



# Shutter Island - Guilt, Monsters and Truth

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As in many of his films, Martin Scorsese has assembled a stellar cast. Alongside DiCaprio, who has teamed with this director three times before (in *Gangs of New York*, *The Aviator*, and *The Departed*), are veteran actors Ben Kingsley, Max von Sydow, Emily Mortimer, Patricia Clarkson, Ted Levine, and Michelle Williams. Their performances are spot on.

Here DiCaprio is US Marshal Teddy Daniels.

Together with his new partner Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo), they are sent to Ashecliffe Hospital on Shutter Island to investigate the mysterious disappearance of one of the patients. But these patients are prisoners, dangerous murderers, as Ashecliffe

is a mental institution for the criminally insane. And it is 1954, when three differing approaches to treating mental illness are arising: repetitious pharmacology, respectful

counseling, and radical lobotomy.

Visually, *Shutter Island* and Ashecliffe Hospital are stark and foreboding. There is something frightening about the place these two marshals must visit. The score is loud and discordant, echoing the twisted nature of the souls who live there. Together, the sounds and vision establish a menacing atmosphere.

Once they have arrived at the hospital, Daniels and Aule find a wall of silence. The doctors, staff and even the inmates seem unwilling to help the investigation. It's as though there is a conspiracy covering up what has happened. When a hurricane-force storm pummels

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the island, knocking out power and communication lines, the two marshals find they are stranded, trapped on an island that does not want to release them. Meanwhile, Daniels is haunted by dreams and hallucinations of his dead wife, Delores (Williams), who tells him that the lost woman is still on the island. As well as this, he struggles physically with recurrent migraines and psychologically with guilt. This guilt stems from the death of Delores in a fire started by an arsonist and from what he saw and did during World War 2. He was one of the soldiers who liberated Dachau concentration camp and experienced first-hand the results of the inhumanities committed by the Nazis: frozen bodies of men, women and children piled high beside the barbed wire fence.

Guilt is one of the themes. As a Catholic filmmaker, it is not surprising that Martin Scorsese weaves this thread throughout his career. Guilt is the feeling that a person has violated a moral standard through action or inaction. Closely related is the concept of remorse, the emotional expression of personal regret for committing a shameful or violent act. Guilt is intended to drive us to God in repentance (Acts 20:21). When we do this, we will find forgiveness, the only thing that can truly remove guilt. The forgiveness of God is freely given (Eph. 1:7) but must be graciously received (Jn. 1:12). It cost God his son, Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:25). We cannot erase our guilt in any other way, though, like Daniels, we may try.

Violence is a second theme, and again a recurrent one for Scorsese. The Warden, in a conversation with Daniels, brings this to the forefront: “God loves violence. . . Why else would there be so much of it? It’s in us. It’s what we are. We wage war, we burn sacrifices, and pillage and plunder and tear at the flesh of our brothers. . . . There’s no moral order at all. There’s just this: can my violence conquer yours?” Before this, the lead psychiatrist had said something similar to both marshals: “Men like you are my specialty, you know. Men of violence.”

The theology in view here is both right and wrong. God does not love violence. That is clear from his very

nature: “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:16). Violence was not part of the created order but entered the world with the fall of Adam. His son Cain became the first murderer (Gen. 4:8). Yet after the fall, with the entrance of sin, we are all capable of violence, of terrible acts. The film points to the atrocities of the Nazis in the Second World War but also points to ongoing inhuman and immoral actions that occurred in Russia and even occur in America. Moreover, we read of the brutal acts of violence perpetrated by serial killers, monsters in our society, and we understand this aspect of the truth in the warden’s comments.

Monsters emerge as a third theme of *Shutter Island*. Dr. Naehring (von Sydow) brings this point into view: “Wounds can create monsters. . . And wouldn’t you agree, when you see a monster, you must stop it?”

We are all wounded, in one way or another. Daniels was wounded and harbored deep, dark secrets. Our wounds result from the consequences of sin. Some may be our own sin and we become our own victims. Sometimes it is the sin of others. Then, like the poor victims in Dachau, we feel the pain of wounds inflicted on us by others. If we focus on our wounds, turning inward, we can become bitter and turn into the monsters that inflict wounds on others. The cycle can only be broken by dealing with the root cause: sin. And we cannot do this on our own. When we try, like Daniels, we find ourselves in a prison of our own making, running from those who may or may not be our friends. No, the person who can save us is Jesus (1 Pet. 3:21). He dealt with sin, once for all, when he went to the cross for us (Heb. 9:26). We must receive his gift of life, and find in him a new identity and a new nature; we become a new creation (2 Cor. 5:21).

As the film progresses it keeps the viewer engaged, unwrapping secret after secret at the right moment. With horrors without and within, it offers insight into the torments of the human mind. And it is through this inner war, fought by one man, Daniels, against himself and those around him, that we also see that truth is not always clear. Though Jesus said, “The truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32), we must look carefully for the truth,

and discern wisely else we will be fooled, by ourselves and by our friends.

At one point Daniels says to his partner, “Which would be worse – to live as a monster? Or to die as a good man?” And this summarizes nicely the themes of violence, guilt, monsters and truth in one succinct line. Are we willing to live out our lives as monsters, even if this is only apparent to ourselves? We may fool others, but we know our inner depravity, if we really look at ourselves closely in the mirror. Or will we confess our sins, our monster nature, to God and accept his cleansing; his gift of a new nature, and become a good man? This may result in society ostracizing us, even putting us to death, but we will find forgiveness and truth.

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