



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on May 26, 2010

Shutter Island: A Pro-life Morality Tale

Shutter Island comes out on DVD and Blue-ray on June 8. This analysis of Shutter Island, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Leonardo DiCaprio, is not intended primarily as a review of the film. For that, one may read Raven Clabough's thoughtful review here. Such reviews are intended to inform the audience of whether or not the film is worthy of \$10.00 or a spot on one's Netflix queue. I agree with her ultimate conclusion: It is. This critique, however, is intended to mine the film for a deeper truth than otherwise might be obvious at first viewing — or rather, to identify the truth that is hidden in plain sight. Reader beware: spoilers follow!



A cursory reading of the reviews of *Shutter Island* on [Rotten Tomatoes](#) reveals that critics, for the most part, either love the journey or they love the destination but they can not reconcile the two. For those who do not like the film, all of the flashbacks and nightmares feel like red herrings — cheap and tired parlor tricks intended to throw us off the trail. Those who liked it tend to forgive the disconnect between journey and destination and chalk the film up to an excuse to watch Scorsese's adept use of the medium to render palpable the main character's plunge into paranoia. There are variations, sure. But the gist goes something like this: "The film is disconnected, I hated it"; or, "The film is disconnected, so what?"

This disconnect extends to the core of the film. Most critics realize that the film is striking at some very deep, very human themes like redemption and guilt. But to these critics, the film's comment is vague. For instance, why is the Holocaust used as a trope for collective guilt? Their answer is that the film wishes to comment on the nature of collective guilt. For them, the film's argument is circular in nature.

My argument, however, is that the film is linear in its logic and is striking at something very specific — something like the Holocaust but more immediate, more horrendous, and ultimately much more breathtaking in its breadth while somehow remaining so personal, so individual in its impact. The Holocaust, like others of the film's metaphors, is not the point in *Shutter Island*. The Holocaust is a trope that the film uses to key the audience into an idea. Once it is through with keying us into that idea, however, it moves on.

In the end, all of those ideas are unified in one final statement. This statement is the film's unifying factor and if it is missed, as it has been by most, than the film feels disconnected. All of it has been for naught. It is with this in mind that I intend to show that the best context in which to view *Shutter Island*, and indeed the only one that I can think of in which it actually makes "sense," is in the context of the wider cultural discourse over abortion.

Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) are U.S. Marshals investigating the disappearance of Rachel Solando. Solando is a female inmate of Ashecliffe Hospital for the criminally



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insane on Shutter Island, committed for murdering her three children. Teddy, however, has ulterior motives: He believes that his wife's murderer, Andrew Laeddis, has been committed to Ashecliffe.

While on the island, Teddy is plagued by nightmares of the death of his wife, Dolores Chanal (Michelle Williams), and his time spent in a platoon in WWII. His recurring nightmares reveal the soul-wracking guilt that he still harbors for the atrocities that he committed against Nazi soldiers in WWII, as well as the guilt he feels for the atrocities that those same Nazis committed against the Jews and others at Dachau Concentration Camp.

Why Didn't You Save Us?

A recurring aspect of these nightmares is a dead girl. One of his encounters with the dream girl occurs as his company finds a frozen, impersonal mass of bodies as they enter into Dauchau Concentration Camp. On the outskirts of this human ice cube he spies the body of the young girl. She is frozen to death. She opens her eyes, looks directly at Teddy, and asks him a question.

"Why didn't you save us?" Quite the loaded question, especially for a guilt-racked fellow like Teddy. It is also a loaded question for the audience. The little girl looks straight into the camera, at us, the audience, as she asks her conscience-penetrating question. The immediate assumption is that the girl is asking the question on behalf of the victims of Hitler's crazed regime. But as with everything else on this Island, nothing is quite what it seems.

Teddy's sleeping nightmares soon turn to waking ones and the little girl returns, now separated from her original, Holocaustian context. She asks her haunting question again, "Why didn't you save us?" The question's separation from its original context suggests that the film has used the Holocaust to frame the question as one of collective guilt but is done with it. The film now leaves the viewer with an unanswered question, "If not from the Holocaust, then from what?"

This question is not the only implied question the film posits before making its point. Teddy, in his capacity as lead investigator, questions one of the inmates at Ashecliffe. She speaks of the insanity of the outside world. To her, the idea that people can be sent over the airwaves and be stuffed into a small box, via television, is far more insane than anything that could be found in Ashecliffe. It is almost heart warming in its innocent naivete. This is not the only comment on the world's insanity, however.

In a somewhat harrowing sequence, Teddy investigates Ward C, reserved for the most dangerous and depraved. As this occurs during an electric outage, most of the inmates run rampant throughout the maze-like ward. Teddy, however, will not be deterred in his quest to find the man who killed his wife. In a rather sadistic feeling game of cat and mouse, Teddy quickly becomes the mouse as he chases down an inmate. The inmate jumps on Teddy's back and, to Teddy's horror, tells him that he doesn't want to leave Ashecliffe. He fears that he will be sent back into the world that he, like the woman before him, believes to be far more insane than anything in Ashecliffe — even in Ward C. He cites the ability of man to reduce himself to ashes with nuclear weapons. Children and fools speak the truth.

