



## **Instructor Teaching Packet for**

### *Madman: Strange Adventures of a Psychology Intern*

by John Suler, Ph.D.

Thanks for adopting *Madman* for your course. In this packet I will offer some ideas on how to integrate the novel into your classroom activities. In these descriptions, I will refer to my website *Teaching Clinical Psychology* which contains a wide range of resources. You can find it easily via google. *Madman* and my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* site concentrate on issues concerning mental health and illness, counseling, psychotherapy, interpersonal relationships, and personal growth, which applies not just to clinical courses, but many other courses as well. Some of the activities below focus specifically on my novel, while others use *Madman* as a springboard to other learning experiences described in my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* site.

#### **CONTENTS:**

##### **1. Discussion Questions**

- *What's it like to be a psychotherapist?*
- *After reading the novel, do you think you would want to be a mental health professional?*
- *What's life like on a psychiatric unit?*
- *What are the roles of the various mental health professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses)? How do these professionals relate to each other?*
- *What's your psychological analysis of Thomas Holden?*
- *What's more important: biology or psychology?*
- *Is the madman a therapist, or is the therapist a madman?*
- *What are the limits of psychology and science?*
- *What's reality and what's fantasy in the novel?*
- *What about all those loose ends?*

##### **2. Activities and Exercises**

- *Identifying Mental Disorders and Personality Types*
- *The Intake Interview and Mental Status Exam*
- *Mental Health Treatments*
- *Defense Mechanisms*
- *Secrets and Resistance in Psychotherapy*
- *Cognitive Distortions*
- *Transference Reactions and the "Shadow"*
- *Childhood Memories*
- *Understanding Sleep and Dreams*
- *Personal Timelines*
- *Computerized Psychotherapy*
- *Eastern Philosophy and Western Psychology*
- *Using the I Ching for personal insight and change*
- *Transcendent, Peak, and Spiritual Experiences*
- *The Training of the Psychologist and Psychotherapist*

##### **3. Images for Teaching**

##### **4. Web Addresses**

## 1. Discussion Questions

- *What's it like to be a psychotherapist?*

Many students comment that they have read about or seen movies and TV programs about psychotherapy from the perspective of the client. But now they are able to envision how the psychotherapist feels about it? What are the pros and cons of doing this type of work? Did students gain some new insights into the inner thoughts of the psychotherapist?

- *After reading the novel, do you think you would want to be a mental health professional?*

Discuss with students what inspired them about the novel, and what might have given them pause for thought about becoming a mental health professional. What indeed are the rewards as well as the stresses?

I wrote *Madman* to give my students a realistic glimpse into the lifestyle of a psychologist working on a psychiatric unit. After reading it, many students feel inspired to become a mental health professional. Others are not so sure, usually because they think the work might involve too much responsibility and stress. I remind students that I exaggerated the pressures experienced by the intern Thomas Holden in order to create a dramatic story. A mundane workday of the typical psychologist wouldn't work well as a novel! Nevertheless, being a psychotherapist is a complex professional career and can sometimes be stressful.

- *What's life like on a psychiatric unit?*

*Madman* is a realistic depiction of life on a psychiatric unit. Encourage students to discuss the purpose of the various activities on the unit, like morning report, intake interviews, community meetings, and grand rounds – as well as how the structural design of the unit affects the patients and staff (e.g., center circle, isolation rooms, interview cubicles). Encourage students to discuss how the environment in *Madman* differs from the usual Hollywood versions of “the mental ward.” How do private, state, and teaching hospitals differ? Some of the students in your class might have visited or worked in psychiatric hospitals. Ask them about how those places compared to the hospital in *Madman*.

- *What are the roles of the various mental health professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses)? How do these professionals relate to each other?*

Undergraduate students might know very little about the differences in training and professional responsibilities among the various mental health professionals. Graduate students might know very little about the “politics” of the profession. Encourage them to discuss what they learned about these issues from *Madman*. What happens in other hospitals and clinics might be very different. How so?

- *What's your psychological analysis of Thomas Holden?*

The story unfolds through the eyes of the psychology intern, Thomas Holden. Ask students what it was like living in his shoes. How would they describe his personality, motivations, self-concept, and conflicts. This is a “coming of age” novel, so what psychological transformations are occurring in Holden? What causes him to fall apart, and then recover?

- *What's more important: biology or psychology?*

During the novel Holden often ponders this question about whether biological or psychological factors weigh more heavily in determining human behavior, and whether biological or psychological treatments for psychological problems work best. What are the arguments made in the novel about this issue? What do your students think about this topic and what conclusions can be drawn from psychological research?

- *Is the madman a therapist, or is the therapist a madman?*

The title of the book suggests that someone is a madman. But who? Obviously, some of the patients, but what about Doe? Is he really mentally disturbed? How do we define normal and abnormal? And what about Holden himself, who seems to be decompensating during the course of the novel? The relationship between Doe and Holden addresses this interesting question about who's the therapist and who's the madman. Might Doe be a wise but quirky old man, maybe even a kind of Zen master, who is trying to help Holden? If so, how is he trying to help Holden? Encourage students to talk about those situations in which psychotherapists might be the "madman" while the clients might be the therapists. Issues about countertransference and mental health problems among psychotherapists will be important in this discussion.

