Triggers of a Mental Breakdown. Understanding Mental Illness in Three of Tennessee Williams' Lead Female Characters: Blanche, Catharine & Laura

Camille Leclere

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Camille LECLERE

Triggers of a Mental Breakdown.
Understanding Mental Illness in Three of Tennessee Williams' Lead Female Characters: Blanche, Catharine & Laura

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Dedicated to Marie-Madeleine Leclère

“*You must never make fun of insanity. […] It’s worse than death.*”

Rose Williams to her brother, Tennessee

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Introduction

"*Take down this message! In desperate, desperate circumstances! Help me! Caught in a trap. Caught in – Oh!*"[1] These are Blanche DuBois' last words before Stanley Kowalksi arrives into the room in the penultimate scene of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Her final and somewhat questionable moment of sanity before being trapped into the abyss of her own psyche. Though she is under the influence of alcohol, Blanche is fully aware of the danger she is in.

Mental illness and its treatments were discarded over time for various reasons, mainly because the wounds of the mind are invisible, as opposed to those of the flesh. Men were marginalized, considered as insane, women were either thought to be witches, possessed or simply more delicate and more prone to emotional distress. One of the first prominent attempts at understanding mental illness in women was in 1895 with Sigmund Freud's *Studies on Hysteria.*[2] Though it was then commonplace to think of women as fragile beings, subjected to their emotions and frail nature, Freud now considered their sexuality as one of the triggers of their hysterical outbursts. Though progress has been made since then, these theories were still widely acknowledged in the first half of the 20th century.

Thomas Lanier Williams, better known by his alias Tennessee Williams, is no stranger to these dynamics, given his strong attachment to the women in his life, and mainly his sister. Rose Williams spent the vast majority of her existence in public and private mental institutions, was diagnosed schizophrenic and ended up lobotomized, which changed her forever. Tennessee had a very close-knit relationship with Rose and made her his priority throughout his life, out of love, but also out of fear of his own demons. Her underlying presence is palpable in each of his lead female characters, their fears and struggles reflecting those that she felt but could not express. Both siblings grew up in a broken family, with an

[1] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). London: Penguin Books [Twentieth Century Classics], 1989 (Reprinted Edition): 214.
[2] FREUD, Sigmund. *Studies on Hysteria – The Complete Works*. Ivan Smith [online PDF document] (2000, 2007, 2010).

absent and violent father, and an overly religious mother. Though he did not define his childhood as particularly unhappy, Williams was troubled. In his *Memoirs*, he states:

> My first eight years of childhood in Mississippi were the most joyously innocent of my life, due to the beneficent homelife provided by my beloved Dakin grandparents, with whom we lived. […] That world, that charmed time, ended with the abrupt transference of the family to St. Louis.[3]

This was in part due to his sister's illness, but also because of his own demons and his closeted homosexuality, which he could not embrace in the deeply-Christian South.

It is with all of these elements in mind that Williams took to writing, as a way to escape from his sinister everyday life, but also to bring light to the depths of American society. His theater is raw yet poetic, dark in its storylines, yet illuminated at times by his characters, particularly that of the desperately-shy Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. The latter grew up with an impediment – one of her legs is shorter than the other – which developed in her the sense that she was different. Laura therefore retreats into an imaginary world made up of glass animals, far more appealing than the one she lives in. Her father left the family long before the time of the play, and Amanda, her mother, has difficulty making ends meet. The only person who seems to understand Laura is her brother, Tom, who tries to help her, but is torn between his loyalty to his family and his desire to become a poet.

In *Suddenly, Last Summer*, Catharine Holly struggles against her ruthless aunt, Violet Venable, whose quest for revenge leads the young woman to be threatened with a lobotomy. The root of this conflict lies in the previous summer, when Catharine and her cousin Sebastian, Violet's son, went on vacation to Europe. The latter died under atrocious circumstances, which deeply traumatized Catharine, leading her to be institutionalized at St. Mary's. In the light of her mental condition, Violet makes it seem as though lobotomy were the only solution to calm Catharine, but the former wants to know the truth and pushes her niece, with the help of a doctor, to the innermost corners of her psyche.

