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The Snake Pit and Social Awareness and Treatment of Mental Illness

by Joan Tett

(Honors English 1135)

The Assignment: Students selected a film and viewed it repeatedly and then isolated specific scenes for careful study. Research involved the reviews, creative process, and social context of the film. Their assessment of the film's effectiveness concluded the paper.

The *Snake Pit* is one of the first films to deal with mental illness as its main theme. The film is based on Mary Jane Ward's novel also titled *The Snake Pit* which was highly praised as "...the kind of wholly fresh book that makes the conventional novel seem dull and unrewarding" (Engle 1946). The film's director, Anatole Litvak, adheres closely to the book and does not sensationalize the topic for cinematic purposes. The subject and story are compelling on their own as the film deals with mental illness in a sensitive and sympathetic manner. The movie tells the story of Virginia Cunningham, played by Olivia de Havilland, who has a mental breakdown and is hospitalized in a New York state facility. Virginia is moved throughout various wards of the facility often backsliding in her treatment. Some of her setbacks are due to her own struggle to reveal the origins of her illness. However, sometimes Virginia is reassigned to a ward due to incompetence or abuse on the part of the staff. The movie is noted for being well ahead of its time (Zimmerman 2003). The film draws attention to controversial treatments and overcrowded conditions at a state facility. Virginia is being treated by Dr. Kik, played by Leo Glenn, who has a compassionate approach while applying Freudian theory of psychoanalysis.

A discussion on *The Snake Pit* would not be complete without including the emphasis on Sigmund Freud. Freud is known as the father of psychoanalysis and it is clear that Dr. Kik is trained in Freudian theory. Psychoanalysis is a theory of personality and human development, a method for investigating the unconscious and conscious forces governing human behavior, and a technique for treating neurotic disorders (Strupp 1, 7-11). Some of the references to Freud are overt, although this was not noticeable to me in a casual viewing. It was only after repeated viewings, in order to study the film, that the references to Freud become obvious. Some critics found the Freudian references overdone. In more than one scene set in Dr. Kik's office, the mise en scene is designed around Freud's portrait. In one particular scene, the portrait is the main focal point centered on the wall between Virginia and Dr. Kik as they discuss her relationship with her father and the other men in her life. The psychoanalysis is less threatening than other treatments Virginia endures. The only drawback is the time required to treat someone solely with psychoanalysis. This point is made clear by Dr. Kik on several occasions as if he would like to avoid the other types of treatment, but the time constraints require methods to help speed up the process.

In *Understanding Movies*, a discussion on *Citizen Kane* notes that the ideas of Freud gained attention in American cinema of the 1940s: "...especially the centrality of a child's prepubescent life in determining his or her later character" (Giannetti 539). Freud and his colleagues regarded neurotic symptoms and behaviors stemming from unresolved internal conflict, and neuroses are the outcome of a person's developmental history, particularly of adverse experiences in early childhood (Strupp 1, 7-11). This fundamental Freudian idea is clearly present in the film as Virginia's memory of events from her childhood have had a profound effect on her adult life and likely led to her breakdown. Dr. Kik and Virginia discuss her childhood and she describes her relationship with her

parents.

Psychoanalytic theory denotes that early childhood conflicts give rise to anxiety. Flashback scenes show Virginia prior to her breakdown and we gradually witness her decline. She is suffering from insomnia, and the lack of sleep, compounded with repressed memories, allows her to slip away from reality. The close-up shots of Virginia reveal her anxiety and confusion. Olivia de Havilland gives a fine performance as she is expert at expressing Virginia's emotions visually. Psychoanalytic theory also identifies the resistance that can be met when one attempts to tap into the repressed memories that contain the triggers to the illness. Freud was able to observe that when patients' ideas while under hypnosis, were brought into consciousness, they showed improvement (*"Psychoanalysis"* 761-762). Dr. Kik achieves success once the shock therapy and hypnosis help Virginia recall events in her past. A critical event is when out of anger towards her father due to a disciplinary action she smashes a doll that she came to associate with her father. He subsequently becomes ill and dies. Her mind associates her outburst as the cause of his death and she harbors a great deal of guilt as a result. Dr. Kik is able to identify this association through psychoanalysis and helps Virginia understand that her father's illness started long before her outburst. He also speculates that her father's death has played a role in her relationships with men in her adult life. She dates Gordon, who is in charge more like a father than a boyfriend. The onset of her illness is triggered when Gordon is killed in a car crash. This is an event she feels responsible for because he turned the car around at her request, and she feels it never would have happened if she had not asked to be taken home. The ability of Dr. Kik to tap into the events that Virginia repressed is important to her recovery and consistent with Freudian theory on psychoanalysis.

