

MARGARET McALLISTER AND DONNA LEE BRIEN

Central Queensland University

Looking back to see ahead: Reassessing *The Snake Pit* for its gothic codes and significance

ABSTRACT

While the linking of mental illness and the gothic is prevalent and persistent in the popular imagination, little sustained investigation has interrogated prominent examples of this co-relation and the typographies which can be drawn from such a consideration. In this context, we dissect The Snake Pit (1948) in order to investigate how the gothic operates in this classic and influential film, the filmic techniques used to establish and develop gothic elements and how mental illness is used to illuminate both aspects of societies in disarray and the cultural anxieties around this. In the process we will demonstrate the power of popular culture to not only describe, portray and define mental illness but also to illuminate the human condition and act as a powerful catalysing agent for change.

KEYWORDS

The Snake Pit
gothic
Mary Anne
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film analysis
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INTRODUCTION

Tropes of mental illness are often used within gothic texts to highlight cultural anxieties and to subvert and destabilize common understandings about the world (Punter and Byron 2004). The commanding asylum is often used to represent the control and regulation of the undeserving, shattering ideas that such institutions are humane and flexible. Treatments purported to be advanced and curative are little more than medieval instruments of torture – evoking a sense that modernity is far from enlightened. Mad doctors and cruel nurses illustrate the dangers of power being exerted on the ‘other’ (McAllister and Brien 2015), subverting cultural expectations of efficient and compassionate care.

Throughout the experience of confinement, attempts to escape or find solace are thwarted and patients are driven to becoming crazed, animalistic and inhuman (Anolik 2010). As Wasson states, the gothic is ‘traditionally preoccupied with a sense of a menacing past undermining optimism for the present or future’ (2015: 2). Gothic representations are not

realistic but rather subversive, conjuring a negative aesthetic in order to highlight uncertainties and deficiencies in modernity (Baldick 1992).

Readers coming from another discourse such as health promotion are often critical of such sensational representations of mental illness in popular culture because, they argue, these ideas can sustain negative stereotypes about mental illness (Adriaens and De Block 2013; Wahl 1995). Yet Harper argues that more depth to analysis is required than simply stating whether a text portrays illness accurately or not (2008). For example, a horror film and a documentary have different conventions and expectations. The below posits that the gothic is a useful tool in such discrimination and aims to reveal how a gothic lens can deepen understanding of the function of representations of mental illness in popular culture.

BACKGROUND: FROM BOOK TO FILM

The Snake Pit (Livak 1948) is a largely realistic film based on a semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Mary Jane Ward published in 1946. It describes how a married female novelist, Virginia Cunningham suffers an acute psychosis after past traumas and is admitted to a state mental institution where she endures a series of treatments. The novel was written during the Second World War and was closely based on Ward's own nine-month stay in Rockland State Hospital in Orangeburg, New York, in 1941 (Anon 1948: 92). Although upon its publication Ward denied that *The Snake Pit* was autobiographical, Random House widely circulated the knowledge that she had drawn on her own illness and hospitalization in writing the novel and this information appeared in many reviews of the book and later in articles about the film.

Ward had published two previous novels in 1928 and 1938 which were positively reviewed but did not sell well (Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre n.d.). In contrast, *The Snake Pit* was not only very well-received by critics but also sold well (Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre n.d.). Indeed, it was described as the leading text within a large number of novels based around stories of mental illness that set up what was then known as a 'madness fashion' in literature (E.P. 1946: 15). Closely based on the book but slightly changed in order to translate the story to the screen, the film opened in New York in 1948 and in Australia in 1949. The film was successful, grossing \$US4.1 million at the box office which placed it equal second at the US/Canadian box-office for 1949 and was nominated for 6 Academy Awards (Reid 2010: 301).

However, not all of the media attention was so polite or admiring, with a front-page news story in *The Daily News* (Perth, Australia) describing how a British woman had gone ‘mental’ after seeing *The Snake Pit* and her husband had demanded it be withdrawn from screening (Anon 1949: 1). This points to the film’s powerful impact on the viewing public and indeed Clooney nominated the film in 2002 as one of his ‘movies that changed us’ in his influential book of that title. The film’s portrayal of a psychiatric institution shocked and horrified because it subverted viewers’ understanding of modern healthcare. After the film was aired, 26 states of the U.S.A. changed their mental health laws and instituted a policy of deinstitutionalization and similar policies were also later introduced in the U.K., Australia and New Zealand.