Finally, we have the character of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is most likely one of Tennessee William's most notorious "heroines". The daughter of a plantation owner, Blanche has lived a life of luxury and wealth, but surprisingly shows up to her younger sister's apartment in New Orleans, to take a break from her teaching activities in the town of Laurel, Mississippi. While Stella greets her with as much love as

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[3] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *Memoirs* (1972). London: Penguin Books [Penguin Modern Classics], 2007 (Reprinted Edition): 11.

she can, this is not the case with her husband Stanley, a rather brutal and outspoken man, who seems to see right through Blanche. It turns out that she has been kicked out of the school she worked in and that she has been forced to leave the town because of her promiscuity and the reputation she acquired. Yet, Blanche strives to maintain the illusion of her being a proper and respectable woman, though her mental state declines throughout the course of her stay.

These three women seem very different, yet they share substantial similarities – they are all mentally distraught, and go through a very significant mental breakdown. The causes and the manifestations of the latter are of various natures and it will be my task through this thesis to bring them forward. A trigger is, according to the University of Alberta Sexual Assault Center:

> [S]omething that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma.
>
> Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that she/he thinks triggered the flashback. She/he will react to this flashback, trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.[4]

In order to understand how Blanche, Laura and Catharine are brought to the verge of their sanity, I shall first study the contexts in which they evolve, through the geographical locations of the plays, the South, but also the symbolical notions and references which are associated with this setting, notably the stock character of the Southern Belle, but also of the Southern Gothic literary sub-genre. In addition to this, I shall study in depth the asylum and the medical treatments used within it, to add the detailed case study of all three of these female characters.

Once the illnesses will have been defined, I will focus on the triggers themselves, that is to say the factors which contribute to the characters' downfall, primarily linked with sexuality through three concepts: death, fear and family. While men are not necessarily the protagonists of these plays, they play a decisive role in the lives of Blanche, Catharine and Laura, be it by their presence or their absence. This is why I will look into the ambivalence of men, with the father figure, the stock character of the gentleman caller and the opposition between the image of a punisher and that of a savior.

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[4] PsychCentral Website, (http://psychcentral.com/lib/what– is– a– trigger/) [Consulted on June 1st 2016].

Since Williams' plays are very personal, it seems important to bring forth what the playwright accomplished by creating these works – he provided a platform to women, with their qualities and their flaws, their hopes and their fears. It is through the notion of the voice, with a textual study of the plays but also with the broader image of "the voices of women" that I will try to show how these character's struggles reach far beyond their own universes. I shall also look deeper into the playwright's own life and the people around him in order to provide more elements in understanding these female protagonists.

I have chosen to study the plays in their original format, that is to say the text itself, and not speak of the stage and film adaptations in order to base my studies on Williams' initial vision of the settings, the characters and their relationships. As I will develop more thoroughly, the playwright's writing was incredibly rich and detailed, and the adaptations, however brilliant they may be, do not necessarily follow his own directions. Given that these productions were and still are submitted to the film or stage directors' own interpretations of the plays, I preferred to focus my research on material which is closest to Williams' vision, in keeping with the autobiographical approach of his writing.

The following abbreviations will be used throughout this thesis in order to name the plays:

- *ASND*: *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- *SLS*: *Suddenly, Last Summer*
- *TGM*: *The Glass Menagerie*

Part I: Crossing the Border – From Physical to Mental Space

The idea of transgression is one that is omnipresent in Tennessee Williams' theater, characters cross the boundaries of what is considered acceptable by others, they sometimes involuntarily set themselves apart from the outside world and take refuge both in a safe physical space, but also a mental space in order to find solace. In terms of physical space, all three plays share common characteristics, such as taking place in the South, which seems to represent both a geographical and ideological notion. They are also set in a closed setting, which conveys a sense of confinement, be it in Violet Venable's garden, the Wingfields' apartment or Stella and Stanley's apartment.

Progressively throughout the plays, it seems as though the settings which surround the characters reflect their mental states – the noises made by birds in the garden become more and more prominent and remind Catharine of Cabeza de Lobo, the darkness provoked by the power cut in the apartment seems to enable Laura to show the depths of her soul to Jim, and finally, the damp, almost stiffening atmosphere of New Orleans translates Blanche's feeling of confinement.

