

# A “His Story” of Insanity:

## *Madness and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century American Literature*

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# Abstract

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study of the largely neglected relationship between madness and masculinity based on three American literary works written during different periods of the twentieth century. The study utilizes literary, social, and medical research in order to provide a holistic view of madness and masculinity as two social constructs that interact with and are contingent on each other. In Sherwood Anderson's "Hands," Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, madness and masculinity are depicted as mutually dependent concepts that reflect the social norms and cultural beliefs prevalent in society. Although in literary studies, madness has popularly been considered and examined as a female malady, Anderson's, Kesey's, and Wallace's protagonists are male characters whose experience of madness illuminates the damaging effects of gender dualism on the identity of men who struggle to conform to socially defined norms. My aim in outlining the literary history of madness and masculinity within the limits of a specific time span is to show that the dualistic gender ideology of Western culture, as well as attempts both to enforce and subdue gender dualism, has had a significant impact on the definitions of and social attitude towards madness throughout the twentieth century.



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# Introduction

## Literature, Madness, and Masculinity

It is a small step to empathize, sometimes—to wish “to wrap your mind in an old newspaper or something and leave it in an alley to shift for itself, without you.”<sup>1</sup> In fiction, losing one’s mind is seemingly safe, as it is not quite real. When the story ends and the book is closed, it takes an instant to unwrap your mind from the paper left in an imaginative alley, and shift happily together, again. I believe that the strange allure of and fascination with fictional insanity lies in the possibility of this simultaneous identification and distancing from the literary experience.

The personal aspect involved in writing and reading about madness in literature has long been considered “unscientific.” It was not until recently that this attitude began to become less prominent, giving way to more humane and culturally aware approaches to understanding the dialogue between medicine and fiction. This explains why the history of madness in literature is long and complex while the history of the study of the relationship between literature and madness is, on the contrary, extremely short.

One major reason for undertaking such a study is the fact that the arts have the potential to offer perspectives that sciences cannot provide. The detachment and objectivity that characterize medical accounts of madness can only benefit from literary analyses of the same phenomenon, carried out in a different, but no less enlightening way. The understanding of madness in fiction is inseparable from personal involvement and subjectivity. In order to describe the experience of insanity, the writer has to enter that experience through “imaginative empathy”<sup>2</sup>—a personal engagement and identification with the fictional characters, which offers a unique perspective on madness, comprising both the biological and the cultural aspect of the concept of mental illness.

As opposed to the doctor-patient relationship, with a strict separation of roles and a clear cut hierarchy, the connection between the writer and his/her fictional character is uninterrupted and intimate. A literary account of madness, where personal involvement plays an essential role, presents a writer’s perspective expressed through subjective and empathic narrative. This type of narrative can be utilized as a significant supplement to an

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), reprinted with a foreword by Dave Eggers (London: Abacus, 2012), 201. All references in this thesis are made to the reprinted edition.

<sup>2</sup> Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton, introduction to *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, eds. Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5.

objective evaluation, which is carried out by a medical professional. In *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton acknowledge that

contemporary medicine, and particularly psychotherapy, emphasise the need for humane ‘narrative understanding’ of case histories as well as for the detached classification of symptoms. The study of ‘story’ and interpretation has entered the medical curriculum, accompanied by a new awareness of the psychological and ethical insights offered by literary portrayals of illness.<sup>3</sup>

The uniqueness and usefulness of such an approach to the concept of madness is also praised by Robert Downie, who agrees that our “understanding can be assisted if our emotions are engaged and we can identify with someone’s situation: we are enabled to appreciate their values, and how these values might derive from or contrast with those prevailing in their culture.”<sup>4</sup>

This brings us to another unique aspect of the relationship between madness and fiction, that is, cultural awareness. Perhaps the most significant difference between literary and medical analyses of insanity lies in explaining the very concept of madness. While medical sciences equate madness with mental illness, in humanities scholarship it is primarily viewed as a social construct. The socio-historical analysis of madness in literature illuminates the impermanence of mental illness categories, as well as the changing social attitudes that they reflect. Since medical science does not address any of these issues, the contribution that humanities scholarship can make to “charting a cultural history”<sup>5</sup> by examining the narrative of madness, becomes particularly valuable. Moreover, at this point the subjectivity of the writer can no longer be considered a disadvantage, as it becomes crucial to understanding the transient nature of madness as a social construct through its literary history.

A slight modification needs to be made to the previous sentence, as the focus and the main goal of this thesis is to create a version of a literary “his story” of madness. Among numerous socio-cultural issues that fictional madness can help to decode, one of the most interesting and least explored is its relationship with masculinity. Masculinity studies, similarly to madness studies, is a relatively new academic field. For this reason, the connection between insanity and gender has most often been limited to feminist

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Downie, “Madness in Literature: Device and Understanding,” in *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, eds. C. Saunders and J. Macnaughton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 57.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Bradley, “Madness Studies,” *Literature and Medicine* 28, no. 1 (2009): 159.

analyses of madness as a female malady. Undoubtedly, substantial amount of valuable research has resulted from such inquiries; however, disregarding the distinct relationship and mutual influence of madness and masculinity has also contributed to strengthening the ties between madness and femininity, thus delaying the social change such research was supposed to facilitate.

It has been argued in feminist analyses that, in Western cultures, madness<sup>6</sup> is constructed as a concept that belongs to women's nature. Recognizing the close ties between insanity and femininity is essential in order to trace and examine the socio-cultural implications of mental health disorders; however, the fact that madness has in many ways been equated with exaggerated stereotypically feminine behavior does not mean that it is not experienced by men. Quite the contrary, when madness enters men's lives, it poses a double threat—that of losing one's reason and that of losing one's masculinity, an aspect that significantly differentiates male and female experiences of madness.

Yet, the lack of studies on the relationship between insanity and masculinity, resulting from the prevailing view that madness is typical of women, has left male madness almost unexplored. One telling example is presented by Elaine Showalter, who in her article about the history of hysteria writes: "Although male hysteria has been documented since the seventeenth century, feminist critics have ignored its clinical manifestations, writing as though 'hysterical questions' about sexual identity are only women's questions."<sup>7</sup> Hysteria is of course a specific mental condition that cannot be considered synonymous with madness, but the example shown by Showalter does reveal the significant prejudice accompanying feminist analysis of madness. Being a feminist critic herself, she does not undertake a thorough examination of male hysteria, but she does make several important points that will be addressed in this thesis.

Once we have recognized that madness has been regarded as a phenomenon comprising all the worst aspects of femininity, it is interesting to see what effect it creates when it enters a man's mind and how the relationship between madness and gender is transformed in the course of time. The clash between a set of Western norms of masculinity and a "female illness" is what interests me most. Therefore, in this thesis I will

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<sup>6</sup> In the present thesis, the terms "madness" and "insanity" are used interchangeably to denote a cultural construct referring to human behavior that deviates from the socially accepted norms to such extent that it is considered to be a condition of mental illness.

<sup>7</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, eds. Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 288.

trace the cultural development of two interconnected social constructs, madness and masculinity, in the course of the twentieth century by examining three literary works that echo, as well as offer an evaluation of, the norms and beliefs prevailing in their respective periods. The major questions that the present thesis will concentrate upon will be the following: How do the essential differences between male and female madness manifest themselves? How does insanity influence male identity? And, finally, can it be true, as Showalter observes in the case of male experience of hysteria, that the feminine component within masculinity is in “itself a symptom of disease?”<sup>8</sup>

By seeking answers to these questions in American literary works written during three different periods in the twentieth century, I wish to show that madness and masculinity are two closely related social constructs whose development is continuous and mutually dependent. Although it cannot be denied that, generally, Western cultures tend to “broadly polarize masculinity and femininity,”<sup>9</sup> this dualistic gender ideology has been influenced by various social and political changes occurring throughout the previous century. It is therefore worth examining the ways in which these processes have impacted the definition and view of madness as a cultural concept. A holistic view of literature, madness, and masculinity will, I hope, contribute to a literary analysis that raises awareness of the importance and usefulness of interdisciplinary research, as well as facilitates the understanding of ever-changing human nature both from a biological and cultural perspective.

### **A Fe/male Malady?**

There exists a myth that twentieth-century literature is largely dominated by female authors who employ madness as a theme that reveals their state of oppression within a masculine culture. Doris Lessing, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton are names that have become cultural symbols of oppressed and broken-down women trying to voice a social protest through their literary depiction of madness. Although it is true, as Elaine Showalter has argued in *A Literature of Their Own* and *The Female Malady*, that the association between madness and femininity in Western cultures has a long history, the predominance of feminist analysis of literature written by women has contributed to increasing the impression that madness is inseparable from femaleness. Despite the overall

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<sup>8</sup> Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender,” 289.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Garde, “Masculinity and Madness,” *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research: Linking Research with Practice* 3, no. 1 (2003): 6, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733140312331384578>.

popularity of this view, I wish to show, with the help of literary instances, its limitations and flaws.

Twentieth-century literature offers numerous examples of male narratives of madness, which have not been approached from the point of view of gender analysis. One possible explanation for this neglect might be that many of these works belong to the science fiction genre (e.g. such novels as *Clans of the Alphane Moon* by Philip K. Dick and *Earth Abides* by George Stewart, or short stories “Dear Diary” by Richard Matheson and “The Ethics of Madness” by Larry Niven). However, even in the literature that deals with male madness in more realistic settings, the gender aspect has hardly ever been examined in detail. For instance, John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*, or Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* are among exceptional literary works in which the relationship between madness and gender has not been sufficiently explored by literary critics.

I have chosen to limit the scope of my analysis to one short story and two novels in which the mutual dependence of madness and masculinity is one of the central themes. Thus, the discussion of the literary history of male madness in the twentieth century will be based on Sherwood Anderson’s short story “Hands” (1919), Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996). There are several important aspects connecting the three works and aiding a valid literary analysis. The protagonists in “Hands,” *Cuckoo’s Nest*, and *Infinite Jest* are men whose experience of madness is either caused by or results in a crisis of gender identity. In some cases, a failure to conform to the prevalent cultural norms defining masculinity becomes so psychologically damaging that the character loses his ability to function successfully in society. In other cases, one’s deviance from gender norms is in itself considered a disease. In the most interesting instances, though, these two aspects of madness are at work simultaneously.

Moreover, I consider it significant that these works have been written by male authors whose exposure to mental health problems was more than simply using insanity as a literary topic. Sherwood Anderson suffered a mental breakdown in 1912, during which he walked the streets of Cleveland for several days. After the episode he decided to stop pursuing a business career and turned wholeheartedly to writing instead.<sup>10</sup> Ken Kesey, in his early twenties, worked on a mental ward at a local veterans’ hospital and participated

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<sup>10</sup> Walter B. Rideout, *Sherwood Anderson: A Writer in America*, vol. 1 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

during that time in drug experiments sponsored by the government (he was paid for taking LSD, Ditrane, mescaline, and IT-290 before these substances entered “the mainstream of American popular culture”).<sup>11</sup> David Foster Wallace ended his life by suicide after having struggled with depression for more than twenty years.<sup>12</sup> The importance of these somber facts does not lie in the opportunity to look for their reproduction in fiction. The value of the authors’ personal experience in terms of a literary analysis can be found in their ability to empathize with the fictional characters and to provide a more informed and indeed subjective account of madness from a male point of view.

Sherwood Anderson’s short story “Hands” is an outstanding example that shows the ways in which the disturbance of a man’s mind is “socially constructed as the opposite of masculinity.”<sup>13</sup> Although the short stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* collection revolve around the maturation of a young writer George Willard’s normative masculinity, the protagonist in the opening story “Hands” is Wing Biddlebaum, a character who contradicts and fails to obey the social norms related to gender specific behavior. Importantly, he does not recognize his mindset as “wrong,” until he is excluded from a society that is depicted as violent and homophobic. Literary scholars have frequently argued that Biddlebaum’s conduct threatens the hegemonic structures of a masculine society, which results in his alienation. For instance, Mark Whalan has noted that “Wing’s house, outside of Winesburg’s society and geography, marks him as both liminal and visible: moreover, it is sited on the edge of the ravine, which indicates his proximity to social and cultural oblivion.”<sup>14</sup>

However, the fact that social exclusion is closely connected with Biddlebaum’s mental disturbance has received no scholarly attention so far. The uncontrollable hand movement that he develops as a result of both the violent attacks by the townsmen and an internalized fear of “abnormal” sexuality reveals one important aspect of insanity—the expression of gender-related deviance. Examining Anderson’s story in the context of the post–World War I society will allow us to specify the ideal and the defective types of manhood operating at that particular period. Furthermore, I would like to show that the

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Faggen, introduction to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, by Ken Kesey (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), reprinted with introduction by Robert Faggen (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), xiii. All references in this thesis are made to the reprinted version.

<sup>12</sup> D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking Adult, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Jane Garde, “Masculinity and Madness,” 14.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism in America* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 46. See also Thomas Yingling’s essay “Winesburg, Ohio and the End of Collective Experience,” in *New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio*, ed. John W. Crowley.



view of madness as anti-masculine prevailing during the most part of the twentieth century also contributes to further feminization of the men whose mental disturbance results from socially deviant gender identity.

Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, written during a period of cultural rebellions and the rise of anti-psychiatry, continues the elaboration of the themes present in Anderson's short story. The cult status of Kesey's book, and perhaps even more of its film adaptation from 1975 has contributed both to the long-lasting popularity of *Cuckoo's Nest* among the general public and to an extensive amount of scholarly criticism. Nevertheless, the approaches used to examine the novel seem to be limited to a few distinct categories. As Angela Farmer has remarked, "*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is commonly read in one or two ways. The most familiar reading sees a commentary on U.S. society. Another very familiar reading sees it as the story of a highly individualistic messianic figure that enters a realm of oppression, sacrifices himself for the good of the collective, and provides liberation."<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, the critique of American society plays an important role in the novel, yet my analysis will focus upon a specific social issue that has received little attention so far: the enforcement of masculinist ideology within the mental health system.

The novel's setting is a male mental ward run by Nurse Ratched (the Big Nurse), who is depicted as a cruel and authoritative figure, a representative of the Combine—a nationwide and destructive mechanism of social control. Her symbolic largeness is described and contrasted by the narrator, Chief Bromden, a six feet seven inches tall Native American from the Columbia tribe, whose story of oppression and liberation is central to the novel's plot. A major reason for most of the male patients' mental disturbances seems to be an internalized stigma of a deviant gender identity. Although they have been committed (or rather have committed themselves) to the institution in order to be "cured," the continuous demasculization that takes place on the ward only seems to worsen their condition. The arrival of Randall McMurphy functions as a threat to the established system. He questions, challenges, and violently protests against the rules imposed by Nurse Ratched, thus inspiring the other men to rebel against the establishment. However, not in all cases does the rebellion prove successful.

Farmer's study of Kesey's novel is interesting in terms of offering a glimpse into the relationship between in/sanity and masculinity in *Cuckoo's Nest*. She makes several

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<sup>15</sup> Angela Farmer, "Monsters, Men and Machines: Gender in Literature and Film, 1942-1962" (PhD diss., Auburn University, 2011), 152.

relevant observations, which are unfortunately left undeveloped. For instance, she argues that “as readers, *we* [emphasis mine] understand that the men are indeed sane [as Mac recognizes and points out to them] and that their only transgression is gender non-conformity.”<sup>16</sup> Here, it is crucial to distinguish between “us” and “them.” From today’s point of view, the majority of the characters in *Cuckoo’s Nest* might indeed seem sane and their deviance from gender norms quite acceptable. Yet the aim of my study is to show the transience of the cultural views that shape the social constructs of madness and masculinity. Taking into account that, for example, homosexuality was officially defined as mental illness until 1973 enables one to see the strong link between the cultural and the biological. From a historical perspective, the characters in *Cuckoo’s Nest* could be seen as “mad” because of their gender-related deviance. Today, however, it seems much more relevant to attribute their madness to external and destructive attempts to impose gender-conformity on them. In this thesis, I will make frequent references to the historical facts that reveal the psychiatric and social consensus of the periods during which the literary works were written in order to show the unique contribution that literature can make in understanding the development of human thought.

The analysis of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* is perhaps the most challenging task, as it is arguably easier to critically approach a literary work in retrospect, as one can trace where the beliefs and the norms of the people living in the past have led to. With a contemporary work, one does not have such a privilege, since it is only possible to speculate about how today’s cultural situation will look in the times to come. On the other hand, the opportunity to read and analyze a literary work as a critique of contemporary culture fascinates me. Importantly, *Infinite Jest* is a novel that is set in the not too distant (though not quite determinable) future. By choosing such an approach, Wallace manages to show a potential development of the most problematic aspects of contemporary culture, one of which is the clash between “old” and “new” ideals of masculinity.

In *Infinite Jest*, three main plots are developed simultaneously. One of them focuses on the attempts of Quebec separatists and the U.S. forces to acquire a video cartridge called “Infinite Jest” (the Entertainment), containing a film with lethal entertainment capacities, which can even be used for terrorist goals. Another plot centers on Don Gately, a former burglar and drug addict who now works as a counselor at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [*sic*] and informs the readers about the ideas and methods of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 157.

Alcoholics Anonymous. The third plotline, which my analysis of *Infinite Jest* will mainly concentrate upon, is the story of young tennis player Hal Incandenza, arguably the novel's protagonist, whose search for a functional (gender) identity depicts the crisis of modern manhood caused by the problematic meeting between the rhetorically advocated post-feminist ideals of masculinity and the still-operating structures of dualistic Western culture where the concepts of masculinity and femininity are explicitly polarized. There are some characters in *Infinite Jest* that do cross the bridges between the three separate plots, yet, as Sven Birkerts has put it in his review of the novel, "the plot lines do not come to apocalyptic or even transfiguring intersection,"<sup>17</sup> which does not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with Wallace's style.

Scholarly attention paid to *Infinite Jest* is considerable, despite its bulky body consisting of more than a thousand pages. While most analyses elaborate on the themes of entertainment and media critique that are both undoubtedly important in the novel, some critics also address the depiction of the crisis of masculinity that connects with the characters' addiction problems, self-help culture, and repressed individualism. What frequently seems to be lacking in these analyses, though, is the recognition of Wallace's ability to both strongly criticize and admit the benefits of the same concept. Rather than being a supporter of a specific type of masculinity, he manages to show how the meeting between two conflicting social manhood ideals results in one's psychological confusion and difficulty in remaining true to oneself. The type of masculinity propagated among the athletes at Enfield Tennis Academy is characterized by goal-oriented avoidance of emotionality, in contrast to the pseudo-sensitivity of post-feminist manhood ideals, represented in the novel by self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

The adolescent tennis players' most often employed method for coping with the demands of a traditionally masculine sports culture proves to be substance abuse. Partially due to the description of addiction as a method applied to handle gender-related cultural demands, I consider the critique of gender dualism to be an integral part of the novel. Still, when Hal decides to seek help in dealing with his addiction, he enters the world of completely different expectations, but the inauthentic emotionality of the self-help group system exemplifies the problematic aspects of the "new masculinity" as well. Although Hal fails to find a solution to his problems in the self-help method, the other protagonist,

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<sup>17</sup> Sven Birkerts, "The Alchemist's Retort," *The Atlantic Monthly* 277, no. 2 (1996), <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/96feb/alchem/alchem.htm>.

Don Gately, does recover from his addiction with the help of Narcotics Anonymous. Wallace's view on the future of American society is not entirely hopeless, as he shows that a post-feminist culture would be capable of providing a cure for male madness if it became more authentic. My study of *Infinite Jest* will show how the social changes pertaining to gender norms have influenced changes in the concept of in/sanity and how the interaction between masculinity and madness in contemporary culture differs from earlier periods of the twentieth century. By examining the mutual dependence of psychiatric, social, and cultural transformations, and the reflection of these processes in *Infinite Jest*, I wish to prove the ability of Wallace's novel to problematize and accentuate the challenges of masculinity in contemporary Western society.

### **Research Methodology and Structure**

This thesis is an interdisciplinary research project that combines literature, sociology, cultural studies, and psychiatry in order to explore the relationship between madness and masculinity in three literary texts written during the twentieth century. The increasing awareness of the importance of interdisciplinary research that includes literary studies has resulted in the emergence of academic disciplines that emphasize the diverse and complex nature of human categories. Thus this thesis makes a contribution both to the field of medical humanities and to a broader area of bioculture, of which madness studies is a subdivision. The emerging field of medical humanities comprises both

the study of the arts in medicine – how literature, philosophy, history, music and art can inform and enlighten medical practice and doctors' understanding of the human condition – and the study of medicine in the arts, including the literary portrayal and function of aspects of medicine and illness, history of medicine, psychoanalytic theory, and the connection between illness and creativity.<sup>18</sup>

Two main reasons can be distinguished for the lack of study of the relationship between madness and the arts. First, it is the current classification of insanity as a physical brain illness that makes the impact of socially constructed pressures seem worthy of little regard. Second, "individualism in psychotherapeutics diverts attention from identifying damaging socio-cultural conditions that contribute to individual distress by attributing insanity/distress as a function of the person."<sup>19</sup> Medical humanities, on the contrary, is a field whose representatives believe that the study of the arts and humanities is an essential

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<sup>18</sup> Saunders and Macnaughton, *Madness and Creativity*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Garde, "Madness and Masculinity," 13.

way in which “the medical ethos can be humanized from its current mechanistic and inward looking state.”<sup>20</sup> The historical and critical aspects of literary studies can provide valuable insights into the concept of madness (defined, medically, as mental illness) from the perspective of gender in general and masculinity in particular. This knowledge has the potential to increase the physicians understanding of and empathy towards men who suffer from mental health disturbances. In addition, it shows that, for some individuals, problematic social issues can act as one of the contributors to serious mental distress.

