

The Snake Pit: Study Guide

Released :1948

Stars: Olivia de Havilland, Mark Stevens, Leo Genn, Celeste Holme, Beulah Bondi, and Lee Patrick

Adapted from the novel, *The Snake Pit*, by Mary Jane Ward.

Some women's rights critics argue the film misrepresents Ward's character Virginia and her difficulties, and object to the film's implication that accepting a subservient role as wife and mother is part of a real "cure".

Other film analysts feel the film successfully conveys Ward's view of the uncertainties of post-WWII life and women's roles.

Plot Summary from: Hal Erickson, *All Movie Guide* (http://www.fandango.com/thesnakepit_v45324/summary)

"A woman loses her mind and is confined to a mental institution." That's the usual TV-listing encapsulation of *The Snake Pit* -- and like most such encapsulations, it only scratches the film's surface. Olivia de Havilland stars as an outwardly normal young woman, married to loyal, kindly Mark Stevens. As de Havilland's behavior becomes more and more erratic, however, Stevens comes to the sad conclusion that she needs professional help. She is sent to an overcrowded state hospital for treatment -- a curious set-up, in that, while de Havilland is treated with compassion by soft-spoken psychiatrist Leo Genn, she is sorely abused by resentful matrons and profoundly disturbed patients. Throughout the film, she is threatened with being clapped into "the snake pit" -- an open room where the most severe cases are permitted to roam about and jabber incoherently -- if she doesn't realign her thinking. In retrospect, it seems that de Havilland's biggest "crime" is that she wants to do her own thinking, and that she isn't satisfied with merely being a loving wife. While this subtext may not have been intentional, it's worth noting that de Havilland escapes permanent confinement only when she agrees to march to everyone else's beat. Amazingly, Olivia de Havilland didn't win an Academy Award for her harrowing performance in *The Snake Pit* (the only Oscar won by the film was for sound recording). While some of the psychological verbiage in this adaptation of Mary Jane Ward's autobiographical novel seems antiquated and overly simplistic today, *The Snake Pit* was rightly hosannahed as a breakthrough film in 1948.

1963: Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan defined women's unhappiness as "the problem that has no name," then launched into a detailed exploration of what she believed causes this problem. Through her research—which includes many theories, statistics, and first-person accounts—Friedan blamed an idealized image of femininity that she labeled the feminine mystique. According to Friedan, women had been encouraged to confine themselves to the narrow roles of housewife and mother, forsaking education and career aspirations in the process. Friedan attempted to prove that the feminine mystique denies women the opportunity to develop their own identities, which can ultimately lead to problems for women and their families.

In Chapter 2, Friedan examines women's magazines from before and after World War II. In 1930s magazines, stories feature confident and independent heroines, many of whom are involved in careers. In most women's magazines in the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, the Happy Housewife, whose only ambitions are marriage and motherhood, replaces the career-oriented New Woman. Friedan calls this homemaker ideal of femininity the feminine mystique.

Excerpt from Chapter 5: "It did not really start, in America, until the 1940s. And then again, it was less a start than the prevention of an end. The old prejudices – women are animals, less than human, unable to think like men, born merely to breed and serve men – were not so easily dispelled by the crusading feminists, by science and education, and by the democratic spirit after all. They merely reappeared in the forties, in Freudian disguise. The feminine mystique derived its power from Freudian thought; for it was an idea born of Freud, which led women, and those who studied them, to misinterpret their mothers' frustrations, and their fathers' and brothers' and husbands' resentments and inadequacies, and their own emotions and possible choices in life."

Definition of Schizophrenia: "A general label for a number of psychotic disorders with various cognitive, emotional and behavioural manifestations.... It literally means *splitting in the mind* and was chosen... because the disorder seemed to reflect a cleavage or dissociation between the functions of feeling or emotion on one hand and those of thinking or cognition on the other." *Dictionary of Psychology* (Penguin 2001)

Freud: Freud always remained skeptical about the name "schizophrenia"--the name Eugen Bleuler proposed for those suffering from (what was called) dementia praecox. The name, Freud wrote, "prejudices the issue, since it connotes a theoretically postulated characteristic of the disease--a characteristic, moreover, which does not belong exclusively to it, and which, in the light of other considerations, cannot be regarded as the essential one." Freud's (1911) hypothesis argued that the basic disorder in schizophrenia consists in the patient's inability to maintain the libidinal cathexis of objects. A sex-role problem, in other words?

"**Schizophrenia** is defined as a "sex role alienation or sex role rejection" (Chesler 87). Thus, women who suffer from Schizophrenia often embrace stereotypically male characteristics such as hostility, violence, restlessness, nervousness, and outspokenness. This illness thus centers on the rejection of the traditional female role as these women assume an aggressive stance in society." **From "Women's Mental Illness: A History of Oppression"** (<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/femhist/madness.shtml#attitudes>)

From: Shock Treatment, Brain Damage, and Memory Loss: A Neurological Perspective by John M. Friedberg, M.D.

A 32 year old woman who had received 21 ECT [electroconvulsive shock therapy] treatments stated 5 years later:

One of the results of the whole thing is that I have no memory of what happened in the year to year and a half prior to my shock treatments. The doctor assured me that it was going to come back and it never has. I don't remember a bloody thing. I couldn't even find my way around the town I lived in for three years. If I walked into a building I didn't even know where I was. I could barely find my way around my own house. I could sew and knit before. but afterward I could no more comprehend a pattern to sew than the man in the moon.

...Alpers and Hughes described the brains of 2 women who had received 62 and 6 shocks, respectively. The first woman's seizures had been suppressed by curare. Both brains showed hemorrhagic lesions around small blood vessels, rarefaction of tissue, and gliosis. Throughout the 1940s similar reports continued to call attention to brain changes after ECT, including cases in which oxygen and curare had been administered.

Study Questions:

1. Consider Deleuze's argument about institutions as sadistic. The sadist (institution) requires the victim to accept the institution's authority, its rules, and even its torture as necessary and, at some level, "natural." If one accepts the sadist's construction of "normal" behavior, there is no need for laws or contracts. Another way of viewing this is what Michel Foucault argues in the History of Sexuality: "Without resistance, power becomes invisible." Power creates self-policing, and self-hatred when the individual fails to conform to the "law". When a law feels "natural," no law is necessary. Which social institution has Virginia failed to conform to before her husband commits her to the Mental Institution? In what way(s) does Virginia fail to accept the power of her husband's view of "natural" and "normal" behavior? How does she react to overt power in the Mental Institution? Is her insanity connected to her refusal to accept the rules for a "normal" woman and wife?
2. Virginia is unaware of her own past or why (or even that) she is in a Mental Institution. She confuses the hospital with a prison, in fact. How disturbing is her "amnesia" and her misunderstanding? Is she "forgetful" because she is mentally ill, or is she being forced to forget some other way to be who she is?
3. How would you define mental health and mental insanity? Does the movie offer any definition for mental health? What constitutes a mentally healthy woman, according to the film? Is that different from definitions applied to men?
4. Is Virginia schizophrenic? Why or why not?
5. What happens to Virginia in the institution? Who are the "police" that call Virginia into an understanding of the "rules" for normal behavior? Does the doctor represent a policing authority or is he just one aspect of power? What other "powers" are attempting to "cure" Virginia?
6. Is Virginia cured? Explain your response.