- *What are the limits of psychology and science?*

Throughout the novel, Holden questions just how much we can know about the human mind using the traditional approaches of psychology and science. What do students think about this question? Encourage them to talk about whether psychology and science can solve problematic issues concerning morality and spirituality. There are elements of eastern philosophy that surface throughout the novel, and eastern philosophy claims that reason and rationality have their limits. What do your students think about that?

- *What's reality and what's fantasy in the novel?*

As a person who enjoys movies and books where reality blends with fantasy (in such movies as *The Matrix*, *Total Recall*, and *Vanilla Sky*), I wrote *Madman* in this style. Encourage students to discuss these ambiguities – for example, how it's hard to determine when Holden is awake or dreaming, and how at times he seems to be hallucinating. Where do his thoughts and journal entries end, and where does "reality" begin? These ideas can lead to interesting discussions about how the distinction between reality and fantasy is not always as clear as we might think. When and how is reality psychologically "constructed" by the mind?

- *What about all those loose ends?*

Students often comment about the "loose ends" at the conclusion of the novel. What happened to Doe, the journal, and the woman in the cafeteria? I intended the story to be somewhat open-ended and therefore open to interpretation... a kind of projective test. Ask students what they think about Doe, the journal, and the woman. Tell them there are no right or wrong answers, but instead only answers that reflect their own attitudes and beliefs. The students will surprise you with some very interesting ideas! (Note: in the last chapter there is a hint that the woman in the cafeteria reappears. Some students are pleased to see that)

## 2. Activities and Exercises

### *- Identifying Mental Disorders and Personality Types*

Several types of mental disorders are portrayed in the novel, including paranoid schizophrenia (Richard Mobin and Rachael Finski), a borderline personality disorder (Cheryl), a cognitive disorder (Mr. Tennostein), depression (Elizabeth Baso), and an impulsive disorder (Kathy Mummon). There are also a variety of personality types illustrated, such as narcissistic (Dr. Stein), compulsive (Fred Cooling), schizoid (Dr. Lloyd), schizotypal (Jon), and passive-aggressive (Ron).

Ask students to apply DSM criteria to the mental disorders portrayed in the novel. Ask them to identify the features of the various personality styles using either DSM criteria for personality disorders, or the reinterpretations of those criteria as personality styles (as in David Shapiro's book *Neurotic Styles* or Nancy McWilliam's *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis*).

For spin-off activities, see the exercises "Diagnosing Mr. Smith," "Shades of Abnormality" and "Personality Disorders" in the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website. The exercise on personality disorders includes a handout that summarizes the features of these disorders.

### *- The Intake Interview and Mental Status Exam*

During the novel we see Thomas Holden conducting an intake interview and mental status exam. Ask students to identify the types of information a clinician tries to obtain during the intake interview, and the kinds of mental functions that are assessed in the mental status exam. Provide students with the traditional criteria for doing intakes and mental status exam, or have them find this information online. How does Holden's techniques compare to these criteria?

### *- Mental Health Treatments*

Ask students to identify the various types of mental health treatments that are mentioned in the novel (medications, psychotherapy, ECT, etc.). Which types of treatments seem most appropriate for which types of problems? In the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website is an exercise "Mental Health Treatments" that encourages students to match up a particular type of treatment with a particular type of mental disorder.

### *- Defense Mechanisms*

As psychotherapists very well know, we all use a variety of defense mechanisms every day to help us cope with anxiety-provoking thoughts and feelings. In the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website, I provide a handout that summarizes the most common defense mechanism, as well as a description of a group of students talking during lunch – a conversation filled with defense mechanisms that the students in my class attempt to identify. After guiding your students through this exercise, ask them to identify the defense mechanisms used by the characters in the novel. Encourage them to think about their own use of defense mechanisms.

### *- Secrets and Resistance in Psychotherapy*

In the novel Holden talks about, and sometimes himself shows, various types of resistance to psychotherapy. Ask students to identify these forms of resistance in the story (e.g., forgetting therapy sessions, falling asleep during sessions, blocking, etc.). In the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website is a "Secrets and Resistance in Psychotherapy" exercise that encourages students to think about the sensitive secrets in their own lives, and what it would be like to discuss these things in psychotherapy. It's a fascinating and powerful activity.

### *- Cognitive Distortions*

Holden often seems to fall victim to all sorts of cognitive distortions and dysfunctional beliefs. In fact, he even jokes about it. Ask students to identify these dysfunctional beliefs. In the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website is an experiment called “The Way I Think” that guides students through a collection of cognitive therapy exercises. You might also try the “I wish you health and happiness” activity that invariably makes students laugh while encouraging positive thinking.

