

New Horizons in English Studies 1/2016

## LITERATURE



Dominika Szymańska

MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY (UMCS) IN LUBLIN

[szymanskadominika91@gmail.com](mailto:szymanskadominika91@gmail.com)

---

# Mental Illness as a Factor in the Creation of the Contemporary Romantic

**Abstract.** The paper discusses the image of a mad person in the movie *Donnie Darko* by Richard Kelly. I want to examine the deranged protagonist as a contemporary Romantic by comparing Donnie Darko's features and his approach to society with concepts espoused by Romanticism. The focus is on schizophrenia as a condition that influences Donnie's perception, providing typical symptoms displayed by the protagonist (thought disturbance, various types of delusion or hallucination, acts of antisocial behaviour) as well as problems in information processing.

I argue that it is Donnie's condition that makes him a contemporary Romantic – he sees more, feels more and, in the end, he trusts intuition and emotions rather than rational explanation. The eponymous character is a young, alienated idealist who believes that the world can be changed. Donnie refuses to accept social norms or rules as an exceptional and rebellious outsider in search of the meaning of life. Eventually, the Romantic fascination with freedom and nature corresponds to the perception of the illness as liberation of one's true nature.

**Keywords:** romanticism, schizophrenia, stream of consciousness, mental disorders, nonconformism

Michel Foucault (2001, 21) notes "(...) madness fascinates because it is knowledge." The deranged is tempted by the insidious curiosity that urges him/her to question everything. A mad person tends to see more than ordinary people. The eponymous character in Richard Kelly's 2001 movie *Donnie Darko* is a young, alienated idealist who believes that the world can be changed. Donnie is depicted as a romantic individualist who refuses to accept social norms. He is the type of exceptional and rebellious outsider who proves that, paradoxically, it is a mad person who stands as the guardian of truth and reason.

The rejection of accepted order was witnessed in the past under the label of Romanticism – an intellectual movement that flourished in the period between the late 18th and the mid-19th century in Western arts. Romanticism

emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental. (...) [A]ttitudes of Romanticism were as following: a deepened appreciation of the beauties of nature; a general exaltation of emotion over reason and of the senses over intellect; a turning in upon the self and a heightened examination of human personality and its moods and mental [abilities]; a preoccupation with the genius, the hero, and the exceptional figure in general, and a focus on his passions and inner struggles. ("Romanticism" Britannica.com)

Another important aspect of Romanticism was the emphasis on imagination as "(...) a gateway to transcendent experience and spiritual truth" (ibid.). Romantics opposed rationalism by perceiving emotions as superior to reason and the senses as superior to the intellectual or the empirical. Thus, the works from this period dealt with subjects concerning the supernatural, the horrible as well as with intense emotions such as horror, terror or love (ibid.). For instance, *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, one of the best known narratives of the period, combines horror with the tragic results of interfering with nature.

Romanticism ascribed a unique role to the poet as a guide of the masses through complicated world of emotion and meaning. William Wordsworth, one of the first representatives of Romanticism in English literature next to John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Lord Byron, described poetry in his preface to "Lyrical Ballads" (1800) as "(...) the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings (...)" (*Archive.org*). This approach to the poetry and its impact upon the reader became the literary creed of the English Romantic Movement.<sup>1</sup>

Romanticism opposed widely accepted rules, conventions, and authorities. It praised individualism, freedom of thought, and nonconformity. The Romantic hero can be characterized by a highly individualistic approach to life that isolated him from the rest of the society by making him an outcast who questioned social and moral values. Moreover, the Romantics abandoned the institutional Church and saw Nature as a pure manifestation of God. Nature and its magical characteristics fostered self-discovery by inspiring independent thinking contrary to the corrupt society. The hero escaped into the world of nature or art as an alternative to reality. The Romantics

<sup>1</sup> A central figure of American Romanticism, Edgar Allan Poe, an author of short stories like *The Black Cat* (1843), *Ligeia* (1838), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842) and narrative poems eg. *The Raven* (1845) became famous for using the mysterious, the macabre, and the supernatural. He combined spiritual themes with psychological aspects, which allowed multiple interpretations of his literary works.

perceived the rebellious individual as an exceptional figure and described his passions and inner struggles (Stevens 2004, 11–19).