In her book *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation*, Nancy Easterlin remarks that “it is striking how little scholars have concerned themselves with the *utility* of literature.”<sup>21</sup> She explains that the biocultural study of literature takes place through an informed and rational dialogue with science. An interdisciplinary literary study has the capability to demonstrate the “utility” of literature, not only from the aesthetic, but also from the scientific point of view. I agree with Easterlin’s argument that “biological and cultural evolution together highlight the centrality of meaning-making processes for our species and, by extension, provide ample justification for interpretation as the core aim of our discipline [literary studies].”<sup>22</sup> I believe that the essential interpretive aspect of the study of literature in combination with scientific knowledge can provide a significantly more complete view of the phenomena that define our humanity. Biocultural criticism and theory, according to Easterlin, “strengthen the aims and practices of literary studies by combining scientific psychology and evolutionary studies with literary criticism, history, and other areas of the humanities and sciences.”<sup>23</sup> In this thesis, I will employ a biocultural approach to literary interpretation to provide a holistic view of the intertwining discourses of madness and masculinity in the three selected texts.

Since this thesis includes the analysis of the historical development of the literary relationship between madness and masculinity throughout the twentieth century, I will refer to a variety of psychiatric, sociological and literary studies in order to highlight the major tendencies within these fields during three rather different periods, as well as their gradual and inter-dependent transformation. The references to psychiatric and psychological theory in connection with gender will comprise various socio-historical accounts, among which the concept of “masculinist society” introduced by Jane Garde will

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<sup>20</sup> David Weatherall, introduction to *Medical Humanities: A Practical Introduction*, eds. Deborah Kirklin and Ruth Richardson (London: Royal College of Physicians, 2001), viii.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy Easterlin, preface to *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), ix.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

play a particularly important role. Garde's study of male madness in the context of her psychotherapeutic practice provides numerous informative and original insights into the differences between male and female experience of insanity. The theoretical material pertaining to the field of men's studies encompasses studies that focus on social gender norms and deviance from manhood ideals. Finally, my analysis of "Hands," *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Infinite Jest* will be carried out in a continuous dialogue with the previous literary criticism that addresses similar questions to those I have outlined in this introduction.

The analytical part of this thesis is divided into three chapters, each of them focusing upon one literary work. "Hands," *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Infinite Jest* are discussed in a chronological order, which naturally reflects my intention to trace the development of the madness-masculinity symbiosis in the course of the previous century. The first subdivision of each chapter contains a review of psychiatric, sociological, and cultural tendencies that characterize the particular period and that are of major importance for an informed and detailed study of the social constructs of madness and masculinity in literature written during that time. The following two subchapters contain a literary analysis of the chosen works in the light of the presented socio-cultural theory.

In the first chapter, I examine Sherwood Anderson's short story "Hands" in the context of post-World War I attitudes towards insanity and normative masculinity. In this section, I introduce Jane Garde's concept of "masculinism," which she uses as a term that denotes attitudes typical of Western dualistic gender ideology, where masculinity functions as the measure of normality. The influence of masculinist ideology in "Hands" is explained by considering madness both as deviance from proper masculinity (including, but not limited to homosexuality) and as an emotional distress caused by the inability and/or unwillingness to conform to socially advocated gender norms. I approach the story's main character Wing Biddlebaum as a victim of an oppressive social system where the fact that he steps over the line of proper masculine conduct causes violent reactions and leads to his social exclusion.

The second chapter examines Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a book that echoes some of the basic concepts of anti-psychiatry movement, which reached its peak in the 1960s. I find both the psychiatrist Thomas Szasz's notion of "psychiatric slavery" (a means for coercive social control) and sociologist Erving Goffman's ideas on the impact of institutionalization on one's identity relevant to the

discussion of the stigma of mental illness and the harmful effects of institutional psychiatry that, in Kesey's novel, contribute to a continuous demasculization of the male patients. Although *Cuckoo's Nest* has frequently been studied as a work that argues in favor of traditional masculinity (i.e., masculinism) because of its depiction of madness as a feminizing force, I examine the novel as a critique rather than an advocate of oppressive social attempts to impose conformity to traditional gender norms.

Finally, the third chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the epic novel *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. Second-wave feminism, declassification of homosexuality as a form of mental illness, the expansion of the pharmaceutical industry with regard to psychiatric medications—these processes I explain as having a close connection with the “defeminization of madness.” By this notion I define the way in which the concept of madness has been normalized and deprived of its humiliating feminizing stigma. At the same time, there has appeared a modern ideal of post-feminist masculinity, which is no longer defined as anti-feminine. By examining *Infinite Jest*, one can observe that despite these developments, the structures of dualistic gender ideology are still operative in contemporary society, creating a problematic clash of norms that can have a destructive impact on male identity.

# 1. The Two Faces of Madness: Sherwood Anderson's "Hands"

*And factory sounds and factory thoughts  
Were banished from him by that larger, quieter hand  
That lay in his with the sun upon it.  
And as the bandage knot was tightened  
The two men smiled into each other's eyes.*

Hart Crane, "Episode of Hands"

## Madness within Post–World War I Masculinism

It has been argued that Sherwood Anderson's short story collection *Winesburg, Ohio* and particularly its opening story "Hands" reflect his intention to show the binary opposition between maleness and femaleness in order to revitalize patriarchal masculinity and heterosexual hegemony.<sup>24</sup> Distancing myself from the writer's arguable project, I read "Hands" as a text that manages to accomplish quite the opposite. Although it is true that the story relies on the binaries that characterize dualistic gender ideology, its depiction of mental disturbance reveals the damaging impact of such set of norms on male gender identity. Madness in "Hands" is multifaceted, yet inseparable from the main character's struggle with conforming to socially accepted gender norms. Both Wing Biddlebaum's uncontrollable hand movement and his alleged homosexuality, as well as the townspeople's homophobic reactions towards his deviant behavior, display the association between madness and femininity.

In order to understand the connection between madness and gender in the post–World War I period, it is necessary to take a look back in history. Anderson wrote *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919, during a time when male vulnerability and disposition to mental health disorders became undeniable. World War I caused an epidemic of madness among men, and the term "shell-shock" was coined by Dr. Charles S. Myers to give a masculine-sounding name to hysteria experienced by soldiers in order to "disguise the troubling parallels between male war neurosis and the female nervous disorders epidemic before the war."<sup>25</sup> Several attempts were made to prove that shell-shock was substantially different from hysteria or even an imaginary disease (and thus having no connection to "the female malady"), yet the lack of success in treating patients lead the doctors to the conclusion that

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<sup>24</sup> Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Showalter, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," 321.



shell-shock was “the product of womanish, homosexual, or childish impulses in men,”<sup>26</sup> indicating that effeminacy was an integral component of male madness. Thus, the Great War was a turning point in the twentieth century’s view of insanity from different perspectives. On the one hand, it demonstrated that male madness was a real phenomenon that had to be dealt with. On the other hand, the relationship between madness and gender became accentuated, since psychiatry’s reaction to male hysteria during World War I epitomized masculinism as normality.<sup>27</sup>

Masculinism, as defined by Jane Garde, is a “socially constructed, pancultural and trans-historical ideology . . . encoded as a value system and constellation of related dispositional traits, which underpin institutional and cultural practices and standards.”<sup>28</sup> Garde distinguishes four main features of masculinist ideology: power, ambivalence to femininity, domination and objectification of Nature and the psyche, and avoidance of emotion. The notion of power comprises such traits as, for instance, aggression, assertiveness, violence, and ascendancy, all of which contribute to maintaining patriarchal domination in various social spheres. Ambivalence to femininity manifests itself most vividly as the attempt of males to distance and disassociate themselves from femininity. This tendency is reflected in the dualistic division of private and public spaces, where femininity is restricted to the personal and masculinity to the professional spheres of life. Domination and objectification of Nature and the psyche implies the superiority of the knowledge gained by sensory observation over the perceptual interpretation of reality (e.g. quantitative vs. qualitative research). Finally, avoidance of emotion is characterized by seeing affective experiences as obstacles to acquiring proper manhood.

According to Mark Whalan, *Winesburg, Ohio* exemplifies different aspects of gender dualism. He argues that

this binary underpins various differentiations Anderson makes on the basis of gender: these include the activity of the writer / craftsman as against the passivity of the materials; geographical, social, financial, and personal mobility against stasis and stability; and a phallogentric, penetrative sexuality against a passive receptive one.<sup>29</sup>

He sees the maturation of Wing Biddlebaum’s young friend George Willard, the recurring character in *Winesburg, Ohio*, as a process that affirms masculinism. I would agree that

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>27</sup> Garde, “Masculinity and Madness,” 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>29</sup> Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism*, 46.

Biddlebaum's deviance from proper masculinity does have a certain "regulatory function,"<sup>30</sup> presenting George with the potential damaging consequences of non-conformity to social norms. However, the fact that Anderson depicts masculinism as the only socially accepted set of gender-related beliefs does not necessarily imply that he advocates it. My literary analysis will concentrate on Wing Biddlebaum rather than George Willard, as the perspective of the protagonist in the short story "Hands" shows Anderson's awareness of the destructive force of masculinist ideology, which is expressed through the character's experience of madness.

We do not meet a soldier suffering from shell-shock in Anderson's short story, as his protagonist has to deal with more mundane traumatic experiences than the trauma of battle. Nevertheless, Wing Biddlebaum is a character that one could almost call archetypal. He is a man whose behavior deviates from the cultural norms of proper masculinity or ideal manhood to such an extent that this deviation leads to severe emotional distress caused by external social exclusion as well as internal self-condemnation. As a consequence, his identity is damaged, and he is unable to escape the vicious circle where his feminine characteristics are the cause of his mental distress and where his madness is what feminizes him even further.

Although World War I proved that men were also in need of psychological help, the ideology of masculinism pervaded the reactions towards male madness and normative gender behavior. Consequently, male mental health disorders came to imply feminization—a substantial threat to male identity that contributed to increasing the damaging effects of mental problems. This development that originated in the beginning of the last century has had a great impact on the depiction and treatment of male madness since then, both scientifically and culturally, and as I will argue later, it is still exerting its influence today through the still operating Western dualistic gender ideology.

The relationship between masculinity and insanity is complex, because its nature is reciprocal. In other words, failing to uphold the culturally defined norms of masculinity may result in mental health disorders due to the psychological distress caused by the damage to one's identity and social functioning. At the same time, as was mentioned earlier, insanity is not just a result of having lost one's manhood—it is also a cause in itself, since madness is antithetical to masculinity by encompassing the stereotypical aspects of femininity. In an attempt to explain the relationship between madness and

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<sup>30</sup> Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism*, 47.

masculinity in greater detail, I will begin by examining insanity as a consequence of failed masculinity and then address its causal qualities.

## **Beating the Wings: Mental Disturbance as a Result of Damaged Male Identity**

The dualistic gender ideologies of Western cultures present men with tough challenges. David D. Gilmore claims in the introduction to his book *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* that manhood ideals are necessary both for the continuous functioning of social systems and for men to be able to integrate into their community. Since these ideals are rather strict and unambiguous, any deviation from the norm is accompanied by a risk of losing one's status in society. This concept of "pressured manhood" is demanded by the culture as a criterion by which one's belonging to the society is evaluated.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, those men who fail to satisfy the demands of proper manhood ("the men-who-are-no-men") contribute to strengthening conformity to the ideal of masculinity by being scorned by society.<sup>32</sup> As a result, failed masculinity is highly destructive to an individual, while it serves the purpose of maintaining social structures.

Sherwood Anderson's hero Wing Biddlebaum is one of such deviant cases. By failing to conform to the ideals of proper manhood, he loses his work, social status, and the sense of self-worth. His main characteristic seems to be a constant and restless hand movement, a neurotic habit that plagues him and reminds him of his "abnormality." "The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands. Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird, had given him his name,"<sup>33</sup> writes Anderson, and the reader is kept in suspense while the story of hands is gradually made more explicit. Biddlebaum's hands can be seen as a metonym of his mental condition, which was once in perfect order, but has now become reminiscent of a type of neurosis.

The reason for this significant change is an event that took place when Biddlebaum (at that time, Adolph Myers) was still working as a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania. One of the students accused the teacher of sexual misconduct, although, from Biddlebaum's perspective, his affectionate attitude towards his pupils was a Socratic attempt to

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<sup>31</sup> David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1919), renewed ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 28. All references in this thesis are made to the renewed version.

encourage them to dream and not a method of seduction. The reader is presented with a following glimpse of the main character's past:

With the boys of his school, Adolph Myers had walked in the evening or had sat talking until dusk upon the schoolhouse steps lost in a kind of dream. Here and there went his hands, caressing the shoulders of the boys, playing about the tousled heads. As he talked his voice became soft and musical. There was a caress in that also. In a way the voice and the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds. . . . Under the caress of his hands doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys and they began also to dream.<sup>34</sup>

The emphasis of the above quoted passage lies on the sensitive nature of both physical and emotional male-male intimacy between the teacher and schoolboys, which has a strong status of taboo in the historic-socio-cultural environment of masculinity.<sup>35</sup> By crossing the boundaries that define the accepted ways of connection between men, Biddlebaum is confronted with the aggressive and condemnatory reactions that society administers in order to enforce conformity within its oppressive systems, one of which is masculinism.<sup>36</sup> Within the constraints of masculinism, the schema of male-male interaction is strongly fixed and characterized by such internalized psychological rules as "men don't have physical contact," "physical contact has only to do with sex," and "physical contact with another man calls into question your sexual preference."<sup>37</sup> Michael Kimmel, in discussion of the psychological well-being of older men in our society, gives the following description of the influence of masculinism on the male perception of same-sex intimacy in the first part of the twentieth century:

They matured during a time of taken-for-granted cultural prejudice resulting in severe negative sanctions, not only against physical intimacy between men but even against expressions of affection. Not only religious leaders, but educational and medical authorities as well, conflated gender roles with sexual orientation, unintentionally promoting widespread anxiety among all men of any behavior that could be considered "feminine."<sup>38</sup>

Nobody doubts the truthfulness of the accusations of pedophilia that one of the schoolboys expresses, since Biddlebaum's behavior has always been considered suspicious

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Andreas G. Philaretou, *The Perils of Masculinity: An Analysis of Male Sexual Anxiety, Sexual Addiction, and Relational Abuse* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004), 29.

<sup>36</sup> Garde, "Madness and Masculinity," 6.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Blazina and David S. Shen-Miller, *An International Psychology of Men: Theoretical Advances, Case Studies, and Clinical Innovations* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 109.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Men and Masculinities* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 13.

by people in the town; therefore, the voicing of the allegations is sufficient for the town's men to undertake a violent attack in order to expel the teacher from their society. Although they do not manage to murder Biddlebaum, the nature of his banishment is irreversible, and after the lynching he is described as a "figure that screamed and ran faster and faster into the darkness," symbolically depicting the crossing of the borderline between sanity and madness. Biddlebaum does not consciously realize his crime, yet he feels that there is something about his hands that is the reason for the hatred and violence that others punish him with.

Wing Biddlebaum's life changes drastically the moment he is forced to leave his hometown and workplace, as he becomes isolated from the outside world and develops the neurotic habit reflecting his mental state, that is characterized by constant anxiety, alienation and a highly negative view of the self. The reader is told that "forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, [Wing Biddlebaum] did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years."<sup>39</sup> After being expelled from the town's social circles, Biddlebaum starts to lead a solitary existence, and it seems impossible that he could ever return to his former life again. Importantly, he accepts his fate as an outcast and makes no attempt to retrieve his manhood. The inability and unwillingness to follow the social rules pertaining to proper masculinity result in a substantial and permanent damage to the character's identity.

Before delving into the specifics of Biddlebaum's neurotic reactions, it is relevant to see what typifies the loss of manhood in general. Michael Kimmel, with regard to male aggression, argues that emasculation is directly linked to humiliation, and, in most cases, one feels obliged to win one's manhood back by revenge.<sup>40</sup> Fiona Reid also claims that emasculation is not necessarily permanent, but in her view the majority of men are able to develop successful coping mechanisms to deal with their gender-related emotional trauma.<sup>41</sup> Most scholars seem to agree that the loss of manhood is equated with losing one's power and/or status and that there are both constructive and destructive ways of dealing with traumas connected to male identity. Yet it is hard to come across a discussion of the cases where men with damaged gender identity, such as Anderson's protagonist, do not try to restore their manhood and surrender to a permanent pathological state.

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<sup>39</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinities* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 125.

<sup>41</sup> Fiona Reid, *Broken Men: Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914-30* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 4.

Why does Biddlebaum never make an attempt to fight or find his way back to society? One reason might be that he does not recognize the set of norms governing proper masculinity among his contemporaries, as he becomes troubled by his affectionate feelings towards men no sooner than after he has been humiliated by the townsmen. Also, Thomas Yingling makes a relevant point in his essay “*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience,” where he argues that “Hands” is a story about “homosexual panic and the privilege of self-assured heterosexual men to mark and brutalize those who differ from them in appearance, speech, and behavior.”<sup>42</sup> The townsmen’s aggressive reaction towards Biddlebaum’s deviant behavior is a rather obvious demonstration of homosexual panic, yet he never recognizes his inclination to same-sex physical contact as related to his sexuality. Whalan argues that this “type of simultaneous encouragement and disavowal of same-sex desire was important to Anderson as a way of escaping the constricting regulation of ‘homosexual panic.’”<sup>43</sup> Still, in Biddlebaum’s case the public persecution results in complete retreat from society.

One of the main emotional states that Biddlebaum continuously finds himself in is therefore alienation. According to David L. Minter, the theme of isolation is central to Anderson’s writing: “Repressed needs, thwarted desires, failed communications, and misshapen lives fill his work. His characters are not only cut off from one another; they are at odds with themselves and their own bodies.”<sup>44</sup> Biddlebaum is indeed alienated both from other people and his own self. His small house, which he seldom leaves, is situated by the edge of a ravine; his personality is timid and fearful; and the only person, with whom he has “formed something like a friendship,”<sup>45</sup> as we will see later, is George Willard. Nevertheless, also this relationship reflects the troublesome needs and desires of the main character.

Biddlebaum’s alienation from his own self, his internalized homosexual panic and the consequent inability to fulfill the demands of masculinist society are depicted through the metonymy of hands, a stylistic device that has afterwards been frequently employed by modernist writers to represent same-sex desire.<sup>46</sup> For instance, Hart Crane’s poem

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas Yingling, “*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience,” in *New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio*, ed. John W. Crowley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 115.

<sup>43</sup> Whalan, *Race, Manhood, and Modernism*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> David L. Minter, *A Cultural History of the American Novel, 1890-1940: Henry James to William Faulkner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Colleen Lamos, “Queer Conjunctions in Modernism,” in *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, ed. Bonnie K. Scott (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 338.

“Episode of Hands,” where the “encounter of hands, self, and other are organized around touch and gesture,”<sup>47</sup> is particularly interesting in relation to Anderson’s story. Biddlebaum’s internalization of homosexual panic circulating among the townsmen is expressed through his obsessive wish to hide his hands. Anderson writes that Biddlebaum “wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields, or passed, driving sleepy teams on country roads.”<sup>48</sup> In a single sentence, the image of hands contributes to the expression of alienation, anxiety and self-reproach. Biddlebaum feels alienated from “other men,” because they do not share his anxiety and shame. He seems to be in a constant struggle with his own hands that “forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression.”<sup>49</sup> Distancing himself from his own body illustrates the conflict between the physical and the psychological self, and functions as an attempt to separate the two. It appears that Biddlebaum has no control over his hands that “conceal themselves” or “come forth” on their own accord.

The inclination to hide or beat his hands represents both an internalized homophobia and the repression of same-sex desire, which is most difficult to control in the presence of George Willard, the only person that Biddlebaum socializes with. When the two men are together, Biddlebaum loses his fear of communication, while at the same time he is constantly beset by the homosexual panic that the society has imposed on him. “With the young reporter at his side, he ventured in the light of day into Main Street or strode up and down on the rickety front porch of his own house, talking excitedly. The voice that had been low and trembling became shrill and loud. The bent figure straightened.”<sup>50</sup> The fact that Willard respects Biddlebaum and does not have knowledge about his past plays an important role here. Their relationship does not have to be governed by masculinist ideology, because there is no one to control the implementation of these norms. However, the memory of the humiliating past experiences is a strong enough force to distort Biddlebaum’s identity. Thus “when he talked to George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum closed his fists and beat with them upon a table or on the walls of his house. The action made him

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<sup>47</sup> Ronald Schleifer, *Intangible Materialism: The Body, Scientific Knowledge, and the Power of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 104.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

more comfortable.”<sup>51</sup> Every time Biddlebaum feels inclined to touch his friend, he has to inflict physical pain on himself, reenacting the punishment that the townsmen undertook after the tragic school incident. The memory of the boys’ fathers’ words “keep your hands to yourself” and “I’ll teach you to put your hands on my boy, you beast” plagues him, and makes Biddlebaum become his own punisher.