In other films like, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, electro-shock therapy (ECT) is used as a punishment and control tool. In *The Snake Pit*, Dr. Kik chooses the treatment as a method to "establish contact with Virginia." I was interested in learning more about ECT because there seems to be so much controversy associated with its application. In 1985, a study conducted by the National Institutes of Health states that "ECT is a treatment for severe mental illness in which a brief application of electric stimulus is used to produce a generalized seizure" ("Electroconvulsive Therapy"). In the study ECT is approved for severe cases of depression and there is evidence of its effectiveness. *The Snake Pit* is consistent with the times as the study noted in the 1940's and 1950's as ECT "...was often administered to the most severely disturbed patients residing in large mental institutions" ("Electroconvulsive Therapy"). After several treatments, Virginia begins to show some improvement as she understands her surroundings and starts to communicate with her doctor. Virginia is hospitalized for almost six months before she begins to make progress. After several well-documented shock treatments, Virginia asks her doctor, "How long have I been here?" The study recommends that ECT be considered when alternative drug therapy has been ineffective. ECT is still considered a valid treatment for severe cases of depression. Complications such as vertebral fractures from ECT that were common in the past have been eliminated in present day applications. Drug therapy seems less evasive, but there can be side effects and adverse reactions associated with drugs. In the study, past recipients of ECT testified about their experience and the testimony was mixed. Some felt the ECT played a key role in their recovery while others felt they suffered long term adverse effects such as memory loss.

The Snake Pit identified social issues many of which continue to be evident today. The film exposes the viewer to the conditions at Juniper Hill, a state mental hospital, which includes overcrowding, controversial treatments, isolation and the incompetence of some staff members. The film drew attention to the subject of mental illness and the large number of people who suffer from mental illness. The film identified these issues in 1948 and remains true today that mental illness has touched the lives of many people in one form or another.

Throughout the film there are scenes that bring attention to the issue of overcrowding at the

hospital. The problem of overcrowding is further complicated by the pressure to release patients prematurely and lack of vacancy for people waiting to be admitted. When the wards are overcrowded with patients and understaffed, a great deal of additional pressure is placed on the staff which can lead to poor treatment and lack of supervision. A patient must battle their illness and the conditions at the hospital.

In an office consultation with Robert Cunningham, Virginia's husband, Dr. Kik explains that he would like to treat Virginia with shock therapy. Robert is concerned about this treatment and asks the doctor if there is any other way. Dr. Kik replies, "Yes if they had more time...." This is one of the first instances where time is mentioned as a limited resource. In a scene set in the staff dining room, Dr. Kik is seated at a table with several staff members when Virginia's case is discussed. Dr. Kik is upset because another staff physician, who knows very little about Virginia's condition, is a proponent for her release and wants her sent for a staff review. As the discussion continues, it is clear that freeing bed space is a major concern. Dr. Kik, the only doctor at the table who is treating Virginia, stipulates that she is not ready to be released. The other doctor then proceeds to recite several facts about the current overcrowding conditions at the hospital. In an interesting contrast while this discussion is taking place, a server tries to remove Dr. Kik's soup which he has not even touched. Another staff member at the table comments to the server, "...can't you see Dr. Kik is not finished with his soup?" Symbolically Dr. Kik has not had a chance to eat his soup much like he has not yet had the chance to properly treat his patient, yet the intervening doctor is more concerned with Dr. Kik's lunch than with his patient.