I want, therefore, to argue that Donnie Darko, the main character in Kelly's film, is a contemporary rendition of the figure of a Romantic. It is Donnie's sickness that conditions his emotional vulnerability, which enables the viewer to see him as a contemporary Romantic – he sees more, feels more, defies authority, ignores convention and, in the end, he trusts intuition and emotions rather than rational explanation. As Erik Erikson (1994, 130), a prominent psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist, noted: “[i]n the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.” Donnie lacks a social identity, he has no sense of belonging to a group. At the same time, his personal identity is highly developed; as a boy he notices the differences between himself and the rest of society. As a result, the way he perceives himself on the basis of the message received from the environment confuses him. At one time Donnie says: “I’m crazy” (*Donnie Darko The Director's Cut* 2001)<sup>2</sup> at another: “there is nothing broken in my brain.” The discrepancy leads to the urge to disconnect from the external world seen as threatening and hostile to his own sense of identity.

According to one of the possible interpretations of the film, Donnie suffers from schizophrenia. *Psychology Core Concepts 6<sup>th</sup> edition* provides the following definition of schizophrenia:

[s]chizophrenia is a severe form of psychopathology in which personality seems to disintegrate, emotional life becomes disrupted, and cognitive processes distorted; [other symptoms involve hallucinations] – false sensory experiences, such as hearing non-existent voices (...), emotions often become blunted, thoughts turn bizarre (...) and memory becomes fragmented (...). (Zimbardo, Johnson and McCann 2008, 551)

The unity of the mind is broken, the personality disintegrates, whereas emotional life and cognitive processes become disrupted. Donnie suffers from thought disturbance, namely auditory hallucinations and cognitive disturbance; as he says: “I’m seeing stuff...like really messed-up stuff.” Alongside auditory hallucination there appears a powerful visual one – the boy encounters Frank the Rabbit, a huge rabbit-like figure who can travel in time. At the same time, Donnie never questions the situation in which he finds himself, he never searches for a reasonable explanation of what is happening in his life.

He takes for granted his messiah quest as he believes that his personal sacrifice will save the whole Universe. As it is shown in the movie, the citizens of Middlesex lost their faith and by following a religious imposter, Jim Cunningham, they commit the sin of ignorance. It seems that only the highest act of faith – the sacrifice of life – can

<sup>2</sup> All quotes used in this paper are taken from *Donnie Darko The Director's Cut*. 2001. Directed by Richard Kelly. Pandora, Inc.

save the world. Ultimately, Donnie gives his life for the community believing that his death can restore order in the Universe. This delusion of grandiosity, of exaggerated self-importance is characteristic of the paranoid schizophrenics.

The symptoms of schizophrenia can easily be found in Donnie's behaviour. The boy believes that thoughts and orders are sent to him from Frank the Rabbit, he also perceives the book *The Philosophy of Time Travel* by Roberta Sparrow as a key to the Tangent Universe – a parallel universe that will allegedly collide with the world Donnie knows. According to the boy, it is his duty to save the world from oblivion. Donnie seems to have lost the ability to control his own actions as he writes on the pavement in front of the flooded school, which he flooded himself, "They made me do it," and later asks the Rabbit: "Why did you make me flood the school?" It seems that his awareness is distorted and he has no recollection of his own deeds despite being physically awake. He also obediently fulfils Frank's order concerning Cunningham's mansion: "Burn it to the ground." The boy interprets his own acts of vandalism and antisocial behaviour as the work of some cosmic force pulling the strings.