It is here that we see the most negative influence of gender related socio-cultural demands on an individual’s mental health. Dualistic gender ideology organizes the society in a way that has no place for those who deviate from the normative masculinity or femininity. As a consequence, people like Biddlebaum, who cannot fit into any of the two concrete categories, are forced to think of themselves as abnormal, and the psychological distress caused by the social rejection is a solid basis for mental health disorders. When discussing the basic principles of social demands pertaining to gender, Taylor J. Holder makes the following point, which summarizes the impact of masculinist ideology on many individuals’ lives: “Denying someone’s place on the continuum leaves them with a deviant label, excluded from their religious faith and social world, rejected by their families, and, for many, oppressed for a lifetime that may be cut short due to their inability to live in a world of rejection and high expectations.”<sup>52</sup> Anderson’s protagonist is one of these individuals who are denied a place on the gender continuum. The reader hears little about Biddlebaum’s family, which enforces the sense of exclusion and alienation. The only family member that is mentioned in the story is “an aunt in Winesburg, a black-toothed old woman who raised chickens,”<sup>53</sup> with whom Biddlebaum lived until her death. Also, all the people he has known before being dismissed from the school are not present in his life afterwards. He is labeled as “Wing Biddlebaum” because of his obsession with hands, and this name acquires the function of a constant reminder of his deviation and inability to be like “normal men.”

Although Anderson wrote his story almost hundred years ago, the problems he introduces in his work are still present in the world of today, and one of the main aims of this thesis is therefore to chronologically examine, through fiction, the problematic areas that medical science does not address. In today’s biopsychiatry, the socio-cultural aspects of mental health disorders are being largely neglected, although I believe that such interdisciplinary research has an immense therapeutic potential. It is important to admit that

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor J. Holder, *All Points in Between: Shifting on the Scale of Sex and Gender* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2006), 34.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 33.



madness is neither a purely physical problem nor a fault of an individual human being, although the stigma attached to mental illness may indicate so. As we see in “Hands,” for instance, it might be that the socio-cultural pressures are one of the basic constituents of individual distress, and the study of the complex relationship between madness and masculinity in literature can contribute to raising the awareness of impact that the society has on an individual’s life and well-being.

### **A Voice Too Smooth: Madness as a Cause of Damaged Male Identity**

In the previous section, mental health disorders were examined as a result of the gender related demands and expectations that the society holds for men; however, that is only one aspect of the social construct of madness. To fully explore the impact that madness has on male identity, it is essential to recognize and study the parallels between insanity and femininity. The three literary works that this thesis concentrates on reveal different ways in which the relationship between madness and masculinity contributes to reinforcing gender stereotypes and maintaining the ideology of masculinism that is as harmful for men as it is for women. Moreover, the specific time periods that these works characterize provide us with valuable knowledge about the changes that the Western culture has undergone in the course of the twentieth century.

“Hands” was written during a period when homosexuality was officially classified as a mental illness, as it was no earlier than in 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed it from its official diagnostic categories.<sup>54</sup> Thus, when the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders was published in 1980, it was stated in the manual that homosexuality itself was not a mental disease.<sup>55</sup> This fact is significant for the present analysis from several perspectives. First of all, it proves that the influence of socio-cultural conditions on psychiatric categories is undeniable and that there has been too little research in this area. Lawrence Stevens in his article “Does Mental Illness Exist?” makes an apt yet ironic comparison between mental and physical illnesses: “If mental illness were really an illness in the same sense that physical illnesses are illnesses, the ideal of deleting homosexuality or anything else from the categories of illness by having a vote would be as absurd as a group of physicians voting to delete

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<sup>54</sup> “The Sexes: An Instant Cure,” *Time Magazine*, April 1, 1974, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,904053,00.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Amanda S. Barusch, *Foundations of Social Policy: Social Justice in Human Perspective*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belmont: Cengage Learning, 2011), 208.

cancer or measles from the concept of disease.”<sup>56</sup> I would not agree with Lawrence’s claim that mental illness is “*entirely* a question of values, of right and wrong, of appropriate versus inappropriate;” however, the importance of the enlisted moral categories should not be underestimated. The emergence of such scholarly disciplines as medical humanities (the study of the arts in medicine and vice versa) or biocultural research is a promising way of uncovering the so far neglected relationship between mental illness and various socio-cultural constructs.

Second, the former classification of homosexuality as mental illness exemplifies the strong association between madness and femininity. Women have traditionally been considered the part of humankind that is prone to various mental health disorders. In “Hands,” we can see that even when madness is ascribed to a man its female characteristics are retained. Therefore, when feminine qualities are displayed by a man, they act as an indication of his mental disturbance. In order to explore this aspect of the relationship between madness and gender, it is pertinent to return to the analysis of Anderson’s short story, in which insanity, masculinity, and homosexuality co-exist in a mutually dependent manner.

From masculinist point of view, a man who displays feminine attitudes and qualities deviates from normative manhood. Since gender dualism is taken for granted and believed to be defined by nature, any deviation is equivalent to “illness.” In “Women and Madness,” Phyllis Chesler argues that problematic male behavior, which corresponds to the socially accepted typically masculine conduct (e.g. displays of violence or alcohol abuse), is seen as mentally healthy, while men who possess emblematic feminine characteristics or choose men as sexual partners are considered to be mentally disturbed: “What we consider ‘madness,’ whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype.”<sup>57</sup> This point is well illustrated in “Hands,” where the physical and emotional attack against Wing Biddlebaum is justified by his inability to act out the strictly defined male role. Regardless of whether we assume that Biddlebaum is homosexual or not, his feminine conduct alone is a sufficient reason for falling into the category of abnormality. The accusations of the schoolboy, which “galvanized into beliefs” the “hidden shadowy

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<sup>56</sup> Lawrence Stevens, “Does Mental Illness Exist?” The Antipsychiatry Coalition, last modified February 10, 2003, <http://www.antipsychiatry.org/exist.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, (New York: Avon Books, 1973), 56.

doubts that had been in men's minds,"<sup>58</sup> provides the boys' fathers (i.e. society) with an informal right to exclude Biddlebaum from all social institutions as a threat to the established order.

It is essential to keep in mind that in Anderson's short story madness and homosexuality are merged as two inseparable entities, reflecting both the scientific and the socio-cultural attitudes towards same-sex desire during the first part of the twentieth century. This makes worthwhile the comparison between "Hands" (1919), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Infinite Jest* (1996) as three literary works written during time periods when significant changes took place in relation between madness, gender, and sexuality. In "Hands," the social definition of homosexuality as a mental "illness" causes homophobic reactions among the men who represent unambiguous heterosexual masculinity. Moreover, the neurotic reactions that Biddlebaum develops after being expelled from the town are the result of the social pressures enacted due to his seeming inclination towards members of his own sex.

The reciprocal relationship between these two aspects of madness are brought forward by Michael King in a chapter about the mental health of gay men included in one of the few books that address the role of gender in mental health issues: *Textbook of Men's Mental Health* (2007). There he argues that the "official sanction of homosexuality as illness hindered the development of a gay and lesbian identity and led to oppression, shame, guilt, and fear for many men and women and their families."<sup>59</sup> My reading of "Hands" shows that equating homosexuality with mental illness did have severe negative effects on many people's lives. Although I would not classify Biddlebaum's identity as homosexual, his ambiguous physical inclination towards the schoolboys causes fear and condemnatory reactions among their parents. In his short story, Anderson exemplifies the consequences of homophobia, showing that even alleged deviance from heterosexuality could do a substantial damage to male identity and mental health.

In "Hands," one finds plenty of evidence that suggests Biddlebaum's incompatibility with the normative sexuality/masculinity and thus criteria for being labeled as mentally disturbed. To begin with, even his physical appearance is described in anti-masculine terms. Biddlebaum is introduced to the reader as "a fat little old man" who

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<sup>58</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Michael King, "Mental Health of Gay Men," in *Textbook of Men's Mental Health*, eds. Jon E. Grant and Marc N. Potenza (Arlington: American Psychiatric Pub, 2007), 365.

walks “nervously up and down.”<sup>60</sup> The lack of physical strength, energy, and confidence that is suggested by this succinct description is obviously opposite to the ideal of manhood. Unfortunately, almost no research has been conducted to examine the historical development of the social perception of the male body image and its influence on male mental health, yet current research has shown that “the ideal male physique is muscular mesomorphic, characterized by broad shoulders, a muscular stomach, chest, and arms, and a narrow waist.”<sup>61</sup> Again, any deviation from the ideal complicates one’s opportunities to live in conformity with a culture governed by masculinism. In Biddlebaum’s case, having effeminate physical characteristics adds to the feminization of his personality, as well as preventing him from defending himself against the homophobic men’s violent attacks.

Another important feature that characterizes Biddlebaum’s personality is his voice, as it regularly reflects his changing emotional states and his affection for young men. For example, in George Willard’s presence his voice becomes “soft and reminiscent” and he starts to speak as “one lost in a dream” about “a kind of pastoral golden age”<sup>62</sup> when young men would gather around an old man who talked to them and inspired them to dream. At the same time, Biddlebaum warns Willard against the loud voices of the people who try to pass wrong knowledge to him. He encourages the young man to dream and not imitate the talking of the people who surround him. The created image of the idyllic historical scene and Willard’s presence itself makes Biddlebaum forget that he has to control his hands, and only when he is about to caress the young man does his self-control return and he hurries away with tears in his eyes.

The scene that Biddlebaum contemplates reminds one of the Ancient Greek world, where male same-sex desire was considered to be a completely natural human experience. Pederasty, a relationship between an adult mentor and a boy (usually between the age of ten and eighteen), “even if it included sexual intercourse (‘aphrodisia’) in its manner of proceeding, was the one that focused on the education of the boy into adulthood, not on the erotic pleasure of the adult who acted as mentor.”<sup>63</sup> One easily notices the similarity of the man-boy relationship practiced by ancient Greeks and Biddlebaum’s attempts to educate the schoolboys and the young Willard through both physical and emotional intimacy. He cannot comprehend the wrongness of his behavior, because for him it is completely innocent, just like pederasty for ancient Greeks, which “is conducted honorably . . .

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<sup>60</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Blazina, *An International Psychology of Men*, 190.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 30.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph R. Laurin, *Homosexuality in Ancient Athens* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2005), 22.

without haste or never for money or political power but, as custom prescribes, for the sake of wisdom and virtue in the lover and the beloved. Thus, pederastic love is elevated to the most perfect form of friendship. Not only can it last a lifetime, but it can also be chaste.”<sup>64</sup> The clash between the dominant social norms of Biddlebaum’s own time and his personal beliefs, which might have been seen as adequate somewhere or sometime else, but are unacceptable in the society he lives in, demonstrates the power and the limits of one’s socio-cultural circumstances. In addition, the function of madness as a mechanism of social control, famously defined by Foucault,<sup>65</sup> is also present in Biddlebaum’s situation. His failure to conform to the prevailing morality results in being labeled as mentally ill and excluded from society.

Voice in this story functions not only as an indicator of Biddlebaum’s affection for young men, but also as another significant metonym. The “roaring voices” of mainstream society are opposed to the quiet and repressed voices of such men like Biddlebaum, who is forced to isolate himself from the outside world and live in almost continuous silence. The power dynamics between society and the individual are reflected through the amount and loudness of what can be said by either. “Biddlebaum the silent” can express the ideas “accumulated by his mind during long years of silence”<sup>66</sup> only to his friend Willard, and even then he is haunted by the threats and accusations that were shouted at him many years ago. Symbolically, the conflict between the voices shows that, in masculinist society, an individual is subordinated to the prevailing morality whenever his or her attitudes do not correspond to these norms. The fact that Biddlebaum’s behavior differs from typical male behavior, and consequently endangers successful maintenance of gender dualism, is what causes his silencing by attributing to him the label of madness/homosexuality.

Apart from characterizing power relations, voice has another important function in Anderson’s story, namely that it is used as a metaphor for the potential and/or existing physical contact between Biddlebaum and other men. Interesting research has been done on the use of voice in cinematography as an indirect representation of physical intimacy<sup>67</sup>; however, literature as a written medium has not been explored in great detail with regard to the symbolic use of a character’s voice. Biddlebaum’s manner of talking and the sound of his voice have certain parallels with his body language and, in the following excerpt from

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> Murray Pomerance, *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 49.

“Hands,” the comparison between voice and physical contact is made apparent by the author: “As he talked his voice became soft and musical. There was a caress in that also. In a way the voice and the hands . . . were a part of the schoolmaster’s effort to carry a dream into the young minds.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, voice is equated with touch, and it functions both as a supplement to and as a substitute for the socially forbidden physical intimacy between males.

Biddlebaum’s voice is one of the feminine qualities that he is unable to disguise and also an indicator of his deviation from normative masculinity. Anne Karpf’s book *The Human Voice: The Story of a Remarkable Talent* contains reference to interesting research that was carried out in 1988 during which an attempt was made to define the ideal American voice. The results were rather telling, but probably quite predictable: the ideal American voice corresponded to the ideal male voice, though American women could either possess the ideal female voice or the ideal American voice.<sup>69</sup> This study shows that prejudices against femininity not only concern stereotypically female behavior, but also physical/biological features that women possess. Consequently, if a woman’s voice is masculine, it can still be ideal. If a man, on the contrary, has a feminine voice, he loses both the opportunity to have the ideal and the ideal male voice at the same time. This fact illustrates the previously mentioned “double loss” that men experience when they are exposed to mental health disorders. The presence of a feminine feature within masculinity presupposes deviation from ideal manhood. Simultaneously, it is associated with abnormality to such an extent that this violation of normative masculinity becomes equal to mental disorder. In contrast, a woman who possesses a masculine quality might be considered unfeminine, but the normative character of masculinity itself will not lead to classifying her as mentally disturbed.<sup>70</sup>

Not only Biddlebaum’s physical characteristics, such as his looks or voice, are effeminate, but also his very personality is depicted as womanlike, and many of these feminine qualities can be found among the images commonly associated with madness, such as emotional expressiveness, wildness, irrationality, sexuality, and passivity.<sup>71</sup> I have already briefly addressed the question of physical and emotional intimacy between Biddlebaum and the schoolboys or his only friend George Willard; however, it is worth

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<sup>68</sup> Anderson *Winesburg, Ohio*, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice: The Story of a Remarkable Talent* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 166.

<sup>70</sup> Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender,” 289.

<sup>71</sup> Garde,, “Madness and Masculinity,” 6.

examining in greater detail the differences in male and female displays of sexuality and emotionality and the effects of deviating from the norms prescribed to one's gender through social custom.

The masculine code in Western society represses emotionality, while the feminine code encourages emotional expressiveness that is nurturing and vulnerable.<sup>72</sup> From the point of view of dualistic gender ideology, it is taken for granted that outward emotionality is a female characteristic, which men should avoid. With the “two gender-specific, sexual, and emotional cultures” existing side by side,<sup>73</sup> the display of features that pertain to the other gender involves the risk of being met by social condemnation, which is what happens in “Hands” when the teacher tries to express his affection towards children in a way that is atypical of his gender. “The different styles of loving are the products of the large-scale transformations that created the modern system of gender relations, and they are as much the cause of gender inequality as the result of preexisting gender differences,”<sup>74</sup> suggests Kimmel. One can see it reflected in “Hands,” where Anderson describes Biddlebaum's personality and his emotional expressiveness in the following way: “Adolph Myers was meant by nature to be a teacher of youth. He was one of those rare, little-understood men who rule by a power so gentle that it passes as a lovable weakness. In their feeling for the boys under their charge such men are not unlike the finer sort of women in their love of men.”<sup>75</sup>

In the above quoted passage, the comparison between Biddlebaum's feelings for the schoolchildren and women's love for men is fairly suggestive; however, I would like to stress that the reason for the teacher being considered “rare” and “little-understood” is not his actual feelings for the children, but rather the physical way of expressing his affection. According to Daniel Kahneman, the stereotypes connected to gender differences in emotion “may apply primarily to outward emotional expression and not necessarily to inward emotional experience.”<sup>76</sup> Biddlebaum expresses his love in a way that is stereotypically feminine, by talking, being emotionally supportive and nurturing, as opposed to the “masculine love” that includes, for example, practical assistance, and shared activities. Biddlebaum's way of openly showing love crosses the line that divides

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<sup>72</sup> Paula England, *Theory on Gender/Feminism on Theory* (Hawthorne: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 200.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 216.

<sup>75</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 31.

<sup>76</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 343.

normative manhood and womanhood, and it makes society view this deviation from the norm as dangerous and condemnable.

The experience and expression of love has not always been related to sexuality. Kimmel notes in *The Gendered Society*, that “as the basis for sexual activity, love turns out to be relatively rare.” Moreover, “love and sex turn out to be most highly associated in cultures where women and men are more unequal.”<sup>77</sup> The close association between love and sexuality, which originates from the beginning of the twentieth century, is also one of the main reasons for homophobia. As we see in “Hands,” Biddlebaum’s love for children is immediately perceived as perversion, because it is equated with sexual desire. Besides, after being physically and emotionally abused by the boys’ fathers, Biddlebaum internalizes the homophobic reactions of his contemporary society and feels forced to repress any inclination to express love or affection for his own sex. During a walk with his friend Willard, Biddlebaum becomes “wholly inspired,” forgets about controlling his hands and lays them on Willard’s shoulders. As his emotionality increases, he feels an urge to caress him again, and then “a look of horror” sweeps over his face. The next moment, “with a convulsive movement of his body, Wing Biddlebaum sprang to his feet and thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets.”<sup>78</sup> The internalization of masculinist attitudes towards love and sexuality has a severely negative effect on his identity, as he is neither able to retain his “former self” nor adapt to the socially demanded masculinity.

Among other features that make normative masculinity unattainable for Biddlebaum one finds inactivity and submissiveness that manifest themselves in different situations. For instance, in the beginning of the story, he encounters a group of berry pickers returning from their work on the fields. They laugh and shout while passing him by, which is contrasted with his silent observation. Then one of the youths “commands” him to comb his hair, and he starts nervously to arrange the locks falling on his forehead. The scene makes one sympathetic towards the main character, since it shows his complete inability and/or unwillingness to face other people without fear or anxiety. Although his social anxiety was initiated by the violent expulsion from the work environment because of alleged pedophilia, it is in continuous interaction with his identity as a feature that feminizes him further and enforces the label of madness.

Another situation where one can witness Biddlebaum’s passivity is the moment when Henry Bradford, the father of one of the schoolboys, comes to his house and beats

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<sup>77</sup> Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, 216.

<sup>78</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 30.



him up in front of the children. The teacher shows no resistance, allowing Bradford to “beat him with his fists” and “kick him about the yard.”<sup>79</sup> Both of the above described situations “are consistent with gender schemas that characterize women as passive and lacking control, and men as active, powerful, and exerting control.”<sup>80</sup> Biddlebaum’s role as a victim and his passivity contribute to his feminization both from his own point of view and in the eyes of the outside observers. According to Howard, “victimization may be so deeply female an experience that a man who is victimized is literally feminized” in one’s cognitive evaluations.<sup>81</sup> The aggression and violence that Biddlebaum surrenders to is thus damaging to his identity, as it gives prominence to his effeminacy and is another proof of his incompatibility with the existing norms of masculinity deviation from which is classified as mental disturbance.

Wildness and irrationality have probably the most obvious connection to madness, since insanity is most frequently understood as the very opposite of rationality. However, the lack of rationality is also seen as one of the female shortcomings that are suggested by Western cultural stereotypes related to gender.<sup>82</sup> The tendency to equate women with irrationality and men with rationality was particularly prevalent before the First World War, when hysteria was exclusively “the preserve of over-emotional females.”<sup>83</sup> Although the epidemic of male mental disturbances during and after the war made it clear that the gendered theories of madness had to be reevaluated, the stereotype of women as being hysterical and unreasonable permeates the literature of the twentieth century. In “Hands,” Biddlebaum’s irrationality is one of his most characteristic features. Importantly, it is the main connection between the two kinds of madness that the short story represents—the mental disturbance caused by one’s exclusion from the society due to a failed manhood and the existence of feminine features within a male identity that lead to categorizing him as mentally ill (i.e. homosexual).

The reader is told that “Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years.”<sup>84</sup> Here irrationality plays an important role in two

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>80</sup> Jocelyn A. Hollander, *Gendered Situations, Gendered Selves: A Gender Lens on Social Psychology* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 113.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>82</sup> Sarah J. Gervais and Theresa K. Vescio, “The Origins and Consequences of Subtle Sexism,” in *Advances in Psychology Research 49* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2007), 144.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 223.

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 27.

ways. On one hand, there is Biddlebaum who is constantly displaying outbreaks of seemingly irrational fear of people. On the other hand, there is a society whose fear of non-normative sexuality/gender identity has caused Biddlebaum's anxiety. Although his fear is depicted and perceived by others as irrational, the actual irrationality underlies the social reactions towards the main character. Gregory G. Bolich provides the following definitions and explanation for the fear related to gender and sexuality:

Anyone with an atypical gender identity must face the possibility of *homophobia* – an irrational fear of someone because of their sexual orientation. Anyone with a homosexual orientation must face the possibility of *transphobia* – an irrational fear of someone because of their atypical gender identity. Fear motivates conformity to gender roles.<sup>85</sup>

Hence, the depiction of Biddlebaum's fear as unreasonable actually disguises the irrationality of the fear *of* him. In addition, his timidity and nervousness add to and reinforce his feminine qualities.