Though Catharine is the only character to be institutionalized, and therefore to be clearly diagnosed with a pathology, Blanche (before being driven to some asylum herself at the end of the play) and Laura prove to be trapped in an asylum of their own – that of their mind. The transition between the notions of physical and mental space are deeply rooted in the characters' psyche and all three women share common struggles. As Jeanne McGlinn states in "Tennessee Williams' Women: Illusion and Reality, Sexuality and Love":

> [i]n seven plays written in a twenty year period, Williams uses essentially the same dramatic situation. A woman is presented at a moment when frustration has led to a crisis. She has only two possible ways of acting: to face reality or to retreat into illusion[5]

[5] McGLINN,Jeanne, "Tennessee Williams' Women: Illusion and Reality, Sexuality and Love", *Tennessee Williams: a Tribute*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977:.510. Quoted from GROS, Emmeline, *The Southern Gentleman and the Idea of Masculinity: Figures and Aspects of the Southern Beau in the Literary Tradition of the American South*. Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2010: 306.

It therefore seems as though these women had reached a turning point in their lives from which they cannot escape, and the decisions they make will define the rest of their existences – either to stay in the real world or to completely lose touch with it.

The asylum seems to be the most evident setting when dealing with mental illness since it is the institution where patients are committed, where they are treated and where they are confronted with their own demons. Yet, any place can be seen as an asylum when the person in it happens to be in a fragile mental state, as is the case for Blanche and Laura.

It is through an in-depth study of the institution, medical treatments and the characters themselves that we will try to understand the shift in their mental states. In order to do so, we must first take into consideration the general settings and the symbolical notions which are attached to it, since they play a key role within the plays.

1. The South and its Symbolism

The South can be considered as both a physical and an ideological notion. The first and most evident representation is geographical, and it is important to underline the fact that Tennessee Williams's plays all take place in what is known as the "Deep South" – i.e. the former Confederate States of America (namely Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas). These states were characterized by the presence of plantations, and slavery – as opposed to indentured servitude in the northern colonies – and were marked by great social differences before the American Civil War. After the end of the war in 1865, social differences were meant to be erased, but the former wealthy class, made up of plantation owners and their families, were left with a bitter taste in their mouths, abruptly transitioning from riches to rags. Blanche is without doubt the stock character of the faded Southern Belle, which we will discuss later on, who desperately clings to her glorious past.

Therefore, the South is also a notion that can be considered beyond its physical perimeter – it is a symbol of an ideology and a lifestyle. Belle Rêve, the DuBois family's plantation, can be seen as a metonymy for the idea of the South and every ideological notion that pertains to it, among which feature wealth, antebellum glory, slavery and exploitation, as well as power struggles. The author himself was born in Columbus, Mississippi and spent his childhood moving from town to town within the state and in Missouri. He also deals with these notions, not too frontally though as he mainly focuses on more intimate or psychological issues, involving family relationships notably, which branch out to these notions all the same, and the atmosphere set in his plays is unmistakably Southern.

a) The Symbolic Nature of the South

Beyond the typical ideas associated with the Deep South, a new dimension was given to it in literature in the early 20th century, particularly in Williams' theater. To some critics, "*the South was an 'ideal' fecund bed for nurturing the abnormal psyche that exemplified itself in the external activities of Williams's characters, activities that can be*

categorized as 'terrorizing' and 'abnormal',"[6] that is to say that His characters are indeed strongly influenced by their environment, and sometimes almost crushed by its pressure.

Tennessee Williams provided incredibly detailed stage directions, in terms of scenery, lighting, visual effects, and also sounds, in order to create specific atmospheres, always echoing the city where the scene is set, as in the first scene of *ASND*:

> The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully accentuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a bar– room around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This "blue piano" expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here. (*ASND*, Sc.1: 115)

These elements enable the reader, but also the theater goer to set his mind in this specific setting, though the theater he is in may be thousands of miles away from New Orleans. The reference to "*Negro entertainers*" and "*brown fingers*" is a reminder not only of the pre-Civil War days when blacks worked in cotton fields and sang Negro Spirituals (which are often alluded to in Williams' work), but also of the slow evolution of mentalities in the South. Though Williams died in 1983, the majority of his plays were written when America, and particularly the Deep South, was a segregated nation. Black people were called "niggers" or "negroes" on a daily basis, were not allowed to drink from the same water fountains as white people, and could not even sit where they wanted on a bus. Many were lynched or even hanged, and this was glorified until the end of the 1960s. Let us not forget that the South harbored one of the most racist groups in the United States – The Ku Klux Klan.