After some progress is made with the ECT treatments, Dr. Kik has to accelerate Virginia's treatment as he anticipates the time constraints. Dr. Kik needs to learn about Virginia's past in an attempt to identify the events that led to her breakdown. Dr. Kik decides to use drug-induced hypnosis to accelerate Virginia's recall. Both the ECT and hypnosis are somewhat frightening to watch and these scenes raise questions and concerns about the treatments available.

On ward 33 Virginia encounters a patient whom she recognizes as a nurse, Miss Sommerville, from another ward earlier in her hospitalization. Miss Sommerville is systematically taking the temperature of several patients except she has no thermometer. When Virginia is to be released and saying farewell, Miss Sommerville attempts to take her temperature but, when told Virginia is well and being released, the patient/nurse states, "...then that will make room for more..." and then she begins to describe the pressure of being sent too many patients than she can cope with. This implies that the overcrowding is not only an issue for the patients but a health risk for the staff too. In addition to the overcrowding described through dialog and action, many scenes capture the overcrowding conditions visually. High angle long shots show wards with beds crowded together.

In Juniper Hill the patients are subjected to staff that have their own issues. For example, in one scene an attending nurse cares more about a carpet than the patients. Nurse Greene tries to prevent the patients from walking on the carpet because "We're the only ward that has a rug. It's new and clean and we mean to keep it that way." The nurse is focused on the cleanliness of the carpet instead of the patients and does not recognize the absurdity of her motive. Virginia "a patient" recognizes how ridiculous this is and sarcastically asks, "Why don't you hang it on the wall?" The nurse removes her shoes before she steps on the rug to remove Virginia. Virginia seems to have a better grasp of reality than the nurse.

Nurse Davis who appears in several scenes and takes a dislike to Virginia seemingly because she is jealous of the attention Dr. Kik pays to Virginia. Virginia suffers as a result under her care, and after a confrontation that angers Nurse Davis and causes Virginia to panic, she is sent from ward 1 to ward 33. Instead of being supportive Nurse Davis is confrontational and personal issues interfere with her job performance.

The Snake Pit was released in the post-Depression and postwar era. Emphasis was placed on domestic issues and the quality of life for working-class people. President Harry S. Truman stated in

1945, “We must build a new world, a far better world - one in which the eternal dignity of man is respected” (“Postwar America”). The economy was booming in the U.S. and Americans were in a position to delve into social issues that affected the quality of their life. Hollywood responded with intelligent works which were intended to be more than escapist entertainment. Hollywood produced movies of “real life” and an effort was made to bring important social issues to theatres (Hulse 2202). *The Snake Pit* focused attention on the subject of mental illness in our society and the need for effective treatment and understanding.

Many people hospitalized for mental illness are isolated from their family, friends and society. In postwar America it would have been easy for people to relate to the desire to be home and near their loved ones. The patients at Juniper Hill State Hospital all shared the desire to go home. In a touching scene there is a dance for the patients, and the dancing and conversation stops in order to listen to a woman sing the folksong “Goin’ Home.” The music is from Dvorak’s *New World Symphony No. 9* although the lyrics were written after his death. Dvorak was influenced by African American and Native American folksongs and his music blended beautifully with the lyrics written by William Arms Fisher (“Goin’ Home”). Dvorak composed the music while in New York and he was very lonely for his homeland in Bohemia. He appreciated America and thought it had potential to be a great country, but he wanted to be in his homeland with his entire family and familiar settings. In the movie, the music and song create a poignant connection to the patients at Juniper Hill, soldiers and their families, or anyone who is away from home and their loved ones. The connections are subtle, but all point to the basic human need to be among loved ones, in a familiar environment, and not cut off from the outside world. It is a very moving scene when the dancing and conversation stop and the patients turn and listen to the woman singing and many join in the song. The camera slowly pans the audience and then zooms in on Virginia as a tear rolls down her cheek and she wonders if she might be going home soon. Here the audience experiences the sadness and longing associated with isolation of the hospital (Butterworth 1980).

