

BOOK REVIEWS

Tess Maginess (ed.), *Dementia and Literature: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*.

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Dementia and Literature, edited by Tess Maginess of Queens University Belfast, is an impressive contribution to the field of the medical/health humanities. It offers a deeper understanding of the disease by bringing together different and sometimes even opposing perspectives regarding the representation and changing meanings of dementia. As Maginess states in the introduction: “Dementia is a topic of great ‘pith and moment’, a key issue for our time and the future” (1). Its importance derives from the multilayered nature of the disease, from which arise many existential, social, and ethical questions about being human. Analyzing this widespread but taboo topic using medical/health humanities is both eye-opening and liberating. As Maginess further suggests: “[T]he representation of dementia in literature, however that may be defined, across time and culture, cannot but cause us to think about dementia in terms of the profound ontological issues it raises about our very being as individual ‘selves’, about how this self operates relationally – how does the individual engage with and separate from society and, at the most profound level, what it means or ought to mean, to be human” (3). In addition to the representation and dissection of dementia, this volume also focuses on caregivers and thus provides a complete analysis of the subject.

The book consists of 10 texts. Ragna Aadlandsvik’s *Entering a New Landscape: Dementia in Literature* emphasizes the importance of literature to better understand different and complex human conditions. She mentions her projects with older people and those with dementia and emphasizes the role of stories and storytelling in reaching them. For her, especially poetry has the necessary qualities to depict dementia: “If going into dementia is to enter a new landscape, it could be said that a good poem also takes us into a new, unexpected and surprising landscape of understanding. By its short, tight form, blank spaces, and rhythm, it has a magic ability to create images and open up new, fresh ways of seeing” (25). She also analyzes *We Are Not Ourselves* by Matthew Thomas as a successful and unique depiction of Alzheimer’s disease.

Briege Casey's study analyzes Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* by focusing on Estragon's mental state as a depiction of Alzheimer's. She also discusses the "symbiotic" relationship between the patient with dementia and his/her caregiver, who is represented as a friend instead of a family member in Beckett's play.

Thomas' book *We Are Not Ourselves* is not the volume's only reference to *King Lear*, as Tess Maginess and Hannah Zeilig's study analyzes the question of dementia in *Lear* by using critical medical humanities. Thus, they take the idea of dementia to a more existential level. As they suggest: "Shakespeare's *literary* construction of dementia expands into a metaphor for the human condition – unstable, bewildered, but capable of endurance and, indeed of growth and change." (53)

Faten Hussein discusses different representations of dementia in Arabic literature by mainly focusing on two works (a novella and a book of poetry), which deal with Alzheimer's. In doing so, she explores the perspectives of patient and caregiver, analyzes dementia as a metaphor, and points to cultural differences in living and understanding dementia, and illness in general.

Lucy Burke looks at the ethical question in representing and narrating dementia by comparing Catherine Malabou's *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* with Emma Healey's novel *Elizabeth is Missing*.

Femi Oyeboade and Jan Oyeboade focus on the concepts of self and personhood in dementia, analyzing the ideas of Locke, Hume, and Kant. They also examine the accuracy of these theories by looking at several literary works. Moreover, the authors explore the memory's role in identity, stating: "[T]he embodied nature of human existence demonstrates the continuance of personal identity even in severe dementia and even when explicit memories cannot be voiced." (105) In this way, they emphasize the nature of the true self, which is essentially untouchable.

Joan Rahilly's study highlights the importance of accurate depiction of patients with dementia in literary works and accurate linguistic representation of their speech. Consequently, she disagrees with other contributors' interpretations of *King Lear*, stating: "Shenk, for example, cautions that, while *King Lear* seems to conform to 'the Alzheimer's experience', there are exceptions to *Lear*'s behavior and language which confirm Shakespeare's preoccupation with 'the playwright's device', rather than clinical reality." (120)

The representation of dementia in contemporary Scandinavian fiction is discussed by Nora Simonhjell, who gives examples (several novels and two children's books) from Norwegian literature to better understand different depictions of the disease.

Pramod K. Nayar traces dementia's depiction in *Indian Writing in English (IWE)*, emphasizing its portrayal as a social problem rather than an individual condition.

Maeve Rea examines the role of literature both as a way of self-expression for the people with dementia and as a tool to understand the disease. She gives the example of Iris Murdoch to illustrate the importance of personal narratives. She also discusses the concept of self in people with dementia, stating: "The authors' personal narratives challenge the presumed disintegration of selfhood in Alzheimer's disease" (167)

The volume offers an extensive study of dementia in the field of medical/health humanities. It both challenges the stereotypes regarding the disease and reconstructs our understanding of it. In that sense, any scholar of literature, cultural studies, and medical/health humanities, as well as health professionals and medical students, will definitely find some topics of interest.