The evocation of the South also conveys the idea of heat, dampness, and luxuriousness, with plants for instance, as in the garden where Catharine meets with her family and Dr. Cruckrowicz. The garden is described in the stage directions as a:

> [f]antastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest […]. The colors of this jungle– garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree– flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature. (*SLS*, Sc. 1: 113).

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[6] DUTTA, Suchismita. "Exploring Violence and Terror in Tennessee Williams's plays: *Summer and Smoke, Sweet Bird of Youth, A Streetcar Named Desire", e– Journal of Literary Explorations* 2: III, (August 2014): 3.

In a side note, it is important to bring up the fact that, once having read the play, the reader can easily understand that the setting is a reference to Sebastian's fate, with his body torn to pieces. Here it is almost dream-like, resembling the Garden of Eden to a certain extent, yet the plants are so omnipresent that one could feel trapped into this uncontrollable mass, as if nature had taken back its right and human beings no longer had control over it. The dampness and the heat also convey this idea. In keeping with this, the characters have no control over their own lives and almost seem to be spectators of what is happening to them.

The society in which they live in is also represented in this way as, paradoxically, the plants seem to embody it, and surround the characters until they would smother them. This link may seem a little far-fetched, yet when placing ourselves back in context, the meaning becomes clearer. After the Civil War ended, in 1865, the former Confederate States were left penniless since their economy completely crashed. The latter was based on cotton production and other goods produced in the plantations. The people who worked on these same plantations were black slaves. Therefore, when slavery was abolished, many plantation owners went broke because they were used to free labor and could not (or refused to) pay the newly free employees. It was the entire economy of these states that had to be changed. Families like Blanche and Stella's ended up having to sell their plantations in order to survive, and move to the city in order to find employment. Incomes were low and taxes were high, this is why many individuals, like Blanche in *ASND* or Amanda in *TGM*, have great difficulty transitioning from a life of wealth to one of poverty. This will also be a contributing factor to Blanche's psychiatric downfall, as we will see later on.

In the mid-20th century, much was at stake for young women – either they went to school and found employment, or they found a husband who would provide for them. Stella is the symbol of the working-class housewife, who takes care of the home (which shocks Blanche, who can be heard saying "*Stop it. Let go of that broom. I won't have you cleaning up for him!"* to which Stella responds *"Then who's going to do it? Are you?"*[7]). Amanda's dream is for Laura to become one of those two types of women; ("*Girls that aren't cut out for business careers usually wind up married to some nice man. […] Sister, that's what you'll do!"*[8]), because she knows that without a job or a husband, Laura will live a more than mediocre life, but will also be ostracized as one of the dregs of society.

[7] *ASND*, Sc. 4: 159.
[8] *TGM*, Sc. 2: 247.

The Southern lifestyle might be equated from another perspective as one of warm and easy– going people, drinking iced tea on a porch or under a weeping willow, yet this is not the image conveyed in these plays. On the contrary, Williams' characters do not conform to social norms and do not have a place in that society; they cannot find peace of mind either. Blanche, Catharine and Laura are all caged in an environment from which they are marginalized and suffer from it indirectly.

Catharine seems to be cursed by her experience in Cabeza De Lobo – she is profoundly traumatized by what she has witnessed, causing her to have hysterical outbursts (and to burn Sister Felicity's hand with a cigarette in Scene 2), but she also has to live with the fact that nobody believes her "*crazy story*."[9] Yet, she knows what awaits her if she continues to tell her truth – she will undergo a lobotomy ("*Do you want to bore a hole in my skull and turn a knife in my brain? Everything else was done to me!*"[10]). Individuals with mental ailments, even of traumatic nature, were disregarded by others, including their family members, since they were deeply misunderstood. Asylums at the time resembled prisons, but for those who had not committed crimes. It was easier to "put away" someone who was a little too unconventional than having to deal with the social humiliation that came with keeping them out in the open, especially in the very Christian South, where "lunatics" were shunned by religious communities.