“Hands” contains numerous references to fear and anxiety. For instance, while waiting for Willard to appear, Biddlebaum stood “rubbing his hands together and looking up and down the road, and then, fear overcoming him, ran back to walk again upon the porch on his own house.”<sup>86</sup> To an onlooker, this kind of behavior might seem irrational, while discovering the cause of his fear clearly shows that it is far from being meaningless. Internalized homophobia is constantly reflected through Biddlebaum's obsession with his hands whenever he anticipates or actually has any contact with his friend Willard—the only person who treats Biddlebaum with respect and in whose company he “lost something of his timidity, and his shadowy personality, submerged in a sea of doubts, came forth to look at the world.”<sup>87</sup> In Willard's presence, Biddlebaum does not feel threatened or humiliated. On the contrary, he sees George as someone who is willing to accept the knowledge Biddlebaum is no longer able to pass on to his students.

Still, it must be noted that Willard is not informed about Biddlebaum's past and the tragic incident, which makes the reader wonder if and/or how this knowledge would influence their relationship. Willard's curiosity is described as “overwhelming” and one afternoon he almost manages to ask his friend about his hands. Yet Biddlebaum's nervous and fearful reaction to the impulse of caressing Willard leaves the young man with the

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<sup>85</sup> Gregory G. Bolich, *Conversing on Gender* (Raleigh: Psyche's Press, 2007), 167.

<sup>86</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 28.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

following afterthought: “‘I’ll not ask him about his hands,’ he thought, touched by the memory of the terror he had seen in the man’s eyes. ‘There’s something wrong, but I don’t want to know what it is. His hands have something to do with his fear of me and of everyone.’”<sup>88</sup> Fear seems to afflict everyone in the story. Society is afraid of Biddlebaum, because his deviance from the prescribed gender roles seems incomprehensible and abnormal. Biddlebaum, in his turn, is frightened both by the aggressively homophobic society and by his own deviant self. Also, Willard, who lacks knowledge about the essence of his friend’s mental disturbances, fears discovering the truth. It has been proved that “fear is an emotion that is ‘wired’ into our human natures”<sup>89</sup>; however, when the irrationality of one’s fear becomes equivalent to madness, nature is not to be blamed.

In his memoirs, Anderson has said the following about *Winesburg, Ohio*: “Perhaps I was even vain enough to think that these stories told would, in the end, have the effect of breaking down a little the curious separateness of so much of life, these walls we build up about us.”<sup>90</sup> It might be presumptuous to say that literary scholarship is finally on the way to accomplishing Anderson’s goal. However, I would argue that a careful and thorough study of the relationship between an individual and society and/or culture in literature can indeed contribute to breaking down some of the walls that separate people from one another. In “Hands” one can see both reasons for and the immense destructive potential of the isolation of a human being from the rest of the world because of his inability to satisfy the socio-cultural demands of his time. Madness in this short story is the wall that the masculinist society builds around itself to exclude those who deviate from the norm. At the same time, it is also the wall that one builds around oneself as a protection against the violence and the condemnation directed at those who dare to differ.

“Hands” present the reader with two faces of madness. The first kind of madness is a mental health disorder that develops as the result of Biddlebaum’s inability to conform to the social norms pertaining to manhood ideals. The second kind of madness is his very deviation from these norms, in other words, his femininity that leads to classifying him as homosexual/mentally ill. The main difference between male and female insanity, as Anderson’s story proves, is the double damage that accompanies men’s experience of madness. In masculinist society, male madness does not only imply losing control over one’s reason, but also signifies the loss of proper manhood, since insanity and femininity

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>89</sup> Paul R. Ehrlich, *Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect* (Washington: Island Press, 2000), 216.

<sup>90</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 15.

are closely associated with one another. The beginning of the twentieth century and, specifically, the post–World War I period, was the time when the problems connected to the destructive nature of failed masculinity entered mainstream society and had to be dealt with. Yet, as we have seen in “Hands,” often there was little hope for those who found themselves too far from normative masculinity.

## 2. In the Combine of In/sanity: Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

*“Oh, I could give you Freudian reasons with fancy talk, and that would be right as far as it went. But what you want are the reasons for the reasons, and I'm not able to give you those.”*

Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

### **The Psychedelic 1960s and Madmen-Role Traps**

“You get your visions through whatever gate you're granted,” wrote Ken Kesey in connection with the insights he gained from the government-sponsored drug experiments in which he participated during the early 1960s. After the end of this project, Kesey was accepted as a nurse's aide on the same mental ward, where his sympathy towards the patients and willingness to understand their situation acquired a practical form. “I very prudently took to carrying around a little notebook, to scribble notes. I got a lot of compliments from nurses: ‘Good for you, Mr. Kesey. That's the spirit. Get to know these men.’”<sup>91</sup> In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, these notes are transformed into thorough and touching accounts of the life of a group of male patients on a mental ward, which is run by an authoritative and inhumane nurse. The theme of madness and masculinity is central to Kesey's novel. By turning institutional psychiatry into an allegory of social control, he manages to explain the men's mental problems as resulting from their inability to cope with the demands of masculinist society.

In the previous chapter, I emphasized World War I as one of the main turning points in the twentieth-century's view of madness and gender. The potential need of everyone, regardless of gender, to receive psychiatric help had become acknowledged, and the prestige and authority of mental health professionals were on the rise. During World War II, this tendency expanded, since “military needs for mental health services, from screening recruits to treating combat casualties, gave all the members of the interwar ‘team’ [psychiatrists, social workers, and psychologists] new opportunities to prove their

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<sup>91</sup> Kesey, preface to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, vii-viii.

usefulness.”<sup>92</sup> The prestige of mental health professionals increased due to their successful use of psychoanalytical methods developed during the interwar period in treating war traumas. The most favored group among the above mentioned professionals was undoubtedly the clinical psychiatrists. The field of psychiatry received most of the federal funding and was considered to be highly prestigious among officials, students, and the public alike.<sup>93</sup>

However, at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, after years of an almost unquestionable and unquestioned authority, the prestige of the reigning psychiatry started to collapse. The emphases in psychiatry shifted to favor the “pharmacologization” of madness and community mental health services. In addition, both practically and ideologically influential was “the sudden rise of anti-psychiatry, stemming in part from the overall movement of the sixties counterculture.”<sup>94</sup> These changes affected not only the ways of administrating psychiatric treatment, but also social attitudes towards madness. Nancy Tomes writes that it was the post-war turmoil that brought forward an overall “rebellious stance towards psychiatry, manifest first among clinical psychologists in the 1950s, and spreading to the other disciplines, as well as policy makers and the general public, in the 1960s and 1970s.”<sup>95</sup>

The anti-psychiatry movement is a widely known illustration of the general rebellion towards clinical and institutional psychiatry in the sixties. Although the relevance of the term “anti-psychiatry” has frequently been criticized, also, and perhaps even most severely, by its assumed representatives, I will refer to it in my thesis for two main reasons. First, I see it as well suited for and inseparable from its socio-historical context. The anti-psychiatrists believed and argued that the models of psychiatric practices of the 1960s were wrong in treating mental illnesses as brain diseases and that they were insensitive to individual patients’ rights.<sup>96</sup> In fact, even the concept of mental illness was put under severe critique by, among others, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, who strongly refused identifying his opposition towards the conventional psychiatric practice as anti-

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<sup>92</sup> Nancy Tomes, “The Development of Clinical Psychology, Social Work, and Psychiatric Nursing: 1900-1980s,” in *History of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology*, eds. Edwin R. Wallace and John Gach (New York: Springer, 2008), 667.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 669.

<sup>94</sup> Mark S. Micale, *Discovering the History of Psychiatry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 75.

<sup>95</sup> Tomes, “The Development of Clinical Psychology,” 669.

<sup>96</sup> Gavin Miller, *R.D. Laing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 19.

psychiatric.<sup>97</sup> Second, this term, invented by the psychiatrist David Cooper in 1967,<sup>98</sup> acquired life and power of its own despite all the attempts to reject or replace it. Thus it became a widely recognized and unifying name for both medical and social activists who rebelled against the involuntarily institutional psychiatry that they considered harmful to an individual. Apart from Cooper and Szasz, the names most often associated with the movement of anti-psychiatry include another psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, sociologists Erving Goffman and Thomas Scheff, social theorist Michel Foucault, as well as the author of the novel that will be at the centre of discussion in this chapter—writer Ken Kesey.

Although I will further use some of the ideas presented by the above mentioned prominent scholars to highlight and examine ways in which masculinism operates within closed (mental/social) institutions, it needs to be emphasized that this thesis is not an attempt to make a case for anti-psychiatry, as I consider it to be a socio-historical phenomenon which is relevant as a provider of reference points rather than one concrete, applicable theory. Still, the movement should be given credit for its criticism of institutional “violence” and violation of an individual’s rights, summarized by Szasz in the following way:

I have long maintained that mental illnesses are counterfeit diseases (“nondiseases”) and that coerced psychiatric relations are like coerced labor relations (“slavery”) or sexual relations (rape), and spent the better part of my professional life criticizing the concept of mental illness, objecting to the practices of involuntary-institutional psychiatry, and advocating the abolition of “psychiatric slavery” and “psychiatric rape.”<sup>99</sup>

In my reading, *Cukoo’s Nest* will function as an exemplification of the notions introduced by Szasz, as the novel’s depiction of institutionalization highlights the unequal relations between the staff and the patients, which lead to internalization of the labels of deviance and subordination.

Importantly, in the 1960s the social critique of institutions reached its peak. In his sociological study of institutionalized psychiatric patients, Goffman found out that mental hospitals were at least partial contributors to maintaining the label of deviance assigned to the patients upon being admitted to a mental health institution. According to Goffman, entering an institution for mentally ill causes a process called “the mortification of the

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<sup>97</sup> Thomas Szasz, preface to *Anti-Psychiatry: Quackery Squared* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), viii.

<sup>98</sup> David Cooper, *Psychiatry and Anti-psychiatry* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>99</sup> Szasz, preface to *Anti-Psychiatry*, ix.

self,” through which the patient loses his actual self and acquires an institutional self. This happens through various rituals that displace the routines of everyday life, such as wearing special clothes, having one’s hair cut, and taking scheduled showers and/or meals. It is *within* the institution that the patient learns how to act as mentally ill, and the normality of deviance acquired in such confined and isolated space makes the chances of returning to the outside world fall almost to zero.<sup>100</sup> According to Peter Nolan, in the period between 1950s and 1960s “far from adhering to their original purpose of aiding mentally ill people towards recovery, the agenda in psychiatric hospitals had become solely the preservation of their own hierarchies.”<sup>101</sup>

It is quite obvious to the readers, that Ken Kesey’s novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) echoes Szasz and Goffman’s views about the destructive power of institutional psychiatry and the medicalization of madness with regard to an individual’s right to freedom. In the course of the time that Kesey spent working at the Menlo Park Veteran’s Hospital in spring of 1960, he gained an immediate knowledge about the harmful effects of involuntary institutional conformity.<sup>102</sup> However, the main focus of this chapter will be an analysis of the ways in which the novel represents the enacting of social control through institutional psychiatry in order to maintain successful functioning of masculinist society. Also, I will borrow Goffman’s term “mortification of the self” to give a name to the continuous process of emasculation of male patients through their institutionalization.

One of the main goals of this chapter in particular and my thesis in general is to raise awareness of and counteract arguments that misinterpret and devalue literary works which deal with the subject of gender by examining them through the lens of either deliberate or unconscious prejudice, based on the lack of knowledge and understanding of the multifaceted and mutually dependant nature of social constructs. It is quite easy not to notice the reciprocal relationship between madness and masculinity that is present in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, if each of these constructs is examined in isolation and within the strict constraints of one particular field of study. As a consequence of the lack of inter-disciplinary research, the social critique in Kesey’s novel, particularly with regard to masculinist gender ideology, has often been overlooked.

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<sup>100</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

<sup>101</sup> Peter Nolan, *A History of Mental Health Nursing* (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes, 1998), 123.

<sup>102</sup> Faggen, introduction to *Cuckoo’s Nest*, xiii.



A case in point could be the following claim from the essay “Role Traps in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*” written by sociologist Michelle Napierski-Prancl, which points to the “apparent sexism” that is said to saturate the novel:

Sexism is apparent in *Cuckoo’s Nest* as characters are relegated to two types of role traps: those that favor traditional norms of femininity/masculinity and those that challenge them. We sympathize with characters who act gender appropriately and dislike or feel sorry for those who do not. Role traps pigeonhole characters into classes of one-dimensional gendered beings.<sup>103</sup>

Although Napierski-Prancl emphasizes in her essay the importance of the socio-historical context of the novel’s time of publication, she labels the depiction of gender in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* as sexist due to approaching masculinity/femininity from a strictly feminist perspective. Consequently, she arrives at a conclusion that during the psychedelic 1960s, which witnessed the birth of both the Civil Rights movement and the second wave of feminism, Kesey’s novel acted as “a form of backlash against the civil rights and women’s movements.”<sup>104</sup> My purpose in this thesis is to prove quite the opposite to what is claimed in the above quoted passage—to show that an inter-disciplinary analysis of masculinity and madness in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* makes obvious the novel’s severe and justified critique of coerced and one-dimensional gender roles that characterize masculinist society, as well as their enforcement through the means of social control, particularly, institutional psychiatry.

The examination of Sherwood Anderson’s short story “Hands” in the previous chapter revealed that male madness in masculinist society is essentially different from female madness, since the close association between insanity and femininity acts as a substantial threat to male gender identity. On one hand, in Western dualistic gender ideology effeminacy is seen as a symptom of mental deviance. On the other hand, social reactions towards male madness (and their internalization) contribute to strengthening men’s sense of gender inadequacy. In this chapter, I will attempt to explain the socio-culturally determined modifications and implications of this so-called double face of male madness in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, a literary work whose main value for the purpose of this thesis lies in its courageous and provocative dialogue with and protest against the prevailing practices and beliefs of the time during which it was written.

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<sup>103</sup> Michelle Napierski-Prancl, “Role Traps in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*,” in *Women in Literature: Reading Through the Lens of Gender*, eds. Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), 227.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

## **Between Manhood and Rabbithood: Deviance from Normative Masculinity as a Curable Mental Dis-ease**

The setting in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a male mental ward where the patients are divided into two main groups: the “Acutes,” who are “still sick enough to be fixed”; and the “Chronics,” who are “in for good.”<sup>105</sup> The fact that the Chronics are rendered irremediable, while there is still a possibility that the Acutes might return to society and function successfully within it, creates an essential difference between the two groups. The Chronics can no longer be perceptive of the measures of social control performed by the hospital staff as well as the nationwide Combine (a symbol of power that I will discuss in detail later), while the Acutes have the chance to be “cured” and re-integrated into society. Besides, as the reader discovers in the second part of the novel, most of the Acutes have been institutionalized by choice and not by force, which makes one wonder about the reasons for anyone choosing to spend life in a mental ward where the patients are treated as second-rate human beings. The present analysis will therefore concentrate mainly upon the patients from the Acutes group, while becoming a Chronic will be seen as the irreversible result of an unsuccessful treatment of a potentially “fixable” Acute.

It is made clear in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that the power to decide what sanity or madness lies in the hands of society. The main reason for the in/voluntary hospitalization of the Acutes is their inability to adapt to and live in accordance with the social norms pertaining to masculinism. “You men are in this hospital . . . because of your proven inability to adjust to society”<sup>106</sup> is Nurse Ratched’s favorite claim, which she directs at the patients in various forms every time they dare to protest against a rule of the mental ward. It is important to pay attention to the form of address that the Nurse uses when speaking to the patients, as well as its impact on the content of her speech. “You *men* [emphasis mine]” acquires a strong derogatory meaning because the gender is being equated with social inadequacy. The Acutes are not in the hospital because they cannot function in society as human beings—they are there due to their inability to perform their gender in a socially adequate manner. Thus, the task of psychiatry is to train the patient for successful adjustment with the help of “a little world Inside that is made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside,”<sup>107</sup> where one might need to take one’s place again.

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<sup>105</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Probably the saddest aspect of a strictly dualistic gender ideology and its maintenance by means of equating male deviance from proper manhood with madness is the internalization of gender inadequacy. Although in the course of the novel the reader gets the impression that all the patients have been involuntarily committed to the hospital and that they are prohibited from exiting through its doors unless the staff grants a formal permission, in truth the vast majority of them have committed themselves. Harding, one of the ward's most intellectual residents, reveals this fact to McMurphy whose arrival at the hospital and outward machismo has inspired the old patients and, at the same time, highlighted the gap between the social ideals of manhood and their own personalities. "As a matter of fact, there are only a few men on the ward who *are* committed. Only Scanlon and – well, I guess some of the Chronics. And you. Not many commitments in the whole hospital. No, not many at all,"<sup>108</sup> admits Harding and shocks McMurphy with his confession. The acceptance and internalization of society's persistent demands of conforming to the masculinist norms and its definition of normality has convinced Harding and his fellow Acutes that they are mentally ill, which J.W. Bertens describes as subjecting oneself to the authority of human sciences or, using more Foucauldian terms, deferring to the power of psychiatric discourse.<sup>109</sup>

As was explained in the previous chapter, there exists a strong association between madness and femininity within masculinist ideology, which contributes to labeling men who deviate from proper masculinity as mentally ill. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the Acutes' feminine traits are the main indicator of their social disability and their need for treatment, which is both internalized and forced upon them. Hence, in order to further explore the reciprocal relationship between gender and madness and the influence of these social constructs on one's view of the self, I will undertake an analysis of four characters in the novel: Billy Bibbit, Chief Bromden and Dale Harding, three Acutes who have completely internalized their own gender inadequacy; and McMurphy, who symbolizes normative masculinity and acts both as an encouragement to uprising and as a proof of the other patients' deviance from ideal manhood.

After discovering that almost all patients on the ward, including Billy Bibbit, are there voluntarily, McMurphy cannot hide his incomprehension: "I can understand it with some of those old guys on the ward. They're *nuts*. But you, you're not exactly the everyday man on the street, but you're not nuts. . . . You could get along outside if you had

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>109</sup> Johannes Willem Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 119.

the guts – .”<sup>110</sup> McMurphy cannot relate to the other patients, because his personality traits reflect those that dualistic gender ideology ascribes to proper masculinity, while the men who have voluntarily entered the hospital to receive psychiatric treatment feel inferior and inadequate, because they do not possess the same features. Billy Bibbit’s response to McMurphy’s reaction illustrates this point:

You think I wuh-wuh-wuh-*want* to stay in here? You think I wouldn’t like a convertible and a guh-guh-girl friend? But did you ever have people l-l-laughing at you? No, because you’re so b-big and so *tough!* Well, I’m not big and tough. Neither is Harding. Neither is F-Fredrickson. Neither is Suh-Sefelt. Oh – oh, you – you t-talk like we stayed in here because we liked it! Oh – it’s n-no use...<sup>111</sup>

Billy admits that he could leave the hospital the same moment *if* he “had the guts,” while, in reality, he is overwhelmed by fear of contempt and ridicule administered by society.

The major symbol of Billy’s fear is the stuttering that becomes particularly severe whenever he finds himself in a stressful situation (cf. the uncontrollable movement of Wing Biddlebaum’s hands in Sherwood Anderson’s short story). I tend to agree with Peter Fish, who writes that Billy’s speech defect has a symbolic meaning in the novel, as it depicts his inability to grow up and become a man. However, the claim that in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* manhood and madness are defined “largely in sexual terms”<sup>112</sup> seems to oversimplify the complexity of the interaction between insanity and masculinity reflected by the novel’s characters. Although some of the patients’ problems may be sexually defined, I would argue that the nature of their mental disturbance is rooted in a more inclusive and complex deviance from the gender norms prevailing in their society. Thus, the fact that in his thirties Billy Bibbit is still a virgin should be seen not only as a reason for his mental plight, but also, and especially, as one of the implications of his gender inadequacy that, in its turn, leads to his internalized need and wish for seeking a cure.

The novel presents the reader with numerous references both to explicit and implied feminine traits exhibited by the men on the ward. As mentioned earlier, Billy Bibbit is seen by others as a young boy despite his real age. Chief Bromden, the novel’s narrative voice, tells the reader that the important thing one *has* to know about Billy is the fact “in spite of him having wrinkles in his face and specks of gray in his hair, he still looked like a kid.”

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<sup>110</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 167.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Fish, *Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (New York: Barron’s Educational Sciences, 1984), 20.

Billy's "mouth works like a little doll's mouth" and "he's so tiny he looks like he's a mile off" although he is just a few feet away.<sup>113</sup> The representation of Billy as a childlike figure is particularly significant from two interconnected perspectives. First, it highlights his effeminacy through the association between a child and a woman, which participates in the definition of masculinity through "two developmental and defensive fantasy components" that, according to Nancy J. J. Chodorow, are "masculinity as not female" and "maleness as adult man rather than boy-child."<sup>114</sup> Second, it reflects one of the novel's main symbols, namely, that of smallness, where size functions as the major measure of both manhood and sanity.

In the book *Women And Children First: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Public Policy*, Sharon M. Meagher and Patrice DiQuinzio make the claim that modern Western philosophy promotes masculinism through such elements as the abstract individualist theory of subjectivity and dualistic thinking.<sup>115</sup> The theory of abstract individualism entails the idea that "the essence of human subjectivity is reason, entailing consciousness and rational autonomy, which enables rational independent self-determination and action," while dualistic thinking "privileges essence over difference and dichotomizes human existence into public and private realms."<sup>116</sup> As a result, women and children are defined as passive, dependent, and marginalized objects in a world dominated by men. This allows one to see the clear connection between femininity and unreason, as well as the double damage that men are subjected to through the social construct of madness in masculinist society. Both abstract individualist theory and dualistic ideology imply that the loss of masculinity and the loss of reason are mutually dependant.