### *- Transference Reactions and the “Shadow”*

Throughout the novel, Holden sometimes perceives other people according to his own needs and expectations, rather than seeing them for whom they really are. He is showing transference reactions. In particular, he seems to be reacting to Ron, the psychiatric resident, as if Ron is what Carl Jung called the “shadow” – a part of himself that Holden tries to ignore or ward off. After discussing these issues with your class, try the exercises “Transference” and “The Shadow” in the In-Class Exercises of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website. These exercises encourage students to think about transference and shadow experiences in their own lives.

### *- Childhood Memories*

During the novel Holden describes various memories from his childhood. Ask students to discuss what these memories say about his life, personality, and psychological issues. In the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website is a “Childhood Memories” exercise in which students get feedback from their peers about the significance of a particular childhood memory that they bring to class.

### *- Understanding Sleep and Dreams*

Holden experiences several dreams and dream-states during the novel. Encourage students to apply to the story what they might have learned about the importance of sleep and dreaming. What might Holden’s dreams mean, particularly as indicators of the psychological transformation he is undergoing. Ask students to read “Working and Playing with Dreams” in the Books and Manuals section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website. Encourage them to apply those ideas and dream interpretation techniques to the dreams experienced by Holden, and to their own dreams.

### *- Personal Timelines*

One way to better understand one’s life is to map it out on a timeline, like historians do in summarizing periods of history. Ask students to construct a timeline of Thomas Holden’s life, and to discuss what it reveals about him. In the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website is “The Timeline Exercise” that guides students in constructing a timeline of their own lives. Try it with your students. The results are often both fascinating and educational.

### *- Computerized Psychotherapy*

In the novel Holden interacts with the computerized psychotherapy program “Siggie.” Such programs actually do exist, one of the most well-known being “Eliza,” various versions of which are available for free online. Using google you also might be able to find other types of computerized counseling programs. Ask students to try one of these programs. Encourage them to discuss how their experience compares to Holden’s. What are the pros and cons of computerized counseling, psychotherapy, and mental health interventions? This question is a cutting-edge issue in

contemporary psychotherapy. In the Longer Projects section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website I describe an activity for students using Eliza, including guidelines for writing a paper about their experience.

- *Eastern Philosophy and Western Psychology*

Elements of eastern philosophy appear throughout *Madman*. In fact, some of the events and stories told in the novel come from traditional Zen and Taoist literature. Ask students to read some of these classic tales in my *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbor* website. Encourage them to discuss how these stories point to valuable insights into human nature and psychological transformation. How can eastern philosophy enrich western psychology and psychotherapy? I discuss many of these issues in my book *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Eastern Thought* (SUNY Press).

- *Using the I Ching for personal insight and change*

In the novel, Jon, the security officer in the parking lot booth, throws the coins of the I Ching in order to offer Holden some insights into his situation in life. In my psychotherapy course, my students experiment with the I Ching as a type of psychotherapeutic tool for better understanding themselves and some personal issue in their lives. The results of the exercise are always fascinating. In the In-Class Exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website I describe how you might try this activity in your class.

- *Transcendent, Peak, and Spiritual Experiences*

When Holden chases Richard Mobin out into the snowstorm, something happens to Holden, what some psychologists might call a transcendent, peak, or spiritual experience. In the In-Class exercises section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website is a handout entitled "The Religious Experience: East, West, Everywhere" that summarizes the features of such experiences. Ask students to compare these features to what happened to Holden. Encourage them to discuss the significance of these experiences for people in general. Have students in the class ever had such experiences? Many do, but are reluctant to talk about it because it's not the type of thing people in western cultures are used to discussing.

- *The Training of the Psychologist and Psychotherapist*

Coming right out of graduate school into his internship, Holden has quite a bit to say about the training of the psychologist and psychotherapist. Where are his opinions accurate, and where might they be biased? In the Books and Manuals section of my *Teaching Clinical Psychology* website is a manual about graduate school in psychology. Encourage students to read through it, and to find other resources online about the training of the psychologist and psychotherapist. How does this information compare to what Holden says in the novel? Encourage students to discuss how this information applies to their own career plans.

### 3. Images for Teaching

As a photographer specializing in what I call “photographic psychology,” I have created images that illustrate a wide variety of concepts in psychology, including those explored in *Madman*. Incorporating images into teaching presentations can be a powerful way to reinforce a student’s understanding of the conceptual issues being discussed. In fact, “visual literacy” is a skill often neglected in our teaching, but something I emphasize in my online book *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche*. My psychology images are free for downloading from my Concepts in Psychology set in *Flickr*.

### 4. Web Addresses

True Center Publishing (the publisher of *Madman*) and my websites are easy to find using google, but in case you need the addresses, here they are:

True Center Publishing  
[truecenterpublishing.com](http://truecenterpublishing.com)

Teaching Clinical Psychology  
[users.rider.edu/~suler/tcp.html](http://users.rider.edu/~suler/tcp.html)

Photographic Psychology  
[users.rider.edu/~suler/photopsy/article\\_index.htm](http://users.rider.edu/~suler/photopsy/article_index.htm)

The Psychology of Cyberspace  
[users.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html](http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html)

Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors  
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