At one point, Catharine's brother clearly illustrates this in some other way when he says, "*Aunt Vi? Cathie can't go to Lion's View. Everyone in the Garden District would know you'd put your niece in a State Asylum. Aunt Vi*."[11] He strongly insinuates that people will start gossiping about Catharine and the Venable/Foxhill family, which would alter their reputation, something Violet could not live with (she already has a hard time with Catharine tarnishing her son's memory within St. Mary's).

Through this play, we are therefore presented with a vision of the South as strongly marked by prejudice and social judgment.

The character of Laura gives us an insight on how crippled people were treated, as well as those who were pathologically shy. Her interpersonal relationships are non-existent

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[9] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 134.
[10] Ibid: 138.
[11] Ibid: 141.

outside of her family nucleus (that is to say her mother and her brother), be it because of her illness of because of them. Her mother, Amanda, is so protective of her and has such a pre-established vision of what Laura's life should be that it crushes any aspiration to individuality that the young girl could have. Amanda says in Scene 4: "*My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children!*"[12] So much pressure is put on Laura by society – to either find a job or a husband – that she retreats more and more into her inner world, using her physical ailment as an excuse to set herself aside from the world ("*She just drifts along doing nothing. It frightens me terribly how she just drifts along*"[13]).

As for Blanche, she finds herself caught up between two worlds – the past and the present. She desperately clings to the youthful image she has of herself, that of a seductive and beautiful woman who once was wealthy and had every man at her feet. The Blanche we come to know in the play is far from that character. She has great difficulty adapting to her sister's lifestyle – that of a woman who is submitted to a man. She also refuses to accept the brutality of the world surrounding her, preferring to keep her innocence, thus embodying the archetype of the Southern Belle.

b) The Faded Southern Belle

The stock character of the Southern Belle is most famously embodied by Scarlett O'Hara, the lead female character in Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone with the Wind*. She is the gracious, beautiful and well-mannered young woman from the South who comes from a wealthy family (generally plantation owners) of the pre-Civil War era.

Scarlett and Blanche share many common features – Tara and Belle Rêve being their respective plantations, which they both lose due to financial issues, and they are forced to give up their lavish lifestyle and step into the real world.

In addition to this, Blanche is obsessed with her looks and with feeling attractive. In Scene 2 of the play, Stella tells Stanley: "*And admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful. That's important with Blanche. Her little weakness!*"[14] which is a truly realistic summary of her character.

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[12] *TGM*, Sc. 4: 257.
[13] *TGM* (Amanda to Tom), Sc. 4: 261.
[14] *ASND*, Sc. 2: 132.

Given her upbringing, Blanche can also speak French. When on a date with Mitch, one of Stanley's friends, she tries to demonstrate how learned a woman she truly is by telling him:

> We are going to be very Bohemian. We are going to pretend that we are sitting in a little artists' café on the Left Bank in Paris […] Je suis la dame aux Camélias! Vous êtes – Armand! Understand French?"(*ASND*, Sc. 6: 177.)

This also shows that she has received a proper literary education, since she quotes Alexandre Dumas' novel, but we must not forget that she used to teach literature.

Moreover, she is well-aware of her social status (or the one she was brought up in), and does not hesitate to let it be known, especially when speaking about Stanley: "*You can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you just suppose that any part of a gentleman is in his nature!"*[15] Blanche, throughout the play, thus proves to be very much attached to social codes and etiquette, much in the image of maidens in the antebellum era. Similarly, in terms of love and marriage, she follows the codes and has always had the intent of marrying intelligently, as she tells Stella – *"I took the trip as an investment, thinking I'd meet someone with a million dollars.*"[16] Marrying out of love has clearly never been her priority (lust was reserved to her admirers and/or lovers throughout her life): it was the social status and the financial situation which were at stake. This is perhaps why she was blindsided when she found out that her husband was a homosexual, and rejected him completely.

She also has a taste for everything luxurious, including "*feathers and furs*", "*fox–pieces […] genuine fox fur– pieces, a half a mile long*", as well as "*pearls! Ropes of them!*"[17] together with beautiful and pricey clothing, which will lead both Stanley and Stella to wonder how she was able to pay for everything. Blanche assures them that they are gifts from the countless amount of admirers she has had in her lifetime, including a certain Shep Huntleigh, whom she dated at college.