While the book is relatively unexplored as a literary work, the film of *The Snake Pit* has attracted significant scholarly comment. A number of articles in medical journals have used the film to analyse the history and accuracy of the portrayal of mental illness in films. This began with a profile of the film in *The Lancet* the year the film was released (Cunningham 1949), was a particularly prevalent approach in the 1980s (see e.g. Fleming and Manvell 1986; Hyler 1988; Schneider 1987; Shortland 1987;) and has endured (see e.g. Anderson 2003; Atkinson 2005; Dowbiggin 2013; Grob 1994; Rouquet 2011). While the film has also been included in numerous popular culture-focused studies of gender, sexism and mental illness in film (see e.g. Fishbein 1979; Semarne 1994), its link to the gothic has not been investigated in detail.

THE SNAKE PIT AS GOTHIC TEXT

The film of *The Snake Pit* (1948), despite being almost seventy years old remains frightening and powerful. Unlike many other films about mental illness, *The Snake Pit* does not begin with establishing shots of of an imposing asylum. Instead the film begins, as does the book, with Virginia seated alone on a garden bench ostensibly taking in the quiet and the welcome sunshine. This is an ordinary tranquil scene but soon we hear someone who is not yet visible talking to Virginia, she finds the conversation intrusive and suddenly she is no longer feeling settled in the environment. This conjures up Sigmund Freud’s notion of unease engendered by the *unheimlich* (unhomely) where the familiar has been rendered strange and confusing (1985). As the camera pans back, the viewer realizes that no one is there and that the voice was imagined; hallucinatory.

In this moment the viewer shares Virginia's experience of the uncanny (Royle 2003). Ordinarily inner and hidden, Virginia's psychotic symptoms are externalized in this scene, allowing viewers insight into the subjective and horrifying world of mental illness. This scene sets an important tone for the audience – they are about to enter the hidden world of the asylum, a liminal space (Spooner 2007), set apart from the real world, where separate rules, confinement, punishment, deprivation and other horrific experiences await. Instead of normal life, this is a madhouse – a home where the unhomely reigns and where uncanny experiences are common.

Even though colour film stock had been available for over ten years, Litvak chose to shoot this film in black and white, reminiscent of other expressionist horror films such as *Nosferatu* (1922) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) (Botting 2014: 149). He uses lighting that emphasizes shadows creating an eerie affect. He makes extensive use of extreme close-up camera angles to maximize the terrifying impact of Virginia's ordeal and heavy-handed dramatic metaphors (including the emblematic snake pit scene when a posturing crowd of patients metamorphose into writhing snakes trapped at the bottom of a dark pit). The monochrome emphasizes the contrast between binaries such as sanity and insanity, the inner workings of the mind and outer reality, the known and the unknown, homely and unhomely. This allows viewers to appreciate the world from Virginia's perspective, providing entry into the chaos of her mind and both the book and the film are remarkable in the way that they evoke Virginia's subjective experience of and horrified responses to many of the terrifying symptoms of mental illness. Virginia is a young woman who has upset conventional order by being a writer and not a housewife and then by constantly questioning the way the world works, subtly invoking ideas of the monstrous feminine (Creed 1993). The audience is positioned to empathize with her since she is played by the beautiful Olivia de Havilland – an actress who at this time was very well-known as *Gone with the Wind's* (1939) angelic and put-upon Melanie Hamilton.

Virginia is the object of many experiences that in terms of the gothic would be called uncanny (Royle 2003). In addition to that first experience of the disembodied voice of a man she also hears voices that sound like (but which are not) her husband, doctor and friend. This terrifies her and even though other people seem to know her and to recognize where they are she does not and is continuously disorientated. She forgets the names and identities of people very close to her, loses time and sleeps long and dreamlessly. When she simply cannot understand why it is that people are keeping her locked in such a strange place, she convinces

herself that she is either in a prison or a zoo working undercover as a writer. As the story unfolds, the gruesomeness of the asylum is slowly revealed: the non-consensual painful treatments; the lack of resources, and the over-crowding, starvation and uncivilized behaviours inmates are subjected to – until the climactic scene where Virginia finds herself lost and trapped in a snake pit of heaving lost souls.

