

# Mind of the Damned: A Glimpse into a Psychotic Brain Portrayed in Film

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Humanity has always been fascinated by the unknown. Such phenomena include the human psyche and all of its deviations. Despite centuries of research, our brain is one of our most mysterious and incomprehensible organs. In terms of mental illnesses, the earlier schools of thought differ in treatments with violent methods, such as lobotomy, and a more empathetic view, aimed at understanding the flawed mechanism. This placement of things provides an excellent plot for filmmakers and producers. In recent decades, films about mental illnesses have attracted more and more audiences with their thrilling mysteries and spectacular cinematography. One such piece is *Shutter Island* (2010), directed by Martin Scorsese and written by Laeta Kalogridis. The mystery thriller, based on Dennis Lehane's novel *Shutter Island* (2003), depicts an investigation led by Teddy Daniels, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, which takes place in a mental institution for the criminally insane, Ashecliffe (IMDB.com). The disappearance of one of the patients is a mystery for the U.S. Marshal and his partner, Chuck Aule, due to the fact that the institution is located on an inescapable island. As their investigation goes on, Teddy discovers the pieces to many conspiracies regarding the true nature of the institution and the patient's disappearance. The ending contains one of the most unexpected plot twists in cinematic history when it is uncovered that Teddy is a patient of Ashecliffe himself, and the investigation was all a well-thought-out role play to help him separate his delusions from a painful reality. Teddy Daniels, a hero of his fantasy, tries to uncover the mystery of the disappearance of Rachel Solando, a patient who drowned her three children, which caused her to end up in Ashecliffe. Teddy unravels the tangle of mysteries as he questions the nurses, patients, and the lead psychiatrist, Dr. Cawley. The strange events begin when he starts to hallucinate the tragedy of his past. Dolores, his wife who died in an apartment fire, facilitates his conspiracies against Ashecliffe as he sees her in his dreams. The more steps he seems to take, the more sinister secrets pile up. The audience is watching the events unfold through Teddy's eyes, and are led to believe what Teddy believes. Siding with his gut, the protagonist is certain that he was manipulated into investigating this case and was about to be used for the psychiatrists' alleged "bizarre brain experiments" along with Chuck. The climax of the movie shifts the past meaning of the plot in a completely different direction. It is revealed that Teddy Daniels is a former U.S. Marshal whose real name is Andrew Laeddis. He is a highly delusional and violent patient of Ashecliffe who created this alternate reality and persona as a method of psychological protection. His inability to accept his tragic crime causes him to dive into the world of delusions where he is a hero. After World War II, he began heavily drinking and did not notice that his wife, Dolores, was going insane. After Dolores drowned their three kids, he was responsible for shooting her to set her free from her internal suffering. The aspects of his trauma were carefully scattered throughout his fantasy. Dr. Cawley planned out the extreme roleplay where Andrew can live in his fantasy as Teddy Daniels and, over time, realize how unrealistic it really is. Chuck Aule turned out to be Andrew's primary psychiatrist, Dr. Lester Sheehan. Due to the nature of Andrew's aggression, his last resort is getting lobotomized, and Dr. Cawley did everything to prevent that. A traumatic event can have different influences on a variety of aspects of a person's life. A study of the effects of trauma on proneness to psychosis done by Spauwen *et al.* (2006) found that 17.5% of the individuals in a large adolescent sample reported having experienced at least one psychotic symptom (i.e. hallucinations), concluding that exposure to a traumatic event has a positive correlation with psychosis proneness. Andrew carried the blame for the death of his wife and kids on his shoulders to the point when it became unbearable. Knowing he could have saved his children if only he noticed his wife's bizarre and suicidal behavior makes it impossible for him to continue living as Andrew Laeddis, thus leading to his psychotic delusion and loss of touch with reality. The cinematography contains big, yet easy-to-miss hints throughout the

movie that insinuates the possibility of things being not exactly what they seem. For instance, there is important symbolism behind the use of fire and water. The very first scene of the film is the main character Teddy, or Andrew, feeling seasick on a boat as he and Chuck are on their way to the island (*Shutter Island*, 0:01:11). His dislike of water is not just a simple proneness to seasickness, since similar moments arise later in the movie. In a later scene where Teddy and Chuck are interviewing the patients about Rachel Solando, one of them asks Chuck to bring her a glass of water. She uses this moment to grab Teddy's notebook and write the word "Run" on one of the pages (*Shutter Island*, 0:37:18). However, the more interesting part of this scene is when the patient actually grabs the glass of water and brings it to her lips. There is a split second where it is evident that there is nothing in her hand (*Shutter Island*, 0:37:37). This hint is very obvious, yet fairly unnoticeable. A plausible explanation for this motif of water is Andrew associating it with Dolores drowning their children. He does everything not to be Andrew and blocks out any memory of this reality. In contrast, every scene that contains his dreams or delusions always includes fire in the form of matches, fireplaces, etc. It is not a question that Andrew is intelligent and these defense mechanisms are helping him move on. Nonetheless, is he able to accept his reality? The shocking plot twist is followed by a final scene of Andrew and Dr. Sheehan sitting on the steps of the entrance to one of the wards. A storm that was present throughout the majority of the film has died down, correlating with the peaceful end to Andrew's delusions. Nevertheless, the audience receives one last jaw-dropping twist as Andrew refers to Dr. Sheehan as Chuck and regresses to questioning their next moves of getting off the island. Dr. Sheehan signals to Dr. Cawley, who is standing in the distance, implying that their hard work with attempting to save Andrew has failed after all. As the camera shifts to a nurse walking towards Andrew with an ice pick for the lobotomy, Andrew leans over to Dr. Sheehan and asks "This place makes me wonder which would be worse... To live as a monster, or to die as a good man?" (*Shutter Island*, 2:09:11) With those final words, Andrew gets up and walks over to his inescapable finish line of getting lobotomized. At first glance, it may seem as though Andrew has regressed back to his made-up persona; however, this last line sends a message from Andrew to Dr. Sheehan and the audience, that this is an act. He is still aware of the reality, however, he cannot continue living as Andrew, the 'monster' who feels responsible for the deaths of his wife and children, and is choosing to 'die' as Teddy, the hero he so badly wanted to be. Overall, this movie does a spectacular job of enlightening the audience about trauma-induced delusional disorders and psychosis. Throughout most of the film, the viewers see Teddy as a sane man as they observe him work his investigation. If the audience went into the movie knowing that Andrew is rather insane, they most likely would not have seen him the same. His conspiracies would have been a part of his delusions and his high guard would be backed up by his inability to accept the truth. The audience uncovers the truth along with Andrew and gets a clear look into his past, shining a light on the question "Who can we blame?". This kind of screenplay gives us an empathetic view of the main character. His history and his struggles are very raw and tragic, but also explain his wounded psyche. Dr. Cawley's approach educated the public about the power of understanding the patient, instead of jumping to extreme methods as a first response. Although the story of Andrew Laeddis did not contain a happy ending, it is only proof that even damned minds reside in human beings that deserve to be remembered as they too have lived, loved, and laughed.