use of literary motifs also

helps in showing how schizophrenic individuals are viewed in society in the 1800's, making it easily comparable to how the illness is perceived today. The symptoms of schizophrenia are shown differently in everyone that has the illness and symptoms also have different effects on everyone. For this reason, treatments are also harder to find since each treatment method effects everyone differently. At the time that Gogol writes his novella, there is not much knowledge on mental illnesses. Gogol still manages to portray this illness very clearly in his novella because the symptoms are accurate to what doctors have distinguished as diagnosable to schizophrenic individuals today. Today, medication is being used and new cures are still being discovered such as yoga rather than just the use of medicine. Hopefully in the future, schizophrenic individuals will get helped even more, even if the illness is not completely curable.

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