Yet, the genuine person behind the façade, is far from the somewhat glamorous image of the Southern Belle. Suchismita Dutta provides us with a very accurate description

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[15] Ibid: 163.
[16] *ASND*, Sc. 4: 159.
[17] All of these quotes are from *ASND*, Sc. 2: 134.

of the real Blanche in her article "Exploring Violence and Terror in Tennessee Williams's Plays: *Summer and Smoke, Sweet Bird of Youth, A Streetcar Named Desire*":

> […] In *A Streetcar Named Desire* we have Blanche DuBois as the absolute romantic who still believes in purity, honour and gallantry while her own life has become sordid and soiled. Her lies about her past or her surroundings are dreams of beauty. She is a character who is neurotic, melodramatic, extremely crystalline, brittle and too delicate for the new brawling of modern life.[18]

Blanche DuBois has suffered hardships in her life: the loss of her parents, of her husband, of her beloved plantation, but also of her youth and her attractiveness. Since she was a beautiful woman, she always knew that, whatever she went through in life, her looks could save her. Yet, as time went by, she began showing signs of aging, which in her present-day situation, she does not accept. She now has to face the crumbling of her world, yet one in which she can decide what to make of her life and not the other way round, as maidens were usually married very young and thereafter lived their lives according to their husbands. For various reasons, mainly traditional values and social pressure, upper-class women had to be quiet, obedient and set a good example in terms of etiquette. Transitioning from living in a beautiful house to sleeping on a couch in the living room of an insalubrious one-bedroom apartment is a big change for Blanche, and it also shows her downfall.

Her looks were a great advantage, but are also the reason why she finds herself in this situation – leading to her promiscuity and alcoholism that gave her a reputation from which she cannot escape. The upper-class is a small world and news travels very fast amongst its members, which is why Blanche tries to escape it all by moving in with her sister and while prevaricating on her life and the circumstances of her arrival at Elysian Fields, the district where her sister lives.

Blanche's mental condition seems alarming from the beginning of the play – though the reader/viewer first would seem to think this is caused by her adapting to her new environment – and only worsens throughout her stay, which seems to be the consequence of years of repressed emotions, indulgences of diverse natures (alcohol, sex, perhaps drugs), causing her to have a total alcohol-fueled psychotic meltdown in Scene 10 of the play. She is then shown in a completely delirious state, in an imaginary situation with imaginary people to whom she speaks. This is when Stanley comes back to the apartment after Stella's

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[18] DUTTA, Suchismita. "Exploring Violence and Terror in Tennessee Williams's plays: *Summer and Smoke, Sweet Bird of Youth, A Streetcar Named Desire"*, *e– Journal of Literary Explorations* 2: III, (August 2014): 440.

childbirth, and engages into the fight that will lead to the notorious rape scene that marked viewers and critics alike when the play was first produced on Broadway in 1947.

Interestingly enough, Vivien Leigh, who embodied O'Hara in the 1939 film adaptation of *Gone with the Wind*, also gave an iconic performance as Blanche in the very first London stage production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1949, but also in Elia Kazan's legendary picture in 1951.

Two other examples of Southern-Bell-type characters are Violet Venable (Catharine's aunt in *SLS*) and Amanda Wingfield (Laura's mother in *TGM*). The former is incredibly rich and of a high social class – the Garden District of New Orleans, where her house is set, is an incredibly wealthy borough – while the latter struggles to make ends meet but is very attached to her traditional upbringing and its values (it is said in her character description that she is "*clinging frantically to another time and place*" and she has "*failed to establish contact with reality*"[19]). Amanda still lives in the past, when she had up to seventeen "*gentlemen callers*" and "*sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all!*"[20] yet she lives with the guilt of marrying a handsome but unfaithful man when she could have had a very suitable husband with a good financial situation. In her PhD dissertation, Emmeline Gros states that:

> Whereas Laura entertains her illusions through her glass menagerie, Amanda her mother entertains a false reverie of the Old South. As a consequence, Joseph Wood Krutch, in the line of many other critics, defines this mother– figure in the play as 'an absurd and pathetic widow', who 'is defeated by a crude and pushing modernity which neither understands nor respects her dream of gentility'.[21]

Ironically Amanda refers to Scarlett O'Hara when encouraging a woman to renew her subscription to *Companion*, most likely a literary magazine which published novels. Amanda says: "*You remember how* Gone with the Wind *took everybody by storm? You simply couldn't go out if you hadn't read it. All everybody talked was Scarlett O'Hara.*"[22] This could be seen as a subtle nod on Williams' part to the novel and the stock character, on which Amanda, like Blanche, was modelled, who will try to live her fantasized life through her daughter Laura.