This progression, in ascending order of exponential severity, of the evidence provided for the insanity of the world is intended to move the audience to ask, "What is the next step in this progression? What is the ultimate insanity?"

The film is infected with progression. There is Teddy's progression towards the truth in his investigation, Teddy's progressive spiral into paranoia, the progression of Teddy's nightmares from dream to reality, and finally, the progression of the amounts of knowledge that we, the audience, are made privy to, namely Teddy's insanity. There is a sense of inevitableness. We are progressing — but to



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what?

Teddy's dogged search for the truth, which has been ours all along, is finally rewarded in the island's light house, as good a metaphor for truth as any. There, at the top of the light house, sits Dr. Crawley (Ben Kingsley), the head psychiatrist of Ashecliffe. He reveals the truth to Teddy. Teddy has been insane all along.

We discover that Teddy has concocted an elaborate role play for himself because he can not handle the truth. Edward Daniels and Rachel Solando are anagrams for Andrew Laediss and Dolores Chanal. He is the man who killed his wife, and his wife is the woman who killed their three children. Dr. Crawley, as an eminent psychiatrist, has played along as an elaborate experiment to see if he could heal Teddy and, ultimately, save him from a hospital board prescription of lobotomy. Chuck reveals himself as Dr. Sheehan, Teddy's private psychiatrist.

In flashback, the film reveals that the dream girl is indeed Andrew's, and the meaning of the question, "Why didn't you save us?" becomes clear. Andrew did not save her and her two brothers from the drowning they suffered at the hands of their manic depressant mother. Andrew blames himself for this, since he feels responsible for not recognizing his wife's problem earlier.

Andrew goes insane. After fishing his children's bodies from the pond and laying them out on the grass, he shoots his wife who does not realize what she has done. The second implied question, "What is the ultimate cause of insanity?" is answered thus: Our complicity through complacency in the death of our own children. Child-murder is the ultimate Holocaust that will fray the fabric of society as badly as a man's mind.

The Real Insanity

In one of the most haunting shots in cinematic history the three children are laid side by side. Andrew's wife is laid furthest to the right. Andrew is in between her legs, unable to breathe for grief. The position of Andrew in between his wife's legs is evocative of the pro-creative act. The shot is haunting for its perversity.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. This picture is worth one: Truth.

The natural order of things is the pro-creative act followed by the fruits — children. If the process could be framed in one picture, the pro-creative act would be placed on the left and the children would follow on the right. The frame in question comments on the perversity of abortion by placing the consequence of the act, the dead children, on the left and the good act made sterile on the right. It is this shot in which the film's allegory is made complete.

By the modern Holocaust of abortion, the fruit, the children, are killed. Abortion, like pro-creation, is an act. That act has a consequence. The consequence is non-creation. Not un-creation, for no man can un-create what has been made, but non-creation — a perverse twisting of all that is good in pro-creation. The ultimate consequence is an insanity exponentially greater than that caused by the atomic bomb in the same way that the atomic bomb causes insanity exponentially greater than television.

During the acceptance of her Nobel Peace Prize, Mother Teresa [said](#), "If a mother can kill her own child — what is left for me to kill you and you kill me — there is nothing between." For Mother Teresa the logical end of abortion is worldwide chaos. *Shutter Island* makes the same statement. The Leaddis children's murder is, chronologically speaking, the cause of Andrew's insanity. However, *Shutter Island* also manages to make an even broader statement. By its placement at the end of the film's plot, the children's murder is also made the culmination of insanity. It is not only the cause but also the result of



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a long slide into an age of insanity in which we no longer question the nature of existence, but attack existence itself. Abortion is the final, satanic cherry at the bottom of an upside-down, hellish sundae, and society is gorging itself gluttonously.

The ultimate irony is that the society that needs the message the most is the most likely to miss it. Many will watch this film and view the ending as a non-sequitur to everything that leads up to the final moments of the film. They will view all of the guilt-inducing Holocaust sequences as red herrings, genre trappings to misdirect our attention. Some will be glad for the ride and some will feel completely gypped, as if they have just invested two hours of their precious time in a story only to find out that, in the end, it has all been a dream of the protagonist. After all, *Shutter Island* isn't much better. Instead of the protagonist having been asleep the whole time, he's just insane. Either way, the sum ends up the same: It's all in his head. Viewed in the context of abortion, however, the film becomes a catharsis, a confession of sorts. The first step to a cure is the diagnosis and acknowledgment of the disease.

The film ends with Andrew relapsing into insanity causing the need for his lobotomy. But before he receives the lobotomy, the film hints that he may be receiving the lobotomy voluntarily by merely acting insane. Andrew has the presence of mind to ask Dr. Sheehan a very cognitive question. "Is it better to live as a monster, or die a good man?"

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