When *The Snake Pit* was released in 1948, it was received very well by the public, film critics, and the film industry. It was the 29th top grossing film in 1948-1949 and was nominated for several Oscars (Fetrow 460). The novel by Mary Jane Ward “enjoyed considerable success” (Butcher G10). and I’m certain many readers would have been interested in seeing the film. As early as 1946, two years prior to the release of the film, there was buzz from Hedda Hopper’s column in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. There were blurbs about who would be playing some of the roles. All this speculation would help contribute to the anticipation of the film (Hopper 16, 20, 26, 30).

When *The Snake Pit* was released in Chicago, Mae Tinee of *The Chicago Daily Tribune* noted “...crowds by-passed the lures of other theatres and patiently waited in line at the crowded Garrick on opening day” (A7). Mae Tinee gave an overall positive review: “The film adapted from Mary Jane Ward’s novel is a powerful and pathetic tale, snatching your attention and your sympathies in the opening scene and holding them thruout” (Tinee A7).

Some later criticism charges that Virginia’s treatment is an attempt to condition her to married life and her treatment is controlled by men who seek this objective (Walker 99-109). I think this is an extreme view and most of the viewing public would not make this association in a casual viewing. Many emancipated women would still want to experience being wives and mothers. Virginia was an educated woman and her husband’s intent did not seem to be to control her. I don’t think Virginia would have wanted to stay in the hospital suffering from memory loss, depression and anxiety. Even if the oppression case can be made, it seems inadvertent and not the objective of the film makers. *The Snake Pit* is a thought-provoking film about a serious social issue that still exists today. Most of the reviews were positive and even today is still considered a sensitive and sympathetic film about mental illness. I watched it for the first time this semester and I found it quite compelling.

All reviews praise Olivia de Havilland's performance and the supporting cast. She was nominated for an Oscar for her portrayal of Virginia. She did not win the Oscar, but she did receive the "Best Actress of the Year" by the National Board of Review and the New York Film critics plus the "International Prize for Best Actress" at the Venice Film Festival (Fetrow 460). In an interview with Hedda Hopper after the release of the film, Olivia discussed research she conducted for her role at a California state hospital in an effort to capture a true sense of the character. In order to preserve the realism Olivia noted, "...after many tests that it would be best for me to wear no make up at all in the picture" (Hopper B7). Hollywood often glamorizes roles but the decision to use no make-up was brave and true to the subject matter. *The New York Times* review from 1948 credited the director, Anatole Litvak and the producer, Darryl F. Zanuck, for approaching the film and subject matter with respect and humility. *The Snake Pit* was nominated for "Best Picture" as well as "Best Director." The film won an Oscar for "Best Sound Record." Sound is used quite effectively as it enhances the turmoil Virginia is suffering.

This movie gained public attention evident by some of the warnings that were issued regarding the film. The British censor released a forward to the film that noted the characters were actors and that the conditions depicted in the hospital setting were unlike hospitals in Britain. *The New York Times* review noted that the film was "not recommended for the weak" (Crowther). There was concern that the realism of the film might frighten sensitive people.

One of the reasons I think the story works is because we start out in the middle of Virginia's hospitalization and we want to know more about how she came to be there. She is a likable, intelligent witty character and it is easy to care about what happens to her. The use of flashbacks is very effective as Virginia's story is pieced together by herself and her husband with the aid of the compassionate Dr. Kik. Mental illness is a part of the human condition and will always be something we need to contend with. The film helps to remove some of the stigmatism associated with mental illness.

The film ends as a new beginning for Virginia and her marriage. The ending parallels the postwar era and the new beginning of so many people who have to rebuild their lives after the war and depression. The film helps us understand there is hope for people suffering from mental illness.

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