In Billy Bibbit's case, childishness and effeminacy echo each other, both of them reflecting his inability to attain proper masculinity. An essential obstacle to his growing up and becoming "a man" is also Billy's relationship with his mother, who treats him like a little child, making it even more difficult for him to develop a functional gender identity. She works as a receptionist in the lobby on the mental ward, and whenever the patients go out for an activity, Billy is "obliged to stop and lean a scarlet cheek over that desk for her to dab a kiss on."<sup>117</sup> Mrs. Bibbit refuses to accept that her son is an adult and would rather

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<sup>113</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 118, 253.

<sup>114</sup> Nancy J. J. Chodorow, *Individualizing Gender and Sexuality: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 134.

<sup>115</sup> Sharon M. Meagher and Patrice DiQuinzio, *Women and Children First: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Public Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>117</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 254.

keep Billy in the mental hospital than permit him to become independent of her. One afternoon, when he mentions to his mother looking for a wife and going to college someday, the following dialogue takes place:

“Sweetheart, you still have scads of time for things like that. Your whole life is ahead of you.”

“Mother, I’m th-th-thirty-one years old!”

She laughed and twiddled his ear with the weed. “*Sweetheart*, do I look like the mother of a middle-aged man?”<sup>118</sup>

One of the possible reasons for Mrs. Bibbit’s unwillingness to let Billy grow up might be her reluctance to accept her own growing old, as suggested by Peter Fish<sup>119</sup>; however, more important for the present discussion are the effects of the mother’s treatment of Billy on his gender identity.

According to Garde, parent-child relations are characterized by oppressor-oppressed dynamics, which place children “in an obscured, personalized and private structure of oppression, i.e. adultism.”<sup>120</sup> Since dualistic Western culture promotes masculinism, boys master psychologically damaging masculinist conduct to avoid powerlessness and vulnerability of adultism by overtaking the oppressor role. Even though it has a negative impact on men’s psychological well-being, “adopting the masculinist agenda” is experienced as less damaging than staying in a relationship of permanent subordination.<sup>121</sup> The relationship between Billy and his mother shows the outcome of a completely reversed situation. Mrs. Bibbit does not treat her son in accordance with masculinist ideology, preventing him from learning to perform the role of the oppressor. He becomes fixated in a constant state of childhood, which implies feminization. As a result, society labels him as deviant, while his internalization of masculinist ideology leads to his voluntary commitment to a psychiatric institution with the hope of “getting fixed.” Billy’s situation reveals the core problem of masculinism: regardless of whether or not one chooses to conform, the psychological challenge is inescapable. Still, the social emphasis on masculinism as normality and deviance from it as madness makes conformity the best available option.

Chief Bromden, son of a Columbia Indian and a white woman, is the novel’s narrative voice, thus most of what the reader learns about the characters is seen and told by

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Fish, *Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 20.

<sup>120</sup> Garde, “Madness and Masculinity,” 10.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

him. This fact, however, is an ironical one, since Chief has pretended from the day of his admission to the hospital to be deaf and mute. No one on the ward doubts his inability to hear/speak, before the arrival of McMurphy who helps him find inner strength to stand up against the oppression and humiliation that he has endured for many years. Literary critics often discuss the reliability of Chief's narrative, frequently with regard to his mental illness, that is, schizophrenia. Yet I strongly agree with Robert Faggen who, in his introduction to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, cautions the reader that "to call Chief Bromden schizophrenic, as many critics have done, eviscerates and reduces his own visionary brilliance and humor with the very kind of condescension and control that the novel calls into question."<sup>122</sup>

It is exactly Chief's subjective yet truthful view of both his own and other patients' lives on the ward that uncovers the worst aspects of masculinist society, mainly through witnessing the conflict between McMurphy and the Big Nurse. MacFarlan emphasizes the importance of Kesey's choice of narrative voice and style in representing other characters:

The literary richness in Kesey's rendering of a straightforward narrative dynamic derives from the voice he creates for the Chief, one vacillating between lucid narrative observation and subjective inner turmoil. As such, the Chief is an unreliable narrator. This unreliability allows both the Big Nurse and McMurphy, through the Chief's point of view, to become believably caricaturized.<sup>123</sup>

I would like to stress the importance of subjectivity in providing a truthful account of a problematic situation. Chief's hallucinatory visions and frequently resurfacing memories illustrate the poignancy of his experiences both on the ward and outside it. With the help of symbols and fragments from the past, Chief tells the story of his gradual mental collapse, which is characterized by continuous emasculation.

Chief's internal and external emasculation is depicted mainly through his symbolic smallness, which is connected with his fear of expressing his true self. When McMurphy first notices Chief sitting silently in a corner of the hospital room, he wonders about the Indian's size. Billy Bibbit explains then that Chief has been measured once at six feet seven, but even though he is big in size, he is afraid of his own shadow. This fear of his own self, however, is the result of internalizing the manner in which others have been treating him throughout his life. The novel presents the reader with countless instances where Chief's actual hugeness is contrasted with the way that other people see and behave

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<sup>122</sup> Faggen, introduction to *Cuckoo's Nest*, xiv-xv.

<sup>123</sup> MacFarlan, *The Hippie Narrative*, 27.

towards him—as if he was “some kind of bug.”<sup>124</sup> For the time being, the discussion will concentrate on the experiences of emasculation that have contributed to labeling Chief as mentally ill, while later in this chapter I will address treatment within the hospital walls which, contrary to its aim, only enforces his stigmatization.

Chief reveals in the course of his story that the first time he remembers someone treating him as deaf and dumb was long before he entered the mental hospital. Once, when he was still a child and lived in an Indian village with his family, three government representatives arrived to inform the tribe about their plans to build a hydroelectric dam on the family’s fishing grounds. The only person they encountered was the child, yet whatever he said, they seemed not to hear. Chief recollects: “I see that they don’t look like they’d heard me talk at all. They aren’t even looking at me. . . . Not a one of the three acts like they heard a thing I said; in fact they’re all looking off from me like they’d as soon I wasn’t there at all.”<sup>125</sup> The more similar experiences Chief encounters, the “smaller” he grows and the greater becomes his urge to keep still and hide in a surreal imaginary fog whose thickness depends on the level of his mental distress. By the time he meets McMurphy, in whom he recognizes the heights of masculinity that he himself has been deprived of, Chief’s mind is totally controlled by the sense of inadequacy and helplessness. “I’m way too little,” he reveals to McMurphy. “I used to be big, but not no more. You’re twice the size of me.”<sup>126</sup>

McMurphy struggles for a while to comprehend Chief’s symbolic and seemingly illogical use of epithets of size, and the picture only begins to come into focus when he tells the story of the “shrinking” of his father, the Indian Chief whose name was Tee Ah Millatoona (The-Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-on-the-Mountain). His father’s name, which was supposed to reflect his exceptional tallness, becomes a highlight of his loss of power to the Combine, “an entity that unifies individuals to further its own corporate interests.”<sup>127</sup> Chief explains the novel’s major symbol:

The Combine. It worked on him for years. He was big enough to fight it for a while. It wanted us to live in inspected houses. It wanted to take the falls. It was even in the tribe, and they worked on him. In the town they beat him up in the alleys and they cut his hair short once. Oh, the Combine’s big – big. He fought it a long time till my mother made him too little to fight any more and he gave up.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>127</sup> Faggen, introduction to *Cuckoo’s Nest*, xv.

<sup>128</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 188.



The continuous attempts of the government to intrude into and take control over the Indian tribe and its land, the lack of support among his people, giving up his own name and taking the name of his wife who later supported the sale of the Indian village, all lead to the collapse of Chief's father and his belittlement.

In Chief's mind "the diminishing is a literal, physical one – from a proud Indian Chief to a man stripped of his name, able to live only off charity from the government that ruined his life."<sup>129</sup> The image of his father's humiliation has a strong negative influence on Chief's identity, as he projects his father's defeat on his own self with every single loss implying a threat to his male identity and subsequent feminization. Chodorow explains in her book *Gender and Sexuality*, that due to defining masculinity as not-other (not-femininity) "an image of humiliation by men – defeat in war, subordination to a leader, occupation by another country, watching father's (personal or political-religious father's) humiliation and being powerless to help – become ideologically and in unconscious collective fantasy intertwined with threats to selfhood and gender."<sup>130</sup> As a result, Chief's memory of his father is dominated by the image of humiliation for which he blames the Combine.

The destructive and emasculating power of the Combine seems limitless, and many critics and scholars have struggled to define or explain its nature in less elusive terms than those provided by Chief Bromden. It is interesting to see the impact of particular analyses on the interpretive speculations about what *Kesey's* hypothesis might have been. For instance, Marcia Holly refers in her essay to Terence Martin's analysis where he "shows that throughout the novel the real enemy is woman, who is depicted as emasculating, bitchy, the destroyer of life and energy."<sup>131</sup> She begins by criticizing Martin's interpretation of the Combine as woman, but afterwards attributes this hypothesis to Ken Kesey, concluding, contrary to her initial claim, that Martin's analysis is valid. Thus, in Holy's view, *Cuckoo's Nest* is written from a masculinist perspective. However, I would argue that the novel depicts the destructiveness of this oppressive social system rather than advocates it. The major argument of my analysis is that "the real enemy" in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is certainly *not* a woman—it is the ideology of masculinism in

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<sup>129</sup> Fish, *Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 16.

<sup>130</sup> Chodorow, *Individualizing Gender and Sexuality*, 134.

<sup>131</sup> Marcia Holly, "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," in *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, ed. Josephine Donovan (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 42.

which the victims are men and women alike. The Combine “beats everybody,”<sup>132</sup> because within its dualistic framework one is either the oppressor or the oppressed, regardless of one’s gender.

This involuntary choice between two evils is one of the novel’s “red threads.” Chief’s inferior social situation and consequent emasculation has placed him in the role of the oppressed, which is a state of deviance (i.e. potential madness) from masculinist point of view. The internalization of this inadequacy, in its turn, causes a substantial damage to his identity. However, the novel’s final stage grants us hope. After ending McMurphy’s life out of genuine compassion, Chief tries on his friend’s cap, but it turns out to be too small for him. In the end, he walks out of the ward realizing that he is free to go in any direction. Although McMurphy seems initially to be the measure of normality on the ward, it does not save him from the Combine’s destructive influence. The novel’s real hero turns out to be Chief, who finally manages to overcome his fears and finds strength to confront the outside world again.

Another character who goes through a major transformation in the course of the novel is Dale Harding, the most erudite and intellectual man on the ward. Harding’s observations and explanations complement Chief’s visions of what is happening on hospital grounds: “while the Chief with his hallucinations may give us an unusual insight into the hospital, Harding gives us the sorts of rational explanations we’re used to hearing.”<sup>133</sup> Fish is right in the sense that Harding replaces Chief’s symbols and metaphors with scientific terms. He explains to McMurphy and to the reader the nature and consequences of, for example, various types of medication, lobotomy, EST (Electro Shock Therapy) known by patients as The Shock Shop, as well as “his role in the Darwinian dynamics of predator and prey.”<sup>134</sup> Nevertheless, despite his knowledge and intelligence, he is unable to face and relieve himself of an intense fear whose roots can be found in his deviance from the norms of proper masculinity.

In the novel, Harding is introduced to the reader by Chief as “a flat, nervous man,” who has got “white, thin shoulders” that he curves “around his chest when he’s trying to hide inside himself.”<sup>135</sup> The physical manifestation of Harding’s struggle with his own fear is of a similar kind to the neurotic and uncontrollable hand movement that we have already encountered in the previous chapter in the discussion of Anderson’s short story. Harding,

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<sup>132</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 189.

<sup>133</sup> Fish, *Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 18-19.

<sup>134</sup> Faggen, introduction to *Cuckoo’s Nest*, xvii.

<sup>135</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 19.

just like Wing Biddlebaum, is bothered by his hands that at times “get loose and glide around in front of him free as two white birds until he notices them and traps them between his knees.”<sup>136</sup> Similarly to Biddlebaum’s case, the main reason for Harding’s distress is an internalized homophobia, which makes him see any sign of femininity in himself as shameful and frightening. The combination of such features as an effeminate physique, long and white hands, or a kind of laugh that his wife calls a “mousy little squeak”<sup>137</sup> allocate Harding quite a low position on the masculinity scale. As a consequence of realizing his deviance from normality, he develops an irrational fear of his own personality, his wife, as well as having to live in the society that is governed by the strong aversion toward violating the norms of dualistic gender ideology.

Harding’s feeling of inadequacy is strengthened by contrasting his effeminacy with the stereotypical femininity of his wife, who wears high-heeled shoes and carries a black purse, which she holds in her hands demonstrating the blood-red shine of her nail polish. Her exaggeratedly feminine features highlight the lack of masculine traits in Harding, thus contributing to his sense of inequality. Donovan Braud writes that “Harding is afraid of his own sexuality despite being married to a beautiful woman,”<sup>138</sup> yet it might rather be said that his fear of his own (hypothetical) homosexuality is fortified by the beauty and confidence of his wife, who exhibits the socially demanded gender-related qualities that he does not possess. When Mrs. Harding comes to the hospital to visit her husband, he is reluctant to introduce her to McMurphy as “his better half” because, in his mind, “that phrase indicates some kind of basically equal division,”<sup>139</sup> while he clearly feels inferior to her due to his inability to meet the social requirements for the ideal of masculinity.

The paradox of the involuntary choice between being either the oppressor or the oppressed that characterizes masculinist society is best explained by Harding using the analogy with the Darwinian theory of predator-prey relationships:

All of us in here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping through our Walt Disney world. Oh, don’t misunderstand me, we’re not in here *because* we are rabbits – we’d be rabbits wherever we were – we’re all in here because we can’t *adjust* to our rabbithood.

. . . most of us in here even lack the sexual ability to make the grade as adequate rabbits.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>138</sup> Donovan Braud, “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” in *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature*, ed. Kurt Hemmer (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 247.

<sup>139</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 156.

. . . We are – the *rabbits*, one might say, of the rabbit world!<sup>140</sup>

Harding makes several important points that portray the character of the association between madness and masculinity in modern Western culture. First and foremost, madness is only partially synonymous with *deviance* from normative masculinity. From the point of view of a deviant individual, it can rather be defined as the inability to *accept* one's *failure to comply* with the socially demanded and maintained gender norms. Second, although sexuality and gender are interrelated constructs, their role in defining madness is essentially different. The social ideal of masculinity functions as a measure of in/sanity, while one's sexuality is one of the aspects that either facilitates or complicates adjustment to this ideal. In addition, madness is inseparable from hierarchies. Since the loss of sanity is related to the loss of manhood, both contribute to one's inferiority in various social contexts.

While Harding places all the blame on nature and his own abnormality, the novel accuses the Combine that one can (and should) oppose. For this reason, Harding's bleak and hopeless view of his unfortunate position within the social hierarchy should be viewed critically. It might be tempting to rely on such a skillfully verbalized analogy as quoted above, while it is worth pondering the following question that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* propounds: Can a relatively recently built social system be compared to a law of nature? I believe that Faggen is right in concluding that "nature may be cruel but it allows more latitude than the monotony of a system that discards everything that cannot be made to conform to its monolithic dream of success."<sup>141</sup> In my view, Kesey's novel argues against the authoritative nature of hegemonic masculine society by depicting the harmful, and often tragic, effects of non-conformity.

### **The Machinery of Stigmatization: Institutional Effects on the Male View of the Self**

The previous section focused on the discussion of personal traits and experiences that have brought the characters of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to the mental hospital. I have shown the reasons why and the ways in which masculinist society labels the behavior of men who deviate from the socially upheld gender norms as abnormal to an extent that borders on considering them mentally ill. Also, we saw that the inability to meet the

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 57, 58, 59, 60.

<sup>141</sup> Faggen, introduction to *Cuckoo's Nest*, xvii.

demands for proper masculinity leads to internalization of the notion of ab/normality and a consequent fear of one's own deviance, as well as a wish to be "fixed." In this section, I will discuss the influence of institutionalization on the gender identity of the novel's characters. Although, as it was mentioned earlier, most of patients in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are voluntarily committed to the mental institution, they seem to be trapped within the hospital walls both literally and symbolically, and they only manage to leave the place when they acquire enough courage to free themselves from the constraints of the system that operates within the institution. Therefore, the following analysis will concentrate on the problematic aspects of institutionalization in the novel with regard to male gender identity.

The major task of the novel's mental institution seems to be teaching the patients to adjust to the socially defined normality by applying the theory of the Therapeutic Community. The main points of this theory, which is advocated by the hospital staff, are summarized by Chief, who has heard it enough times to be able "to repeat it forwards and backwards – how a guy has to learn to get along in a group before he'll be able to function in a normal society; how the group can help the guy by showing him where he's out of place; how society is what decides who's sane and who isn't."<sup>142</sup> However, in the course of the novel we see that this theory is not unproblematic, as none of the patients shows any signs of recovery before the arrival of McMurphy, who inspires the other men and encourages them to question the benefits of the institutional conformity that they have been taking for granted.

I will argue that the main fault of the above mentioned theory is the fact that the institutional system inside the hospital is characterized by subjecting the novel's characters to continuous emasculation and humiliation. From the moment someone enters the hospital, their sense of inadequacy gradually increases and the chances of returning to the outside world become smaller. In other words, instead of improving their image of the self, the patients internalize their supposed abnormality, because they are being constantly put in the position of emasculating subordination. Paradoxically, the treatment that is designed to help patients to recover and return to society only reduces their willingness and ability to find their place in the world outside the hospital.

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<sup>142</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 44.

The deterioration of male identity in a closed setting begins with a process that Goffman defines as “labeling”<sup>143</sup>—being stigmatized as odd, deviant, criminal, or insane by normal society by way of institutionalization. Martin Slattery, in his account of Goffman’s major contribution to sociological theory, explains the impact of social labeling on the self-image of the socially marginalized individuals in the middle of the previous century:

By labeling – or worse, stigmatizing them as sick, insane or deviant – were they [doctors, psychiatrists, and social workers] changing their self-image, making them feel odd and abnormal, isolating and humiliating them so that they lost their will to recover or reform and instead adopted a new lifestyle, self-image and friendship pattern that both insulated and isolated them from normal society. . . . The labeling process has the inbuilt potential to be a self-fulfilling process, a process by which the label, the stigma, becomes the reality, those labeled insane “become” insane, those labeled as sick or deviant become social outcasts forever.<sup>144</sup>

As Slattery rightly notices, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* presents the reader with an acute and sensitive exemplification of Goffman’s ideas. The mental ward is by definition an artificial setting that cannot be compared to a natural social space. The patients are denied the right to make independent decisions, even regarding the simplest daily routines; they are constantly reminded of their label by the hospital staff—doctors, nurses, and aides; and they can only form relationships of equality with those who have been labeled likewise. All these aspects of institutionalization contribute to the previously mentioned “mortification of the self”—accepting the label as the reality and thus surrendering to a constant marginalization. A relevant illustration of this point is Chief’s reaction to McMurphy’s resistance to the coercive hospital system: “I’d take a look at my own self in the mirror and wonder how it was possible that anybody could manage such an enormous thing as being what he was. . . . I don’t seem like I ever have been me.”<sup>145</sup> Here, we see that Chief realizes the enormous power of social labeling, and by the end of the novel this knowledge helps him to dispose of his shame and fear of the self. This, unfortunately, is not the case with the majority of patients.

In the novel, every feature of the hospital setting seems to have an emasculating effect on the patients’ identities, which reflects the prevalence of masculinist ideology within the science of psychiatry. According to Garde, the overall organizational structures

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<sup>143</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

<sup>144</sup> Martin Slattery, *Key Ideas in Sociology* (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2003), 188.

<sup>145</sup> Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 140.

of modern mental health system are hierarchical and paternalistic. Within these structures, “patients are considered weak, incapable, dependent, stripped of personal agency, patronized and sometimes abused.”<sup>146</sup> Any of these epithets can be easily attributed the characters in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. One of the most telling examples is perhaps the patients’ obligation to follow scheduled daily routines on the mental ward, which Chief describes in the following way: “Flash on in the dorm at six-thirty. . . Six-forty-five the shavers buzz. . . Seven o’clock the mess hall opens. . . Seven-thirty back to the day room. . . Eight o’clock the walls whirr and hum into full swing. The speaker in the ceiling says, ‘Medications,’ using the Big Nurse’s voice.”<sup>147</sup> While the schedule itself might not bring damage to the patients’ identities, each of the activities is performed in a manner that displays a striking power imbalance between the hospital staff and the men on the ward. After waking up, the Acutes are being pushed out of their beds by the aides; the shaving is done in alphabetic order, with a leather strap being placed on the foreheads of those who might show any resistance; when breakfast time is over, Acutes and Chronics have to stay on the opposite sides of the dayroom, while Nurse Ratched watches them all through her big glass window; finally, when the patients receive their medications, “on rare occasions some fool might ask what he’s being required to swallow.”<sup>148</sup>

The relations between the hospital staff and the patients in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* seem to illustrate Szasz’s notion of “psychiatric slavery”<sup>149</sup>—the coercive control of socially deviant individuals by confining them to mental health institutions where they are deprived of their personal space and free will. It should be noted that such oppressive environment would have a feminizing influence on any patient regardless of gender; however, when manhood is defined in terms of counteracting the opposite gender, the impact of feminization that takes place within a psychiatric institution is particularly interesting in association with male gender identity. Contrary to the influence of the label of madness on female gender identity—supporting and enforcing the stereotypical view of femininity, male madness contradicts socially accepted notions of masculinity (normality) and, in this way, presents men with additional psychological challenges.