Unlike the mythic idea noted in the book's foreword that '[l]ong ago they lowered insane persons into snake pits; they thought that an experience that might drive a sane person out of his wits might send an insane person back into sanity,' in this snake pit only destitution, desperation and chaos reigns. However, in this text the gothic monster is not the 'mad' (Wenk 2008), the incarcerated woman with mental illness, but the monstrous things that happens to her (and her fellow inmates) and this is part of what makes this film such compelling viewing. Patients are herded like animals, fed sloppy meagre meals, made to dress in drab shapeless shifts, punished for trifles and trained to obey. Because Virginia fails to make any signs of improvement, she is prescribed 'shock treatment.' The portrayal of how electroconvulsive therapy was conducted in the days before anaesthetics and muscle relaxants is realistic and horrifying not because the doctors and nurses are necessarily cruel but because Virginia cannot understand what is happening to her. She is held down and believes she is being tortured. As the current pulses and the indicator light above the door flickers, the music screams in imitation of the terror she feels.

One criticism of mental illness's representation in popular culture is the common correlation of violence and mental illness (Wahl 1995). Yet as Harper (2008) states there *is* a correlation, especially in people with psychotic illnesses. In *The Snake Pit* (1948) violence is seen on four occasions, not in an exploitative way but to illustrate Virginia's resistance to her inhumane treatment. Thus the violence is portrayed as transgressive and has the effect of evoking sympathy for Virginia and for others with mental illness in the viewer Virginia has violent outbursts but these are not portrayed as random acts; rather they can be read as provoked, at least through the eyes of a vulnerable and confused young woman.

The use of violence within the film is not what makes it horrifying. Rather it is the regular use of the uncanny – familiar and even mundane occurrences are rendered strange or dangerous. In this way viewers learn that madness may be revealed in the everyday not just the outrageous and extreme. Eating, bathing, dancing and visiting are all ordinary experiences that are alien for Virginia. For example in the dining hall fellow patients banter amiably but Virginia doesn't seem to understand them. Each of them is alert enough to scabble up a meal

from the meagre offerings but Virginia gets none. Even a mundane thing like a calendar date – for Virginia it is the 12th of May – becomes ominous. Mere mention of the date is sufficient to hurtle Virginia back into a traumatic past where instead of love she felt oppression. Her quest is to unravel this past that is hidden even to her because her mind has repressed it. With the help of a benevolent psychiatrist Virginia is eventually able to achieve this goal and to leave the Juniper Hill asylum behind her.

In summary, there are important gothic tropes in this film which subvert the view that modern life is trouble-free or that modern treatment for mental illness is straightforward and humane. It is apparent that the past has the power to intrude upon and haunt Virginia's present. The film suggests that Virginia's loss of touch with reality occurred because stressors in her life (the death of her father then her fiancé and her guilt about each) were overwhelming and not even the power of her psyche to repress these memories was sufficient to prevent them from leaking into her present and destroying her newfound happiness with her husband. On another level, this idea can be read as a metaphor that nature cannot be controlled by culture and chaos ultimately characterizes the modern world.

DISCUSSION

It is also important to note the gothic nature of the geopolitical setting in which this narrative is located. This was the United States at a time of total war – where suffering and destitution was all around – but where personal, government and media attention was focused on Europe. *The Snake Pit's* power as gothic narrative is that it brings the reality of this horror back to the home front. In a stirring scene towards the end of the film, the song 'Going Home' is sung to the tune of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* (1893). This has bittersweet connotations. Virginia and some other patients will soon be discharged back to their families and so too soldiers from the recently concluded war are on their way back home, but they are all forever changed. Implicit in this scene is that some people will never return home either from the asylum or the battlefields.

Fleming and Manvell have suggested that this scene was a sentimental way to encourage the public to take care of the damaged soldiers returning home (1986). Welch develops this idea further arguing the film's power may also rest in raising viewers' consciousness about the standard of psychiatric care afforded to these returning soldiers:

Psychiatric care may have been in a scandalous state for a hundred and fifty years but the film, with its reach, its publicity and its drama, brought it into the public sphere in a way that had not been possible before. (1997: 250.)

Gothic elements within the film emphasize the wastelands that asylums quickly became when war took precedence over domestic affairs. In the 1930s a number of asylums were model institutions, lauded for their spacious and modern amenities, well-trained nurses and doctors and range of modern treatments, as well as patient services such as hairdressing salons, ice-cream parlours and gardens. Yet within twenty years of their establishment these institutions were depleted of staff because of the war and personalized effective care was quickly replaced due to concerns about efficiency.

These texts (the book and the film of *The Snake Pit*) are also remarkable for they hold out a promise for recovery at a time when mental illness was thought to be incurable. Written and distributed in the 1940s, five years before antipsychotic medications became widely accessible, Virginia, who is obviously floridly psychotic and seriously disturbed, can within a year reach a point where she can regain enough mental control to leave the institution despite the gothic obstacles placed in her path. These obstacles include the overcrowded and mind-numbing physical environs, a lack of empathy from staff, under-nutrition, poor hygiene and being cold, bored and sometimes caged like an animal.