Concurrently, pathology in thinking may reveal problems in information processing. Emrich states that "dysfunction in receiving, coding and controlling information leads to psychosis, because it incorporates false data into one's consciousness" (quoted in Jakubik 1999, 221, translation mine). Delusion modifies reception and interpretation of information. Donnie says: "I am pretty troubled and pretty confused. And I'm afraid." The huge amount of disturbing information overwhelms the sick person and contributes to the occurrence of negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety, which result from distortion of reality:

The brain in order to reduce the activation level starts up the self-adjustable mechanisms, e.g. systematization and consistency in delusion, or isolation from the environment. All self-adjustable mechanisms are of adaptive quality. One of them is cognitive restructuring which in its extreme cases may lead to pathological escapism into illness in order to lessen emotional tension. (Jakubik 1999, 228–229; translation mine)

The most evident delusion is Frank, "a six-foot-tall bunny rabbit" from the future, as well as Donnie's fascination with the movie *Back to the Future*, which may explain Donnie's fixation on time travel and the whole vision of the Tangent Universe.

Schizophrenia may also involve revelations of a religious or metaphysical type concerning an irresistible urge for profound understanding. As the disease progresses Donnie becomes deeply interested in ideas such as the nature of God, life, death, immortality, time, sacrifice in the name of love, and rebirth. "A mad person believes in participating in some impossible, unreal, other-worldly events through mystical connection with the divine" (Rybakowski and Rybakowski 2008, 200 [author's translation]). Accordingly, Donnie confesses to his doctor: "I have the power to build a time machine." He also feels obliged to keep the wheels of the world in motion.

Yet, for Donnie, his illness is something more than a medical condition, as madness in Kelly's film enables the protagonist to see the hidden truth about himself. Therefore, a mirror can be assumed its symbol – a device that reflects objective reality distorted by the subjective presumptions of an individual. In the movie, Frank the Rabbit and Donnie are separated by a liquid boundary in the bathroom, which may be interpreted as a mirror. In this respect, Frank can be seen as a reflection of Donnie's self-image, an insight into the boy's beastly picture of himself, his untamed nature. The vision of becoming an animal echoes the Romantic fascination with nature and freedom. Frank states: "I can do anything I want. So can you," implying that Donnie is driven by a blessing granted by God, which places him in favourable position as an outstanding individual with the power to transform social institutions. The transformation is the boy's reaction to forces he finds intolerable, such as polar extremes of perception: good-evil, black-white, love-fear, truth-lie, real-imaginary.

*Donnie Darko* calls, hence, for inner exploration and self-discovery. Donnie, as a true Romantic, is unable to handle reality as it is; thus, it can be argued that

(...) schizophrenia is symptomatic of a sick society. From this viewpoint schizophrenia is a means of coping with the unreasonable social forces exerted upon the patient. [B]y becoming schizophrenic, he actually achieves his autonomy. (Tsuang 2011, 114–115)

The movie shows the social environment as a breeding ground for negative emotions like anxiety, violence, abuse, and solitude that lead to alienation. This motivates Donnie's inner opposition to the false happiness of the adults.

The sick person resembles an artist who has the power to create his/her own reality. Both the artist and the mad are characterized as god-like figures able to create a new world. The former creates reality through artistic means, the latter through thoughts and deranged imagination. They both give a critical comment on contemporary culture and society through their behavior and thoughts by exposing the simplicity in human thinking, its blindness to reason and logic. One example of this is Donnie's critical perception of Jim Cunningham and his popular self-help motivational speeches. It is Donnie who first calls Cunningham 'an antichrist' before his true, deviant nature is revealed.

Mental disorders can be seen as estrangement that defamiliarises social norms and conventions. By seeing through Donnie's eyes one is introduced to an unfamiliar image of the world which shows that what is taken as rigidly fixed can be changed. If it is assumed that each person is a product of the society, the mad man provides an alternative view to widely accepted truths. In this respect, the mad takes on the role of a prophet – a person bestowed with the knowledge of the world's destiny and has a connection with or is controlled by some higher force. The prophet very often becomes a mediator between humanity and the divine. The main role of the prophet is to deliver a warning and to educate the chosen community. Donnie proves that rejecting social conventions allows one to notice things invisible to the majority, such as immi-

nent catastrophe or the hypocrisy of the Middlesex community. Like the Romantics, Donnie, by means of self-discovery and critical outlook which enable the protagonist to see the 'big picture,' is able to foresee the end of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Donnie is not alone in his romanticized perception. There are people who support his vision and share his disagreement regarding constituted rules. This is explained by Erich Fromm, who notices that a person with mental abnormalities