To provide some specific examples from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, I will continue with the analysis of Chief Bromden, Randel McMurphy, and the Big Nurse—a

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<sup>146</sup> Garde, “Madness and Masculinity,” 10.

<sup>147</sup> Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 28-30.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>149</sup> Szasz, *Anti-Psychiatry*, ix.

“triangle of characters that [is] like a firm tripod in the construction of the narrative.”<sup>150</sup> According to MacFarlane, it is “against the backdrop of the Big Nurse’s authoritarian control and McMurphy’s rebelliousness” that “Chief’s struggle against psychic dissonance unfolds.”<sup>151</sup> In the first part of the novel, it is difficult for the reader not to feel sympathetic towards Chief, because his life on the ward seems to be governed by continuous maltreatment. Everyone believes that the novel’s narrator is deaf and mute; as a result, Chief becomes subject to attitudes that might otherwise be revealed in more subtle or hidden ways. Chief’s fictitious inability to hear/speak allows the reader to see the uttermost cruelty of the oppressive power relations within the mental institution, as well as the damaging effect of this power imbalance on male identity.

“Shrinking” and “expanding,” as we have seen before, function as a symbolic representation of the changes of Chief’s masculine self-image. Importantly, at the hospital Chief’s sense of smallness is being constantly reinforced. Smallness as a symbol has a strong connection with femininity, as it is commonly associated with such notions as youth, weakness, and subordination.<sup>152</sup> In a review of literature on social construction of femininity, Sarah Grogan discusses Susan Brownmiller’s analysis of women’s relationships with their bodies where she notes that although “in the majority of species, females are in fact the larger sex, . . . the associations of maleness with largeness and femaleness with smallness are firmly embedded in our consciousness, leading to discomfort when these expectations are challenged.”<sup>153</sup> Brownmiller concludes that the practices characterizing the prevailing aesthetics of female slimness and fragility serve “to weaken women physically, making them more dependent on men.”<sup>154</sup>

Within the dualistic ideology of masculinity the strong association between manhood/largeness and femininity/smallness results in a particularly influential symbolic meaning that is carried by words denoting size. A curious example is presented by Peter Lehman in *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*. In his book, Lehman refers to the psychotherapist Tom Ryan’s observations about men’s concerns with their masculinity that are frequently manifested through their preoccupation

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<sup>150</sup> Scott MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative*, 31.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>152</sup> Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 267.

<sup>153</sup> Sarah Grogan, *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 75.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.



with the size of their penis.<sup>155</sup> According to Ryan, “this is a symbolic as well as an anatomical concern” and “many men exaggerate their smallness in accordance with their deflated masculine self-image.”<sup>156</sup> This is only one of many examples that demonstrate the ways in which “smallness” relates to emasculation and psychological problems connected with male gender identity problems.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, “smallness” and “largeness” are Chief’s main preoccupation. He explains that the hospital staff handles the patients’ as weak and incapable children, treating and “talking to you like you’re nothing but a three-year-old.”<sup>157</sup> A revealing example is presented to the reader in the novel’s first episode when, after sticking a mop in Chief’s hands and pointing to the spot where he should clean, one of the ward’s aides comments: “Haw, you look at ’im shag it? Big enough to eat apples off my head an’ he mine me like a baby.”<sup>158</sup> The power imbalance seems striking; however, according to Garde, it characterizes the mental health system in general, as “the social power differential between patient and practitioner simulates child/adult relations.”<sup>159</sup> In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the concept of adultism and patriarchy extends to allocate power not only to psychiatric authorities, but also to everyone else who enters the ward without being labeled as mad, be it a family member or a public relations representative accompanied by a ladies’ club.

“Shrinking,” in Chief’s view, is directly linked with being humiliated. The main figure that possesses the power to make the patients feel ashamed and overwhelmed with fear is the Big Nurse—the personification of the Combine. While Chief grows smaller, the Big Nurse expands, displaying the interrelationship between the powerfulness of the oppressor and the impotence of the oppressed that distinguishes masculinist ideology. Before McMurphy arrives, no one seems to be able to stop Nurse Ratched from “rubbing your nose in your weakness till what little dignity you got left is gone and you shrink up to nothing from humiliation.”<sup>160</sup> She seems to have complete control over what is happening on the ward, and she continuously uses this power to reaffirm her superiority, in worst cases, even using EST as a means of punishing the noncompliant.

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<sup>155</sup> Peter Lehman, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 24.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 103.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>159</sup> Garde, “Madness and Masculinity,” 8.

<sup>160</sup> Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 118-119.

The choice of a female character to represent “a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she has the Inside”<sup>161</sup> is far from being a coincidence, as the reversed power relations of femininity and masculinity in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* are essential for uncovering the close connection between madness and femaleness. Still, I would like to emphasize that Nurse Ratched is a *personification of the Combine* that emasculates individuals by subordinating them. In other words, the Big Nurse *is* the system rather than a literal woman that represents it, as it is frequently interpreted by literary critics who accuse the novel of propagating sexism. The Big Nurse’s emasculating influence on the patients’ gender identity is more obvious if this character is a woman. Nevertheless, Ratched’s power is not dependent on her gender, but rather on her position of authority, as it is suggested by Scott MacFarlane:

Nurse Ratched *is* castrating and she *is* a fascist control freak. This is obvious. However, the core story could just as easily be about the Big Nurse presiding over a women’s mental ward and facing a similar revolt by these women against the containment of their human spirit. She would be no less a villain in this regard, or if she was a man.<sup>162</sup>

MacFarlane’s interpretation of the Big Nurse conveys both the most important feature of this character and the novel’s main theme, namely, the containment of the human spirit. Within the framework of masculinism, individual uniqueness is, as a rule, subordinated to adjustment to the status quo.<sup>163</sup> In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the conflict between socially advocated dualistic gender ideology and an individual’s inability to follow its uncompromising rules lies at the basis of the novel. The Big Nurse is what symbolizes this system of oppression.

Self-evidently, the Big Nurse is extremely big. In fact, she is the biggest character on the ward until she is rivaled by Randall McMurphy who swiftly becomes “de facto leader of the ward.”<sup>164</sup> From the moment he enters the hospital, McMurphy is seen by the other men as the embodiment of proper masculinity, a role model and a savior. In Chief’s eyes, everything about the newly admitted patient is “big”—he “sounds big,” he is “big in the way he walks,” even his laughter “rings bigger and bigger till it’s lapping against the walls all over the ward.”<sup>165</sup> Being one of the most visible differences between McMurphy

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>162</sup> MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative*, 31.

<sup>163</sup> Garde, “Madness and Masculinity,” 7.

<sup>164</sup> MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative*, 35.

<sup>165</sup> Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 10-11.

and the rest of the men at the hospital, his laughter carries a strong metaphorical meaning where the dimension of gender plays a pivotal role. According to Chief, McMurphy's laughter is the first one he has heard in years: "Everybody on the ward, patients, staff, and all, is stunned dumb by him and his laughing."<sup>166</sup>

As an addition to functioning as an outward display of his protest against the Big Nurse's totalitarian regime on the ward, McMurphy's laughter is a constituent of his traditionally masculine identity. According to Mary Jane Kehily, humor has the potential "to emphasize the power of dominant versions of masculinity" by means of providing a repertoire of gender specific jokes and insults.<sup>167</sup> In Kesey's novel, McMurphy's manhood is being continuously asserted with the help of humor, which, in majority of cases, is directed at the Big Nurse. However, it is no less important for regulating masculine identity when applied among the men. Kehily states that humor helps to convey masculine identities also through "the spirit of camaraderie that pervades everyday social interactions between men."<sup>168</sup> In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, this kind of spirit is absent from the hospital until McMurphy arrives, bringing along "a robust laugh of humanity in the face of authority and in a ward where nobody laughed."<sup>169</sup> The following passage might well illustrate this point:

"Which one of you claims to be the craziest? Which one is the biggest loony? Who runs these card games? It's my first day, and what I like to do is make a good impression straight off on the right man if he can prove to me he *is* the right man. Who's the bull goose loony here?"

He's saying this directly to Billy Bibbit. He leans down and glares so hard at Billy that Billy feels compelled to stutter out that he isn't the buh-buh-buh-bull goose loony yet, though he's next in luh-luh-line for the job.<sup>170</sup>

Although Kesey's novel elaborates a range of complicated themes, it does it not without a touch of lighthearted humor. As we see in the example above, McMurphy's very first appearance establishes his masculine authority by way of an amusing introductory speech that instantly encourages Billy to play along.

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which Kesey's "continuous fictional dream"<sup>171</sup> represents the harsh reality of living on the deviant side of wakefulness.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>167</sup> Mary Jane Kehily, "Humour," in *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael Flood (New York: Routledge, 2007), 321.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative*, 30.

<sup>170</sup> Kesey, *Cuckoo's Nest*, 18.

Although the middle of the twentieth century was characterized by various technological, social, and cultural advances, the ideology of masculinism continued to pervade most spheres of life. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the reader meets a group of men who are among the *biggest* victims of this oppressive system, as their deviance from socially accepted gender norms and internalization of the label of abnormality has brought them to a mental institution that only worsens their state by subjecting them to continuous emasculation. The realism of Kesey's novel lies in its treatment of the theme of individual uniqueness. It echoes, on its own fictional terms, Garde's analysis of the relationship between masculinity and madness. It also supports the conclusion that if the goal of the mental health system is to promote male healing, "it must counteract masculinism"<sup>172</sup> and allow all humans the privilege to fulfill the wish to be what they are, wherever they might find themselves on the masculinity-femininity scale.

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<sup>171</sup> MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative*, 25.

<sup>172</sup> Garde, "Madness and Masculinity," 14.

### 3. In Search of a Cure for the Masculinity Crisis: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

*But what comes next? What North American hero can hope to succeed the placid Frank? We await, I predict, the hero of non-action, the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus, carried here and there across sets by burly extras whose blood sings with retrograde amines.*

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

#### A Madness for Everyone: How Defeminization of Insanity Made All of Us III

In the two literary works discussed in the previous chapters, we saw that madness was depicted as the opposite of the socially established normality with regard to one's gender. Both in Anderson's "Hands" and in Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest*, the male characters were considered, and regarded themselves, as deviant or ill due to their inability to perform gender roles ascribed to them by masculinist society. However, there was an essential difference between the concepts of insanity in the two works. While Anderson's protagonist Wing Biddlebaum was externally forced to retreat from normal society due to his improper conduct, the male characters in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* had internalized their deviance to such an extent that they were willing to commit themselves to a mental health institution. This difference casts light on the change in the social construct of madness from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century, which was characterized by the expansion of dualistic gender ideology and the consequent internalization of the stigma of mental illness by the men who did not manage to conform to the social ideal of manhood.

Almost half a century has passed between the publication of Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, a novel that was published in 1996 and that will perform in this thesis the function of a fictional case study and explain the development of the concept of madness in literature in the second part of the previous century. The last chapter of this thesis will thus be focused upon seeking answers to questions such as: What is the relationship between madness and masculinity in the contemporary Western culture and what are the main contributors to the changes that have taken place during the years

that separate Kesey and Wallace's creations? In other words, whose malady is the madness of today? And finally, what is the result of the changes that both the social constructs of madness and masculinity have undergone?

To answer these questions, I will examine *Infinite Jest*, a novel that, not without the help of sharp irony, raises the reader's awareness of the complexity of human nature. The thematic lines in the novel range from the obsession with entertainment in contemporary culture and the role of the media in forming people's lives, to misshapen identities and the questionable effectivity of modern psychotherapeutic practices in restoring them. The relationship between male gender identity and madness has not been previously recognized among literary scholars as a major theme in *Infinite Jest*; however, my analysis of the novel will prove the contrary. An informed reading of Wallace's work, taking into consideration the representation of madness and masculinity in the previously discussed literary works, as well as its own socio-cultural milieu, will help to recognize that *Infinite Jest* is, in fact, a monument of the contemporary madness-manhood dynamic.

It is important at this point to give a brief overview of the turning points in the development of the concept of madness during the second part of the twentieth century. In the article "Madness Studies" written in 2009, Bradly Lewis mentions 1980 as the point at which psychiatric critique underwent substantial changes. First, this was the year of the publication of the DSM-III, a book that "shifted the psychiatric gaze, particularly in outpatient settings, from psychoanalytically-framed unconscious conflicts and childhood traumas to biomedically-framed broken brains and chemical imbalances."<sup>173</sup> At the same time, the pharmaceutical industry began to bloom, with the amount and frequency of the use of antidepressant medications reaching unbelievable heights. Thus, the use of such antidepressants as Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, and Effexor increased by close to 300% between 1988 and 2000, while spending for this type of medication in the United States during the 1990s grew by 600%.<sup>174</sup>

The importance of Wallace's novel in bringing to surface the socio-cultural aspect of insanity is crucial to my analysis. This aspect of *Infinite Jest* is suggested also by Betty Garcia and Anne Petrovich in the book *Strengthening the DSM: Incorporating Resilience and Cultural Competence*, where they begin the chapter on substance abuse by a quote from the novel: "This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose – this

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<sup>173</sup> Lewis, "Madness Studies," 153.

<sup>174</sup> Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome Wakefield, *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Disorder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

*appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, *this* is the death. What you call the death: this will be the formality only.”<sup>175</sup> Garcia and Petrovich present various case studies in which “the use of antipsychotic drugs would have been avoided” if the doctor’s approach to the patients’ substance abuse problems would encompass socio-cultural awareness.<sup>176</sup> In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace shows the destructive effects of the emphasis on medication in modern psychiatry. Substituting one addiction with another—“*this* is the death,” as there is no cure for the cure.

In a discussion of the development of the field of psychiatry and the invention of medical categories for describing mental health problems, Lennard Davis defines the expansion of the number of people who fit the category of being mentally ill as “democratization of madness.”<sup>177</sup> However, I would argue that one should also recognize the significant relationship between madness and gender, which, throughout the centuries, has both limited insanity to a disease for a select few and made it available for just about everyone. In other words, in this chapter I will define the way in which insanity in contemporary Western culture has become so widespread that it has replaced normality, as “the defeminization of madness.” This notion will be employed to show that in order for madness to enter mainstream society, its definition as the opposite of masculinity has to be significantly modified.

The importance of the link between mental health/illness and gender might not seem obvious, yet a closer examination of this relationship is crucial for understanding the socio-cultural aspect of what is most frequently considered as medical categories. A number of books have been published in recent years that do emphasize the idea that “whenever we attempt to understand and develop the discourse of biology, we must always think about the cultural and the biological together.”<sup>178</sup> A case in point would be the transient nature of homosexuality as a biological category. Although, as we have seen in the two previous chapters, homosexuality (as well as feminine traits in men in general) was viewed as pathological throughout the first part of the twentieth century, in the DSM-II (revised edition, published in 1974) homosexuality was no longer listed as a mental illness. Moreover, the third edition of the Diagnostic Manual (1980) included such categories as ego-dystonic homosexuality, “a desire to acquire or increase heterosexual arousal so that

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<sup>175</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 319.

<sup>176</sup> Betty Garcia and Anne Petrovich, *Strengthening the DSM: Incorporating Resilience and Cultural Competence* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2011), 317.

<sup>177</sup> Lennard Davis, *Obsession: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>178</sup> Lewis, “Madness Studies,” 156.

the heterosexual relationships can be initiated or maintained and a sustained pattern of overt homosexual arousal that the individual explicitly states has been unwanted and a persistent source of distress.”<sup>179</sup> Hence, while DSM-II stated that homosexuality was a pathology, the revised DSM-II declassified homosexuality as a mental illness, and with the publication of DSM-III “the world was informed that believing one’s homosexuality to be a mental illness was now a mental illness, regardless, apparently, of where that belief might have originated.”<sup>180</sup> Psychiatry does not attempt to explain these rapid shifts or their impact on people’s lives, and it is here that the socio-cultural aspect of mental health/illness becomes undeniable, and humanities scholarship can provide a significant contribution.

Declassification of homosexuality as a form of mental illness is an integral part of the defeminization of madness, which is a still ongoing process. It is also an example that shows how mental illnesses to a great extent reflect the socio-cultural milieu of the changing times rather than merely biological or medical discoveries. Still, the latest edition of the DSM (the fourth edition, published in 1994)<sup>181</sup> amounts to 886 pages and describes 297 mental health disorders, in contrast to the first Manual from 1952 that listed 106 disorders in 130 pages. Davis claims in his critical review that according to modern psychiatry “human life is a form of mental illness,” and that “the pages of the DSM-IV are replete with mental illnesses that have been hitherto regarded as perfectly normal behavior.”<sup>182</sup> For the purpose of the present thesis, it is interesting to note that defeminization of madness does not reduce the number of mental disorders, contrary to what might be expected to happen. The effect appears to be reversed—the social construct of madness becomes less focused on deviance from gender norms and thus more all-encompassing or, as Davis puts it, more “democratic.”

This seemingly paradoxical situation can be explained by recognizing the mutual influence between the social constructs of madness and gender from two important angles. First of all, the change in the definition of insanity towards the later part of the twentieth century is closely related to the shifting social attitudes towards masculinity/femininity and sexuality, where an important role has been played by the supporters and representatives of feminism. Second, the fact that defeminization of madness results in the fusion of insanity

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<sup>179</sup> Carol Reeves, *The Language of Science* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 12.

<sup>180</sup> Lawrence J. Davis, “The Encyclopedia of Insanity,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1997, 64, <http://harpers.org/archive/1997/02/the-encyclopedia-of-insanity>.

<sup>181</sup> The revision of the DSM-5 is now in its final stage and it is expected to be published in May 2013.

<sup>182</sup> Davis, “The Encyclopedia of Insanity,” 63.



and normality reveals that the ideology of masculinity is so deeply rooted in the contemporary Western culture that, although the power of masculinity to define normality has become less obvious, it is still operative.

Although second-wave feminism has been repeatedly criticized for facilitating “the continuation of the dominative masculine hegemonic principles”<sup>183</sup> rather than contributing to their elimination, the impact of this movement on the redefining the concept of madness as the opposite of normative masculinity should not be neglected. As Joanne Hollows notes in her book *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, “it is only possible to think of what roles feminisms might play in the present if we reflect on their, sometimes troubled, past.”<sup>184</sup> The aim of the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s was not only to explore the differences and inequalities between the two genders, but also to assist the progress of change. From this perspective, the movement was not a complete failure, as it is often suggested. Hollows presents the reader with a list of the common objectives of various forms of second-wave feminism: equal pay, equal access to education and equal job opportunities; free contraception and the right to abortion; economic and legal independence; the right to define one’s own sexuality; and protest against domestic and sexual violence.<sup>185</sup> One might favor a critical approach towards second-wave feminism due to its failure to radically transform gender roles, yet it is worth recognizing the importance of the changes brought forward by feminists. One significant transformation was thus the legal and political movement towards a more democratic and equal society, which has consequently had a strong influence on the modification of the concept of insanity based on its close association with gender.

In order to explain the relationship between madness and masculinity in contemporary Western culture, one has to examine and give credit to the ideas and contributions of feminism, as it was not until fairly recently that masculinity studies reached “consensus about some previously troubling issues” such as that “men as well as women have undergone historical and cultural processes of gender formation that distribute power and privilege unevenly” and that “masculinity is not monolithic, not one static thing, but the confluence of multiple processes and relationships with variable results

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<sup>183</sup> Richard Howson, *Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 130.

<sup>184</sup> Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

for differing individuals, groups, institutions, and societies.”<sup>186</sup> By referring to these two statements that underlie contemporary men’s studies, I would like to emphasize that feminism of the latter part of the twentieth century did not only influence the situation of women in society, it had as significant an impact on the social concept of masculinity, too. To be more specific, the taken-for-grantedness of male superiority was no longer functioning as a means of defining either normality or deviance. As a consequence, the concept of madness had to undergo transformation, hand in hand with the social construction of gender. The definition of insanity as the opposite of masculinity was gradually deprived of its validity and had to be reinvented.

One of the most frequently employed terms in the contemporary discussion of masculinity is “crisis.” This crisis has been interpreted in rather different ways, yet most scholars seem to agree that the relatively recent discovery of masculinity as a subject of study has been accompanied by certain difficulties in understanding and examining the very concept. In the essay “Unmaking: Men and Masculinity in Feminist Theory,” Robyn Wiegman makes the following claim:

While a number of academic studies have made cogent arguments for understanding masculinity as by definition in perpetual crisis (in part through analyses of earlier historical periods), the very emergence of masculinity as an entity to be interrogated and understood finds its *raison d’être* in the popular acknowledgement and open representational display of masculinity as a domain seemingly beside itself: that is, internally contested, historically discontinuous, and popularly a mess.<sup>187</sup>

Although I cannot disagree with the above quoted observation, it needs to be pointed out that the present thesis is an attempt to establish at least partial order and show the subtle continuity of the arguably conflicting, intermittent, and “messy” concept of masculinity, particularly taking into consideration its connection and mutual influence with madness, another social construct in perpetual crisis.