The film presents that through the doctor-patient relationship experienced in the asylum Virginia is cured and able to resume her domestic life. Yet the book ends in a much more ambiguous way with Virginia appreciating that she feels strong enough to leave but neither she nor the reader knows whether she is cured or not. She also gratefully realizes that while she is free to leave the asylum many remain behind, hapless, vulnerable and/or hopeless lunatics tended by traumatized doctors and nurses.

To make this point, the book ends with a chilling gothic image: as Virginia is readying to leave the asylum she performs a number of rituals that reflect her liberation. She tears her name and number out of her coat and reclaims the fine linen handkerchiefs that have been kept from her. Two nurses, Sommerville and Vance, complete their final assessment of the soon-to-be-discharged patient. At this time it becomes clear that Miss Sommerville is herself disturbed and now a hopeless case. The image of the nurse as mentally ill upsets the normal order of the world and reinforces the liminality of sanity and the uncanny frisson inherent in the asylum's daily routine.

CONCLUSION

Clearly *The Snake Pit* remains a terrifying story. Reading these two versions of *The Snake Pit* as gothic texts reveals important insights that were held about mental illness in its period setting that would otherwise go unnoticed. Appreciating the historical context of these narratives having accessed them through the gothic adds meaning to the dehumanization that Ward (imagined as Virginia) and others had to endure. This was a time when institutions were being built across the developed world in line with industrialization and the expectation that all people deserved decent healthcare delivery even if their disease (such as schizophrenia or manic depression) was considered incurable. However the ability to properly resource these asylums quickly deteriorated with the impact of the Depression and the sudden departure of employees who left to join the war.

Neither version of *The Snake Pit* presents wholly positive or negative images of mental illness or its treatment – but they do not shy away from critique. In this way they effectively unsettle and disrupt because they show that there are good doctors as well as bad and kindness as well as cruelty and that mental illness can manifest in any person, be they patient, staff or family member. Unlike many other texts about mental illness (before and after *The Snake Pit*), Virginia is not portrayed as monstrous or tragic but as victorious over circumstances, and through her relationship with her psychiatrist she is ultimately successful in unravelling the mystery of a series of unknowns. The book and film also make it apparent that to understand the social world what may be hidden from view – such as what occurs within asylums and what transpires between men and women, parents and children, doctors/nurses and patients – needs to be revealed and considered.

The Snake Pit demonstrates the power of the gothic not only to describe, portray and define mental illness but also to illuminate the human condition and act as a powerful agent for change. It is difficult to think of another film or book that evokes the lived experience of psychosis so vividly and in foregrounding and exploring the uncanny, liminal and grotesque aspects of mental illness it is possible to appreciate how terrifying and disabling symptoms such as hallucinations can be. Although it is almost seventy years old, *The Snake Pit* is remarkable because unlike many others it does not conflate illnesses. Virginia's symptoms are quite accurately portrayed as symptoms of psychosis and the violence is not overplayed particularly for a time when institutions like this were large and under-staffed and there were no psychotropic drugs available. This gothic film shocked the public out of complacency and

led to significant policy change all around the world and the gothic elements were, we assert, perhaps the catalysing agents that enabled this.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Margaret McAllister (CMHN, RN, BA, MEd, EdD) is Professor of Nursing at Central Queensland University, Australia. Her research and teaching focus is in mental health and nursing education. She has co-authored *Stories in Mental Health*, *The Resilient Nurse* and *Solution Focused Nursing*. Over her career she has been the recipient of four awards for excellence in teaching, including a national citation for outstanding contributions to student learning in 2010 for the creation of Solution Focused Nursing. She is an editor for Elsevier Publishers.

Contact: m.mcallister@cqu.edu.au

Donna Lee Brien (BEd, GCHE, MA (Prelim), MA, PhD) is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, Australia. Past President of the national peak body, Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Donna's biography *John Power 1881-1943* is the standard work on this expatriate Australian. She is the co-author of the bestselling trade self-help *Girls Guide* series for Allen & Unwin and author of over twenty books and exhibition catalogues and over 150 refereed journal articles and book chapters. Donna is the commissioning editor of special issues for *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* and is also on the editorial advisory boards of national and international journals

including *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*, the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* and *Locale: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies*.

Contact: d.briend@cqu.edu.au

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