(...) does not necessarily have to be negatively judged by the members of the society. They may gain popularity, or even be treated with great respect and sympathy. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the sick person in his behaviour reflects hidden, unconscious tendencies and cravings shared by every man. (quoted in Jakubik 1999, 39 [author's translation])

There are several supporters who help Donnie in his mission – there are two teachers, Mr. Monitoff and Ms. Pomeroy, who develop the boy's intellectual side. There is Grandma Death, who guides him into the Tangent Universe, and Dr. Thurman, who helps Donnie to understand himself. The sequence of therapy scenes is based on a motif of the stream of consciousness. These are the moments when Donnie speaks freely about his deepest fears, beliefs, and hopes. The therapy scenes provide a good opportunity to know Donnie from a very intimate side. Dr Thurman uses hypnotherapy as a tool to uncover the deepest and darkest places of the boy's sub-consciousness. The viewers see how Donnie interprets different situations from a very subjective perspective.

The appearance of the friendly figures can thus be explained by their need or urge to maintain freedom and independence. Donnie's supporters are also victims of the majority's homogenous approach, and they feel entrapped in a world devoid of love, compassion and truth. In effect, the alienated individual becomes the chosen one in the group of 'believers,' which grants him the role of a messiah.

## Conclusion

The connection between the figure of a mad person and a Romantic enriches the interpretation of Kelly's protagonist by touching upon a difficult theme of mental illness and its influence on one's behaviour and point of view. Kelly's movie is a history of a tormented young boy who has problems distinguishing between reality and the illusion created by his own schizophrenic mind. According to Ashton (2006, 106) the perception of the sick person differs from that of a healthy one "[because] everything is image, and our consciousness pervades everything, [thus reality] is 'created' by our

<sup>3</sup> Nature also plays an important role in Donnie's life as the end of the world that Donnie tries to prevent is depicted as a huge atmospheric vortex made of elements. For Donnie, the contemporary Romantic, Nature is deadly dangerous, untamed and unpredictable.

consciousness.” Donnie created his own world in opposition to the external one that is hostile and repellent.

All in all, the boy’s rebellious nature and nonconformity make him similar to the figure of a Romantic as a person misunderstood by society who defies the system. Donnie, a freethinker, uses his imagination to escape from reality into the Tangent Universe, the masterpiece of a deluded mind, since the Tangent Universe and all things connected with it are objectively imaginary but subjectively real for Donnie. As Ashton states (191) “(...) we may never really make sense of the world, and just because something makes sense does not mean that it can be considered the Truth.”

## References

- Ashton, Dyrk. 2006. “Using Deleuze: The cinema Books, Film Studies and Effect.” A Dissertation. Bowling Green State University.
- Erikson, Erik H. 1994. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Foucault, Michel. 2001. *Madness and Civilization: History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage Books A Division Of Random House.
- Jakubik, Andrzej. 1999. *Zaburzenia Osobowości*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Lekarskie PZWL.
- Donnie Darko The Director’s Cut*. 2001. Directed by Richard Kelly. Pandora, Inc.
- “Romanticism.” N. d. n. p. 2014. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/508675/Romanticism>.
- Rybakowski, Janusz, and Filip Rybakowski. 2008. *Sedno Psychiatria*. Wrocław: Urban & Partner.
- Stevens, David. 2004. *Context in literature: Romanticism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tsuang, Ming T., Stephen V. Faraone, and Stephen J. Glatt. 2011. *Schizophrenia*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wordsworth, William. 1800. “Lyrical Ballads.” N. d. n. p. Accessed January 17, 2016. [https://archive.org/stream/lyricalballads00wordiala/lyricalballads00wordiala\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/lyricalballads00wordiala/lyricalballads00wordiala_djvu.txt).
- Zimbardo, P.G, R.L. Johnson, and Vivian McCann. 2008. *Psychology Core Concepts*. 6th ed. Boston: Pearson.