A sound outline of masculine crises is presented, for instance, by Buck Clifford Rosenberg, who recognizes two main contributors to the modification of traditional masculinity in recent decades, that is, the already mentioned second-wave feminism and the transformation of the labor market. According to Rosenberg, the process of de-industrialization, which began in 1970s, has gradually replaced the manufacturing sector

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<sup>186</sup> Judith Kegan Gardiner, ed., introduction to *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>187</sup> Robin Wiegman, “Unmaking: Men and Masculinity in Feminist Theory,” in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, ed. J. K. Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 32.

with “an increasingly feminized service sector.” Consequently, the number of arenas where traditional masculinity could be utilized and learned have been significantly reduced. This process has functioned as a basis for creating new definitions of masculinity, such as the “new man”—a man “supposedly in touch with his feelings, and considerate of women,” a one who cooks, cleans and changes diapers.<sup>188</sup>

However, it is still quite unclear whether and to what extent this ideal of modern masculinity functions in practice. Rosenberg provides the reader with the definition of the SNAG (the Sensitive New Age Guy), at the same time questioning the existence of such a man in reality.<sup>189</sup> Anthony McMahon takes a similar position and attempts in his book *Taking Care of Men: Sexual Politics in the Public Mind* to identify and explain “the various ways in which accounts of social change manage to present an optimistic view of movement towards gender equity.”<sup>190</sup> He emphasizes the power of the rhetoric of change that is prevalent in contemporary sociology as well as the mass media. According to McMahon, “often it is described as gradual change, but the fact of change is always constructed as logical and inevitable,”<sup>191</sup> and, as a result, the rhetoric is made plausible, while the actual research data on the transformation of gender roles in contemporary society is still rather contradictory.

This inconsistency between what is propagated as the modern ideal of masculinity and the resistance of the operating social structures to this new concept is also reflected in the process that I call “defeminization of madness.” As previously mentioned, the social changes that have taken place since 1960s no longer allow for a formal definition of madness that associates insanity with deviance from traditional gender norms. The *rhetoric*, one might say, of psychology and sociology has become significantly less masculinist, and it should be recognized as a positive change. From this point of view, a significant step has been taken towards a more equal society where male inability and/or unwillingness to conform to the dualistic gender ideology does not imply being mentally ill and femaleness is not considered deviant by nature.

Yet behind the rhetoric of gender equity there are some unresolved issues. One of such problematic issues is the fact that the defeminization of the concept of madness has

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<sup>188</sup> Buck Clifford Rosenberg, “Masculine Makeovers: Lifestyle Television, Metrosexuals and Real Blokes,” in *Exposing Lifestyle Television: The Big Reveal*, ed. Gareth Palmer (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 146.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>190</sup> Anthony McMahon, *Taking Care of Men: Sexual Politics in the Public Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

resulted in its normalization, which reveals that masculinity and normality are still closely interconnected. In other words, the disassociation of madness and femininity allows men to encounter insanity without the fear of being considered socially deviant. Thus, madness is transformed from a humiliating, stigmatizing experience that damages one's gender identity into a common illness, not too different from, for example, allergy, influenza, or sore throat. In the most extreme and, in the context of this thesis, most interesting cases, as it will be explained later, madness seems even to have acquired the power of affirming one's masculinity rather than impairing it.

Taking into account these social developments, it cannot be denied that during the last fifty years influential modifications of cultural concepts have taken place. The changes have been swift and rather promising: madness, at least formally, is no longer equated with femininity and the modern view on proper masculinity includes appreciation of qualities traditionally associated with women. However, it is worth acknowledging that we are witnessing a continuous process and that no transformation is fixed or permanent. The positive, rhetorically advocated changes seem frequently to overshadow the less obvious structures of masculinism that still operate in Western culture. The present analysis is therefore an attempt to explore the continuity and mutual influence of socio-cultural processes without neglecting the contradictions and ambiguities that accompany them. Thus, with the help of David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*, I will try to show the ways in which the clash between gradually changing gender norms and twentieth century masculinism has influenced the social concept of madness, and modified the relationship between insanity and gender deviance.

### **Surviving the Collision of Masculinities: Substance Abuse and Escapism in *Infinite Jest***

In September 2006, Dave Eggers concluded his brief but sincere foreword to *Infinite Jest* by trying to persuade the reader that David Foster Wallace, the author of the novel, "is normal, and regular, and ordinary, and this [*Infinite Jest*] is his extraordinary, and irregular, and not-normal achievement, a thing that will outlast him and you and me, but will help future people understand us – how we felt, how we lived, what we gave to each other and why."<sup>192</sup> Two years later, Wallace committed suicide after having struggled with depression for more than twenty years. Mentioning this fact is not intended as a way to

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<sup>192</sup> Dave Eggers, foreword to *Infinite Jest*, xi.

reveal the parallels between *his* life and fiction. I tend rather to relate to Karen Green, Wallace's widow, who is plagued by the knowledge that her husband's "autopsy report is on the internet and is deemed as subject worthy of . . . literary criticism."<sup>193</sup>

What seems striking, though, is the unbinding of the concept of normality in the meeting of *life* and *fiction*. Denying the connection between the two might seem to be the easiest way to deal with such a problematic and poignant issue as madness. Although this denial makes the task of "understanding us" through fiction more complicated, it is also quite revealing, as it shows our unwillingness or unreadiness to admit the currently existing problems by distancing literature from reality. Therefore, instead of waiting for future people to discover this tendency of our time, the present thesis employs a self-critical approach by admitting that, while life and fiction is not synonymous, the relationship between them does reveal various truths about the lives of real people.

Literary critics have sometimes claimed that arguably the main character in *Infinite Jest*, Hal Incandenza, can be seen as a not-normal "autobiographical doppelgänger"<sup>194</sup> of the normal David Foster Wallace. Without denying and discussing the obvious biographical reflections that can be found in the novel, I would like to emphasize that in this thesis both fictional characters and real people function as representatives of their respective sides of the coin. That is, any parallels or discrepancies between them are only deemed relevant so long as they inform us about *us* and not only about themselves. Hal Incandenza is one of such symbolically informative characters, who represents the results of women losing their priority right to madness and the effects of this process on male gender identity. He is a junior tennis player and a "despairing drug addict,"<sup>195</sup> with both categories being almost inseparable. It is thus hardly a coincidence that the development of his skills and suddenly becoming one of the top players at the Enfield Tennis Academy corresponds to his increasing addiction to various substances.

Defining the story of Hal's development as a typical *Bildungsroman* development seems rather ironic,<sup>196</sup> taking into account that his professional leap is dependent on marijuana. On the other hand, the whole 1079 page large body of *Infinite Jest* is a specific type of parody of contemporary American culture, which might justify the use of such term

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<sup>193</sup> Tim Adams, "Karen Green interview," *The Observer*, April 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/apr/10/karen-green-david-foster-wallace-interview>

<sup>194</sup> Marchall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>196</sup> Samuel Cohen, "To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest*'s History," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, eds. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 65.

if the ironic aspect is acknowledged. Throughout the novel, Hal struggles with self-searching and self-affirmation, a process defined by Stephen Burn as an effort to understand the “anatomy of the contemporary self,”<sup>197</sup> using different substances to cope with his own thoughts and emotions. Perhaps not surprisingly, as time goes on, the chances for success slip farther and farther away. While Burn’s interpretation of Hal’s quest for self-definition succeeds in attributing to the novel a sense of coherency and continuity, as well as in explaining narrative shifts (which I will return to later in my analysis), it does not address the role of gender in the character’s attempts to establish and maintain his identity.

Viewing identity search as related to Hal’s unstable sense of manhood helps one to notice and explain the correlation between his athletic achievements and drug abuse. Substance addiction is an essential component of his professional success, but detrimental to his identity, which becomes continuously more elusive towards the end of the novel. This shows Hal finding himself in the midst of the crisis of masculinity that was mentioned previously in this chapter and his addiction functions as a means to maintain the externally demanded type of manhood, to silence inner beliefs that make Hal question whether the development taken by his life is his own choice or a trajectory imposed by social rule. He chooses substance abuse to cope with his inner conflict, to be able to function and communicate in a way that can be understood and approved of by others.

As a result, the cure turns into illness, and Hal’s story casts light on the previously outlined change of the status of madness in society, as his obsessive addiction appears to be a commonly employed method for handling difficult situations. Emily Russell describes this phenomenon in the following way:

*Infinite Jest* reflects a mid-twentieth-century shift away from the ethnographic and visually exploitive venue of the freak show toward a program of diagnosis and cure. Medicine works both materially and ideologically, acting as the central agent in the physical management of disability as well as reinforcing the logic of abnormality through which disabled people are made socially legible.<sup>198</sup>

Perhaps Russell’s use of “disability” and “disabled people” is too clinical with reference to Hal’s communication problems, which can well be interpreted as entirely symbolic. Still, she manages to combine two important and mutually related aspects of the modified

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<sup>197</sup> Stephen Burn, *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 39.

<sup>198</sup> Emily Russell, *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic* (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 177.

concept of madness that *Infinite Jest* presents the reader with, that is, social inclusion of those who experience mental health problems and focusing on the cure. Thus, one could say that madness has lost its former stigma, but retained its function, that of maintaining adherence to normality.

If one assumes that Hal's part in *Infinite Jest* is nevertheless a *Bildungsroman*, then it is a reversed one, or rather an unfinished one. In other words, the novel begins with Hal having a distinct voice of his own. As Cohen has observed, the first-person singular pronoun introduces four of the novel's first five paragraphs.<sup>199</sup> "I am not just a boy who plays tennis," Hal says to the admission authorities at the University of Arizona. "I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex. . . . I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything."<sup>200</sup> However, it turns out that Hal's speech is incomprehensible to his interviewers: "What in God's name are those. . .," one dean cries shrilly, "those *sounds*?"<sup>201</sup> Hal's account of the interview is meticulous and his thoughts intricate, yet he is believed to have a communicative disability. Wallace's skill at maintaining the unreliability of all of his characters' speeches and actions is at its best here. One can never be certain that Hal's words are heard by the deans in the same form that he presents his thoughts to the reader.

Regardless, trying to specify the level of the narrators' reliability is perhaps redundant, since the confusion itself reveals more about the nature of one of the novel's major conflicts. Although Elizabeth Anne Freudenthal argues that Wallace fails at offering a "meaningful substitute for corrective regimes of selfhood" and that the alternatives presented in *Infinite Jest* "exalt formlessness and pure vulnerability rather than meaningful opposition to the cultural forces,"<sup>202</sup> the novel does depict some significant attempts to protest against these regimes, one of which is reflected in Hal's search for a functional self-definition. Contrary to the characters from the two literary works discussed earlier in this paper, Hal's mental disorder does not set him apart from society as a punishment for not being masculine enough. Both in Anderson's "Hands" and Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest*, the male characters could be described as victims, partially because they saw themselves as such. None of the characters examined in previous chapters possessed the level of

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<sup>199</sup> Cohen, "To Wish to Try," 67.

<sup>200</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 11-12.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>202</sup> Elizabeth Anne Freudenthal, "Staying Out of Step: Compulsiveness and Detachment in Contemporary Fiction" (PhD diss., University of California, 2007), 155.

confidence that one finds in Hal's way of thinking. Although he is seen by other people as in need of "care,"<sup>203</sup> it does not lead to his internalization of deficiency. His protest that becomes expressed by means of a mental disorder is active rather than passive and even though Hal loses his voice towards the end of the novel, both literally and metaphorically, it does not victimize him, because he never considers himself as the one that fails.

Moreover, in Hal's struggle with coming to terms with his authentic self one can see both a willingness to protest against the existing masculinist regime characterizing sports culture and the resistance towards important aspects of post-feminism. Thus, Hal's madness can be seen as the symbol of the conflict between the new masculinity in contrast to the traditional views propagated by Western culture in general and sports culture in particular. After declaring that he is not a machine without beliefs and feelings, Hal stands up and witnesses "jowls sagging, eyebrows high on trembling foreheads" and "cheeks bright-white."<sup>204</sup> Then (according to Hal's account), one of the deans wrestles him down on the floor and soon afterwards he is taken to the emergency room to recover from what is described by others as a seizure.

In Cohen's interpretation, which at times seems overly ambitious in relating the character's struggles to Wallace's own professional and personal challenges, Hal is "a soul trapped inside a body, literally strapped down, struggling to express himself, to bring what is inside out into the open so that he can be understood."<sup>205</sup> However, this kind of description places Hal in the position of a victim, which, as I would argue, is not the case in *Infinite Jest*. Cohen's definition seems to reflect a sympathetic yet one-sided view of Hal's personality. The access to his own thoughts, however subjective or unreliable they might be, allows one to learn that Hal's problem is being misunderstood rather than not being able to express himself. His alleged inability to communicate is a means of suppressing his attempts to express dissatisfaction with the existing order. Importantly, "he's fine when he's by himself,"<sup>206</sup> as Uncle Charles (C.T.) admits. The problems begin when he has to function effectively in a society that propagates and demands a contradictory set of attitudes.

Gradually, however, Hal learns how to conform to the expectations surrounding him, but not without the help of drugs, which he becomes increasingly dependent on. The addiction is rendered in the novel as a *normal* way of handling life's stressful moments. As

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<sup>203</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 14.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>205</sup> Cohen, "To Wish to Try," 67.

<sup>206</sup> Wallace, 15.



Wallace writes, “there’s always been a certain percentage of high-caliber adolescent players at E.T.A. who manage their internal weathers chemically.”<sup>207</sup> In spite of the fact that E.T.A.’s regulations formally prohibit the use of alcohol and drugs, the staff never pursues the students who break the rule, because “most of the prorectors themselves are depressed or traumatized about not making it into the Show and having to come back to E.T.A.”<sup>208</sup> In “‘The Machine-Language of the Muscles’: Reading, Sport, and the Self in *Infinite Jest*,” Burn claims that “Wallace uses tennis as a focal point around which larger arguments about the self are generated,”<sup>209</sup> and this point could not be expressed more precisely. Sport is among the cultural arenas where the conflict between the “old” and the “new” masculinity is most easily noticeable, and the novel presents the reader with a vast range of methods for surviving this clash, all of which are connected to escapism.

In *The Dictionary of Psychology*, escapism is defined as “a tendency to free the self from the pressures of the real world by returning to the security of childhood by regressive thinking, feeling, and behavior, ordinarily accompanied by symptoms of neurosis. Usually a form of resistance. The person may also engage in substance abuse to escape from responsibility, anxiety.”<sup>210</sup> To use a definition from a psychology textbook in an analysis that is partially a critique of the shortcomings of the very science, is undoubtedly ironic, yet, at the same time, in concordance with Wallace’s approach to writing. This is, however, not the only reason this definition is provided at this point. The heaviest irony lies in the realization that psychology has pathologized both difficult emotions and their avoidance, making it hardly possible to define normality, or differentiate it from madness. The contradictions within the science of psychology are echoed in culture as well. The question posed by Nicoline Timmer seems thus highly relevant: how can we explain that in contemporary popular culture, where, supposedly, “showing emotions is rather a norm, instead of a taboo,”<sup>211</sup> literary works like *Infinite Jest* depict escapism as the most favored way of dealing with one’s troubling thoughts and feelings?

A particular episode from *Infinite Jest* exemplifies the above suggested contradiction in an ironically revealing manner. Almost immediately after Hal’s father James (referred to as “Himself” by the family members) commits suicide by placing his

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<sup>207</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 53.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Stephen J. Burn, “‘The Machine-Language of the Muscles’: Reading, Sport, and the Self in *Infinite Jest*,” in *Upon Further Review: Sports in American Literature*, eds. Michael Cocchiarale and Scott D. Emmert (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 41.

<sup>210</sup> Raymond J. Corsini, *The Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 341.

<sup>211</sup> Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millenium* (New York: Rodopi, 2010), 146.

head in a microwave oven, Hal is “shunted directly into concentrated grief- and trauma-therapy,”<sup>212</sup> where he is *expected* to show emotions caused by the traumatic event. Being well aware of what these expectations are, Hal meets the counselor duly prepared to deliver “textbook-perfect symptoms of denial, bargaining, anger, still more denial, depression.”<sup>213</sup> Hal’s way of retelling the course of his therapy sessions is characterized by constant disregard of his authentic feelings in favor of trying to satisfy everyone else’s expectations. Timmer summarizes:

Hal uses this way of talking about himself only to give *impression* of dealing appropriately with his feelings, to give the illusion that he acts in accord with what is ‘normal’ or expected in his culture. It is in that sense that the therapeutic narrative is a *normative* cultural narrative in this storyworld. The way Hal in the anecdote about his grief therapy is more preoccupied with *performing* than with actually figuring out how he really feels about things, is telling.<sup>214</sup>

Perhaps most interesting in the context of the changing relationship between madness and masculinity is to observe the way in which the therapeutic narrative of contemporary culture reflects the normalization of mental disorders, as Hal realizes that a certain set of psychological conditions is expected from him. In other words, it is *normal* to be mentally ill. Nevertheless, he displays both deliberate and unconscious resistance to these expectations by prioritizing the performance of artificial “textbook” grief over dealing with the actual one. Moreover, in the course of the novel Hal hardly ever expresses his feelings directly, “but rather hides those feelings behind a wall of cynical, hip irony.” This has a destructive impact on his identity as “the hidden feelings in turn remain caged inside him until they become the walls of his own solipsistic cage.”<sup>215</sup> Linking Hal’s denial of emotions with his difficulties in accepting the mechanical nature of a successful tennis player’s way of being, his behavior can be interpreted as inconsistent. This phenomenon highlights the effects of the conflict between two different masculinity concepts that exist in contemporary culture simultaneously. In my view, the ceaseless irony that the reader finds in Wallace’s novel in its depiction of escapism, is not simply a sign of intellectual elitism,<sup>216</sup> but rather a representation of the encounter between the two conflicting social forces.

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<sup>212</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 252.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>214</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?*, 144.

<sup>215</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 151.

<sup>216</sup> Timmer, 147.

Here we return to the discussion of the women-friendly rhetoric of popular culture versus the masculinist ideology that arguably reached its peak in the middle of the twentieth century. A possible answer to the question posed by Timmer might be that the dualistic gender ideology is still exerting a strong influence with regard to male reaction to sentiment, particularly in the fields that have long been considered typically masculine, such as sports. To use another of the countless ironic examples provided by Wallace: it is not possible that Hal's mother Avril could succeed to her deceased husband's position as the Headmaster at E.T.A., considering such reasons as her countless duties at the Academy and the trauma caused by Himself's suicide. And most importantly, asks the narrator, "how would 'Headmistress' [emphasis mine] have sounded?"<sup>217</sup>

Escapism is Hal's and other young athletes' only way to professional success, because "the whole Tavis/Schitt program here [at E.T.A.] is supposedly a progression towards self-forgetting." The part of the self that needs to be forgotten "in order to hang in and develop" is exactly the one that concerns emotional vulnerability. For this reason, sexual relationships between E.T.A.'s students are not a frequent occurrence. "The whole girl-issue brings them face to face with something in themselves they need to believe they've left far behind,"<sup>218</sup> the narrator explains. The overriding need to suppress emotions and focus on the game is described by Burn as "mechanistic materialism," which functions as the main mode of self-conception at E.T.A.<sup>219</sup> Professionally, this approach is extremely effective, and at the age of seventeen Hal is one of America's top-ranked junior tennis players. His mental condition is deemed by E.T.A.'s staff as entirely adequate, and "when asked how he's doing with it all, Hal says Fine and thanks you for asking."<sup>220</sup>

The fact that the professional achievements are contingent on substance abuse and that this problem is overseen and even encouraged by the school's authorities receives much criticism in Wallace's novel. In *Infinite Jest*, the reader comes across an excessive and almost encyclopedic list of chemical substances that the young athletes employ to improve either their physical or mental performance. One possible set for managing the everyday pressures of the competitive tennis might consist of "dexedrine or low-volt methedrine before matches and benzodiazapenes to come back down after matches, with Mudslides or Blue Flames at some understanding Comm. Ave. nightspot or beers and bongos at some discreet Academy corner at night to short-circuit the up-and-down cycle,

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<sup>217</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 288.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 635-636.

<sup>219</sup> Burn, "The Machine-Language of the Muscles," 45.

<sup>220</sup> Wallace, 155.

mushrooms or X or something. . .”<sup>221</sup> The names of both existing psychoactive drugs and fictitious substances “invented” by Wallace permeate the novel, representing explicitly the escapist tendencies that have become widespread in contemporary culture.

However, the seemingly limitless means of self-erasure do not solve the problem of Hal’s missing self-definition. After all, it is hardly possible to define something that has ceased to exist. The hopelessness of the situation, which reaches its culmination towards the final part of *Infinite Jest*, is reflected in Hal’s increasing disappointment and his “loss of voice.” As the novel draws to a close, the narrative shifts from first to third person, which coincides with severe deterioration of Hal’s communicative ability. The collision of masculinities is survived, but the consequences are not too promising. Continuous balancing between contradictory social expectations of post-feminist culture creates constant obstacles to Hal’s developing a functional identity. Neither drugs nor escapism manage to help him to solve his exemplary crisis of modern masculinity—“life’s endless war against the self you cannot live without.”<sup>222</sup>

### **The “Irony-Free Zone”: Post-Feminist Masculinity Performance at Anti-Substance Meetings**

Apart from revealing the personal identity-related struggles of an individual balancing between various masculinity concepts, Hal’s story is also an entrance (though located at the back of *Infinite Jest*) to considerably more social displays of the attempts to “redefine the hero by dismissing normative images of powerful, aggressive men.”<sup>223</sup> Although in Antony Rowland, Emma Liggins, and Eriks Uskalis’ discussion of the changing concepts of masculinity these attempts are attributed to contemporary fiction as a positive response to media representations, Wallace’s novel takes a different perspective. In *Infinite Jest*, the idea of a *forced* implementation of the New Man concept is approached critically, yet this should not be mistaken for a protest against the social movement away from the masculinist ideal of manhood. As I showed in the previous section, the novel depicts the meeting between the two opposite concepts and criticizes the loss of individual freedom in the face of invasive social forces rather than expressing a judgment about their overall rightness.

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>223</sup> Antony Rowland, Emma Liggins and Eriks Uskalis, eds., introduction to *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 20.

Importantly, Hal becomes a participant in a “demonstration lesson” in modern manhood when he decides to seek help for dealing with his substance addiction, which, in turn, is the result of his unsuccessful attempt at maintaining the identity of an emotionless, unbreakable, and power-driven tennis player. Expecting to receive some scientific encouragement, Hal enters Ennet Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (situated, quite importantly, in near proximity to the Enfield Tennis Academy) to attend a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) Meeting. However, what he experiences at the meeting reaches far beyond both his expectations and preparations, as he witnesses “nine or ten adult middle-class males” holding to their chests “what looks quite a bit like a teddy bear” as a symbol for their “Inner Infant” and listening to a “sobbing guy Kevin” telling about the lack of love and support he has been experiencing throughout his life.<sup>224</sup> Hal’s disappointment is immediate—instead of being presented with “at least some data on how long one might expect the wretchedness of giving up drugs to continue before the old nervous system and salivary glands returned to normal,”<sup>225</sup> he finds himself completely puzzled and, as Timmer puts it, “not at all emotionally prepared”<sup>226</sup> for such a “men’s-issues-Men’s-Movement-type” meeting that one of his fellow E.T.A. students “liked to mimic and parody during drills, making his stick’s grip poke out between his legs and yelling ‘Nurture this! Honor getting in touch with this!’”<sup>227</sup>

The course of the meeting is narrated exclusively by Hal and its description is saturated with exaggeration and irony. The critique is directed at two interconnected main problems, that is, the authoritative form of the self-help group system and inauthenticity of the conveyed emotions. According to the professional expert model,<sup>228</sup> the role of an external authority in the recovery process is an integral part of the self-help system, as it is achieved through admitting the problem and the need for specific assistance, as well as adopting “a specified course of action prescribed by an external expert or experts.”<sup>229</sup> Due to this authoritative aspect of the support group format, which is popularly considered as a successful post-feminist phenomenon, the self-help group movement is described by Hal as an another oppressive system depriving individuals of their free will. At the very beginning of the self-help session, Hal recognizes the leader of the meeting who possesses a “high

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<sup>224</sup> Wallace, 800.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 801.

<sup>226</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?*, 166.

<sup>227</sup> Wallace, 804.

<sup>228</sup> Kate S. Ahmadi, “What is a Self-Help Group?” Psych Central, 2007, <http://psychcentral.com/lib/2007/what-is-a-self-help-group/all/1>.

<sup>229</sup> Andrew Singleton, “Recovery and Self-Help,” in *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael Flood (New York: Routledge, 2007), 535.

hoarse voice” that has a “blandly kind didactic quality . . . as if always speaking to a not-too-bright child.”<sup>230</sup> The obviously uneven power-relations within the group are given emphasis in the described episode, as the participants only act according to the subtly expressed yet clear instructions given by the leader of the meeting.

When the leader invites the other men to voice their feelings of love and support for Kevin, the response is a unanimous expression of love and empathy in the form of memorized clichés that increase the impression of inauthentic oversensitivity. The participants of the group continuously repeat words and phrases used by the leader of the meeting as if in a hypnotic trance:

“I love you, Kevin.”  
“I’m not judging you, Kevin.”  
“Know just how you and the I.I. [Inner Infant] feel.”  
“I’m feeling really close to you.”  
“I’m feeling a lot of love for you right now, Kevin.”  
“You’re crying for two, guy.”  
“Kevin Kevin Kevin Kevin Kevin.”  
“I’m not feeling like your crying is one bit unmanly or pathetic, fella.”<sup>231</sup>

The exaggerated sentimentalism of the language used within the group seems to be a major problem. Wallace demonstrates that the irony of the situation lies in the use of clichés to express true feelings rather than Hal’s inability to relate to the other men. Aaron Ritzenberg makes a relevant point in his discussion of the parallels between the depiction of sentimentalism in *Infinite Jest* and the sentimental novels of the nineteenth century: “In the world of the sentimental, silences are vital: bodies can express true feeling, words cannot. Language at the moment of a fully invested sympathetic communion would only seem hollow, fatuous, even vulgar.”<sup>232</sup> I share Ritzenberg’s view that Wallace highlights in his novel the moments in which trite language fails to convey genuine sympathy.

Although it has been argued that Wallace’s book disavows self-help culture and presents it as a threat to masculinity,<sup>233</sup> I would like to emphasize that the criticism in *Infinite Jest* is directed at specific problematic aspects of the self-help movement rather than its purpose or effectiveness. This is also one of the major challenges and achievements of Wallace’s novel—its ability to create an objective perspective through

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<sup>230</sup> Wallace, 801.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Aaron Ritzenberg, *The Sentimental Touch: The Language of Feeling in the Age of Managerialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 125.

<sup>233</sup> Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 126.

presenting various highly subjective views and attitudes. Hal's dark and penetrating irony clashes with the oversentimentalism circulating in the self-help group, though neither of the two seems to provide a universally applicable tool for solving the crisis of masculinity. On the one hand, the fact that Hal attends the meeting in the first place reveals his unvoiced need for emotional support and identification with those who share his addiction problems. On the other hand, the seemingly artificial and authoritative nature of the self-help group excludes him from the circle of those who can actually be helped.

According to the statistical data presented by Kate S. Ahmadi, there are approximately 500,000 to 700,000 support groups in the United States with 10-15 million participants.<sup>234</sup> It cannot be denied that the post-feminist mutual support movement has established an important place in society, and that a great number of people benefit from participating in it. It should be noted that Wallace's novel never denies this. However, *Infinite Jest* does address the confusion created by placing an unstable masculine identity, targeted by various opposing social forces, within a rather strict framework of post-feminist ideals. Hal's disappointment with being faced with a "cosmetic-psychology encounter thing" instead of a "hopeful antidrug Meeting"<sup>235</sup> is summarized by Timmer in the following way:

That Hal does not find what he is looking for, that in the novel he is not granted the "magic" of the self-help group solution is significant. Apparently this is not a one directional solution for every problem individuals have to deal with in this storyworld – and that it does not work for *Hal*, who plays such an important role in the novel, underscores this. Hal is at the wrong type of meeting, of course, but he could have been at an NA meeting, at least that would have been a narrative option at that point.<sup>236</sup>

The fact that Hal fails to identify with either the power-driven and emotionless athlete image or the post-feminist ideology of the self-help group model is significant, as it maintains his role of an exemplary display of the contemporary masculinity crisis.

In *Infinite Jest*, the self-help movement is described in more detail through the depiction of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. In most interesting passages, Wallace introduces the second-person narrative to reveal some facts about AA system from the position of someone who has gone through the whole recovery process. Thus, *Infinite Jest* playfully maintains the theme of human empathy throughout its more than thousand pages.

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<sup>234</sup> Ahmadi, "What is a Self-Help Group?"

<sup>235</sup> Wallace, 801.

<sup>236</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?*, 167.

The blending of narrative points of view challenges the reader to imagine what it is like to actually be an addict. Empathy is also considered to be a key concept within the AA system. During the AA meetings, writes Wallace, “everybody is aiming for total empathy with the speaker; that way they’ll be able to receive the AA message he’s here to carry. Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification. . . . Identifying, unless you’ve got a stake in Comparing, isn’t very hard to do, here.”<sup>237</sup> The fact that empathy is called “Identification” implies that these notions are not identical. The self-help group language is presented as not only exaggeratedly sentimental, but also overly theoretical.

However, as Ritzenberg has noted, “Wallace is wary of the sentimental moment, but he is not cynical, and the text is certainly not a repudiation of sentimentalism.”<sup>238</sup> *Infinite Jest* employs the second-person narrative to expound on the knowledge that one acquires during a stay at the Ennet Recovery House, a significant part of which is related to the relationship between psychological problems, substance abuse, and masculinity. Wallace fills six pages with countless facts that are informative, amusing, and tragic at the same time. For the reader, it is not always easy to determine whether the enlisted facts should be accepted literally or through the lens of sarcasm, due to Wallace’s intricate combination of trivialities and profound truths expressed with the use of various points of view. For example, “a little time around” the Ennet House will let *you* realize that “*pace* macho bullshit, public male weeping is not only plenty masculine but can actually feel *good* (reportedly),” that “addiction is either a disease or a mental illness or a spiritual condition (as in ‘poor of spirit’),” that “it takes great personal courage to let yourself appear weak,” or that “the cliché ‘I don’t know who I am’ unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché.”<sup>239</sup> By blending different narratives Wallace leaves the validity of these facts for the readers to determine themselves.

Apart from Hal, another character that offers the reader a glimpse of the multi-faceted truths of the self-help movement is Don Gately, a former burglar and addict who becomes a counselor at the Ennet House and a loyal adherent of Alcoholics Anonymous philosophy. There are various connections between the stories of Hal and Gately. One of the main links is, for instance, Joelle Van Dyne, a woman who always wears a veil that conceals her acid-damaged face and who plays the main role in the deadly *Infinite Jest* film (the Entertainment) created by Hal’s father. Joelle steps on the way of addiction recovery

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<sup>237</sup> Wallace, 345.

<sup>238</sup> Ritzenberg, *The Sentimental Touch*, 125.

<sup>239</sup> Wallace, 201, 203, 204.



as a resident at the Ennet House and is counseled by Gately, thus indirectly connecting the two main characters. Another connection, which I find even more significant in the context of present analysis, is Hal's and Gately's depiction of the future of the American society. Hal's story has a hopeful beginning and then depicts the gradual decline of his identity due to unsuccessful attempts to solve the crisis of masculinity by engaging in substance abuse and his subsequent inability to accept the help provided by self-help system. Gately's story, on the contrary, presents a reversed development, which gives "at least some outline of what hope might look like in contemporary and near-future America."<sup>240</sup>

Just like in Hal's case, on entering the twelve step program of NA, Gately's attitude is markedly skeptical. Nevertheless, soon afterwards and to his own great surprise, Gately discovers that "sitting on hemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work"<sup>241</sup> if one would stop asking questions beginning by "How." The story of Gately is, in this respect, a successful one, and through his point of view the reader learns about the most positive and successful aspects of NA and AA. The newest members of AA are encouraged to use the clichéd slogans they do not yet believe in, a process known within self-help discourse as "Fake It Till You Make It."<sup>242</sup> In other words, the newly sober are expected to *pretend* that they are happy to be substance-free and that they benefit greatly from being part of the self-help group until it actually starts to happen, which it, more often than not, does.

However, no one warns Gately that being free of substance makes the former addicts remember the reasons why they started to use the substance in the first place. Eight months after becoming an NA member, the troublesome experiences of Gately's past start to reappear: "It's like a lot of memories of his youth sank without bubbles when he quit school and then later only in sobriety bubbled back up to where he could Get In Touch with them."<sup>243</sup> He has to face the memory of his alcoholic mother and her lover who frequently used to physically abuse her. Gately also "Gets In Touch" with being continuously bullied during his school years and having a routine of finishing the bottles of Stolichnaya vodka after his mother had drunk enough to lose consciousness. Despite the painful re-experiencing of the disturbing moments from his past, Gately does not relapse

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<sup>240</sup> Andrew B. Warren, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men by David Foster Wallace," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Writers and Their Works*, eds. Geoff Hamilton and Brian Jones (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 41.

<sup>241</sup> Wallace, 349.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

into substance abuse. Quite the contrary, he learns to appreciate the benefits provided to him by the self-help movement.

One of these positive aspects is the opportunity to help other people who suffer from addiction problems. Gately is not a typical Ennet House counselor, because his sense of empathy is depicted as authentic. He tells the newcomers about his own initial disbelief in the self-help system, as well as the subsequent shock, as it proved to be effective. He also admits that he feels *lucky* rather than *grateful* for being sober, modifying the accepted self-help discourse. He encourages everyone to continue coming to the meetings despite the skepticism and “defies the new Ennet House residents to try and shock the smiles off these Boston AA’s faces. Can’t be done, he says.”<sup>244</sup> The fact that Gately is a character that bears much of Wallace’s characteristic irony is important. While the story of Gately’s recovery gives a promising outlook for the future of post-feminist culture, it shows that it is not unproblematic. “An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church,” writes Wallace. “Irony-free zone.”<sup>245</sup> Yet Gately, the most ironic of Ennet House’s counselors, proves to feel the most authentic empathy for the new residents.

Although Gately’s story, contrary to Hal’s experience, proves that the post-feminist self-help culture *can* be effective for many individuals, I will agree with Timmer who concludes that “the discursive practice of self-help groups may in the end be too limited or too specific – very strict in the type of self that is molded by going through the program. We could also say that this discursive practice is simply not sophisticated enough to deal with more subtle psychological problems.”<sup>246</sup> The novel shows that following the twelve step program, attending the meetings and adjusting to the discourse of NA or AA has the healing potential for those men who accept the rhetoric of the post-feminist self-help culture without questioning it. This means, however, that someone is bound to be excluded from the circle of those who are lucky enough to be “self-helped.” In contemporary Western culture, different types of masculinity exist simultaneously, and it cannot be taken for granted that any individual would embrace the post-feminist ideals without resistance. Dualistic gender ideology, though significantly less prominent and destructive than before, is still a concept that influences the way men who suffer from psychological problems approach emotion. *Infinite Jest* offers no clear answers, but its depiction of the contradictions surrounding the search of a cure for the masculinity crisis is revealing. I do

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<sup>244</sup> Wallace, 352.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>246</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?*, 166.

not consider Wallace's novel to be nihilistic, because it does provide alternative solutions for the problems it illuminates, the most valuable of which is acknowledging and respecting one's personal freedom. For this reason, "*Infinite Jest* as a compendium of many different stories of selves does not presume one particular type of self,"<sup>247</sup> thus defending the right of every individual to "make it."

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 168.

## Conclusion

In a recent talk, Thomas Insel, the Director of the National Institute of Mental Health, called the paradoxical situation that the human brain is not yet able to understand itself “a cruel trick of evolution.”<sup>248</sup> He informed the audience about the huge medical success in reducing the mortality rates for such diseases as leukemia (mortality rate reduced by 85% in the period 1965-1995), heart disease (65%), and HIV/AIDS. After an inspiring reference to such remarkable advances in medicine, Insel presented the fact that about every fifteen minutes there is one person committing suicide in the USA (90% of which are related to mental disorders), and the morbidity rate for this condition since 1960s has not changed at all. According to Insel, the “impediment of progress” has been the misleading concept of “mental disorders,” which has to be replaced by “brain disorders,” due to the changes that happen in the brain of people who have been diagnosed with, for example, schizophrenia. Apart from proposing to “rethink” mental disorders through a new name, the talk did not offer any new solutions for helping the people who experience mental health problems (an estimated 20% of the population).

Perhaps the name “brain disorders” is not as regressive as it appears to me at first sight. It is at least an honest one, denoting disorders of something that cannot be understood, since the only tool for understanding it is the brain itself. But this then is a road that leads nowhere, and I do not believe that the situation of humankind is so utterly hopeless. A question might arise—what has literature to do with this? I suggest reading David Foster Wallace’s description of what he sees as the purpose of fiction as an answer to it:

Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now.<sup>249</sup>

While medicine seeks the cure before managing to find the cause, fiction illuminates the reasons for the problems of the human mind. Moreover, analyzing literature from a

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<sup>248</sup> Thomas Insel, “Towards a New Understanding of Mental Illness,” TED Talks, filmed January 2013, posted April 2013, [http://www.ted.com/talks/thomas\\_insel\\_toward\\_a\\_new\\_understanding\\_of\\_mental\\_illness.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_insel_toward_a_new_understanding_of_mental_illness.html)

<sup>249</sup> Stephen Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 26.

historical perspective shows that these reasons are, perhaps surprisingly, subject to continuous change.

I have tried to argue and prove throughout this thesis that the role of socio-cultural processes in understanding problematic conditions of human mind is crucial. My answer to the question why there has been almost no progress in reducing the harmful effects of mental disorders is the fact that their socio-cultural aspect has so far been largely ignored. By bringing together the fields of medicine and humanities, previously neglected important insights can be provided. The analysis of the depiction of mental disorders in literature is valuable from several perspectives. First of all, it helps to explain the close relationship between problematic individual experiences and the changing social norms, beliefs, and attitudes. The study of madness in fiction reveals the cultural component of the idea of mental illness by depicting the impermanence and variability of its categories. Second, it facilitates an empathic understanding of those who suffer from mental health problems. The imaginative empathy and subjectivity of the writer possess the potential to eliminate the stigma of mental illness, as the reader learns about the *reasons* that contribute to it. Finally, the study of madness in fiction proves that the potential of literary scholarship reaches far beyond the aesthetic aspect, contrary to what is popularly believed.

While there have been carried out interesting studies of the depiction of female insanity in twentieth-century literature, the relationship between madness and masculinity in American fiction is a yet unexplored theme, which has both complicated and aided my undertaking the present project. At this point, I consider my initial aim, to outline *a literary "his story"* of madness and masculinity in American literature of the previous century, fulfilled. The analysis of Sherwood Anderson's "Hands," Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* has showed that madness and gender are two interdependent social constructs whose transience in time makes fascinating socio-cultural knowledge available. Wallace's idea of the purpose of fiction can be applicable to all three works that have been examined in this thesis, as they all bring to the surface both the difficulties in being "a real human being" and the fact that it is still possible and worth striving for.

The analysis of Anderson's short story "Hands" helped me to define and explain the essential differences between male and female madness. In the first part of the twentieth century, the close association between madness and femininity was particularly damaging to the gender identity of those men who deviated from the masculinist ideal of manhood. By depicting his protagonist as a victim of external social pressures, Anderson

managed to reveal the “double nature” or “double loss” of male madness, a phenomenon that could be both a cause (e.g. Biddlebaum’s alleged homosexuality) and a result (his neurotic hand movements) of male psychological difficulties. By depicting homophobic social reactions towards the protagonist’s gender-inappropriate behavior and his subsequent neurosis resulting from his exclusion from society, Anderson’s short story exemplifies the destructive effects of the feminine aspect of madness on male identity in the beginning of the previous century.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the relationship between madness and masculinity is no less complex than in “Hands.” Most of the male patients living on the mental ward have committed themselves to the psychiatric institution, because they have internalized the pathological view of gender-related deviance that, in Anderson’s story, was violently forced upon the protagonist. In addition to describing individual struggles with one’s inability to attain proper masculinity, Kesey depicts the harmful effects of oppressive practices of institutional psychiatry that received a great deal of critique during the psychedelic sixties. In *Cuckoo’s Nest*, the masculinist ideology is at its peak, as it is depicted as a force that operates both on the individual, social, and nationwide scale. However, the means of sustaining this ideology are noticeably more indirect than in “Hands,” which is probably the main reason why Kesey’s novel has frequently been read as advocating masculinist society. The purpose of my analysis was to prove the opposite; therefore, by examining the destructive impact of the oppressive social system on male mental health, I have exemplified the ways in which *Cuckoo’s Nest* protests against the social forces that aim to repress individual freedom.

Finally, David Foster Wallace’s literary “monument” of contemporary American society, *Infinite Jest*, has helped me to explore the relationship between madness and masculinity in today’s culture. The novel interestingly builds upon the developments discussed in the analyses of the preceding literary works to describe a culture in the process of significant change. What distinguishes *Infinite Jest* as a reflection of contemporary society is the significant fact that in the course of the latter part of the twentieth century madness has been deprived of its negative associations with femininity, a phenomenon that I have defined in this thesis as the “defeminization of madness.” Due to the social developments brought forward by second-wave feminism, these associations, perhaps still existing, are no longer deemed derogatory.

Although this is a promising change, Wallace’s novel shows that behind the post-feminist rhetoric, the structures of masculinist ideology are still functioning. Thus, in

contemporary society, madness is related to the clash between two conflicting ideals of manhood rather than the dualism of manhood and womanhood, as we have seen in the previous two works. Wallace depicts the problematic encounter of the “old” and “new” masculinity by presenting the reader with conflicting social expectations that men are confronted with in today’s culture. In *Infinite Jest*, the cruel demands of the sports culture, which still to a great extent cultivates the ideal of an emotionless and self-centered masculinity, are opposed to the rhetoric of oversentimentalism permeating the self-help groups, such as AA or NA, whose members are expected to adopt the discourse of post-feminist masculinity without questioning it.

The three-period division of the continuously changing relationship between madness and masculinity in the twentieth century has not been an arbitrary choice, which I have tried to prove by referring to the significant socio-cultural changes that took place during and in between the time when “Hands,” *Cuckoo’s Nest*, and *Infinite Jest* were written. Still, this division is rather general, and, as I already mentioned in the introductory part, the literary heritage of the previous century is not characterized by a shortage of works that depict the various aspects of male madness. To obtain a more detailed view, it would definitely be worthwhile to explore how other kinds of fiction relate to Anderson’s, Kesey’s, and Wallace’s creations, since a single work can hardly give a complete view of a whole epoch. Nevertheless, I am certain that the combined analysis of “Hands,” *Cuckoo’s Nest*, and *Infinite Jest* illuminates several important aspects of human nature, such as the cultural influence on scientific categories, the connectedness of social constructs, as well as the transience of their nature. I hope that this knowledge can contribute not only to a greater appreciation of literature, but also to finding a way to solve the “cruel trick of evolution.”

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