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[19] Both quotes from *TGM*, The Characters: 228.
[20] *TGM*, Sc. 1: 237.
[21] GROS, Emmeline, "The Southern Gentleman and the Idea of Masculinity: Figures and Aspects of the Southern Beau in the Literary Tradition of the American South." Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2010: 303.
[22] *TGM*, Sc. 3: 249.

Another example of a mother's stifling love as a compensation for her own lack of love from her husband is Violet, who maintained an incredibly close-knit – almost incestuous – relationship with her son Sebastian, sparing no expense to give in to his indulgences and anything he may have wanted. In keeping with this, Catharine and Laura in *TGM* and *SLS* were both forced to make their debut in order to find a proper husband and be taken care of. In both cases it was a disaster, creating huge disappointment on the part of their respective aunt and mother,Violet and Amanda.

This stereotypical character of a woman belonging to another era and incapable of adapting to the new world, as embodied by the characters we are directly studying in this dissertation, or by others interacting with them, provides an explanation as to why Blanche, Laura and Catharine follow a path that leads to a mental breakdown. Other elements may seem to trigger their breakdown, notably related with the subgenre of the Southern Gothic these plays may be said to belong to.

c) The Southern Gothic

The "Southern Gothic" is a literary genre derived from Gothic literature, which first appeared in the United States with Edgar Allan Poe in the late 19th century. Mississippi-born William Faulkner is one of its pioneers, with works such as *The Sound and the Fury* or *As I Lay Dying*. The main difference between the two genres is that Southern Gothic literature, as its name stresses – is written by authors born in the South and the stories are set there as well. The three plays which we are studying make no exception to this rule: *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly, Last Summer* are both set in New Orleans, Louisiana (the former in a poverty– stricken district, on a street which "*runs between the L & N tracks and the river"*[23] and the latter in the upper-class Garden District), and *The Glass Menagerie* takes place in St. Louis, Missouri.

Moreover, where traditional Gothic novels are based on supernatural elements, unaccountable phenomena and a fair dose of horror, the later Southern ones are more centered on complex characters with serious mental issues, convoluted family dynamics and the crushing weight of society. To say that Southern Gothic literature entails a more psychological approach of characters would perhaps be far-fetched, it is however undeniable

[23] *ASND*, Sc. 1: 115.

that realism plays a much more significant role than in traditional Gothic works. In the production notes of *TGM*, Williams himself stated that:

> Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to the truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are.[24]

The playwright created realistic situations, he relied on symbolism as a form of expressionism, in order to provide more depth to the characters and the situation. For example, Blanche is likened to a moth ("*Her delicate beauty must avoid strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth"*[25]*).* This symbolic simile is very important in order to understand the character of Blanche, her actions and reactions, particularly concerning her physical appearance and her dealing with aging. Through his plays, Williams was distancing himself and his body of work from what had been done before. He created flawed and relatable characters, and dealt with issues that had previously been discarded in the theater – sex, alcoholism, and psychiatric ailments, among other unconventional topics which arise within his plays. These characteristics were truly groundbreaking in the mid-20th century, since in the postwar years in particular, people who went to the theater wanted to be entertained, to take a break from their everyday lives. With Tennessee Williams, they were witnessing their own issues onstage, they were seeing characters just like themselves, who lived in sometimes precarious situations, who were struggling with money or family dynamics, but most of all, who were struggling with their own personal demons, trying to find a place in a hostile and decadent world.

SLS is the only play out of the corpus we are studying which can clearly be defined as Southern Gothic literature, yet both *ASND* and *TGM* clearly contain key elements which are characteristic of the genre.

The notion of decay is very important in keeping with the Southern Gothic genre, starting with the setting. In *TGM*, the Wingfields' apartment building is decrepit, and

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[24] *TGM*, Production Notes: 229.
[25] *ASND*, Sc. 1: 117.

"*burn[s] with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation,*"[26] as a sign of the sordid atmosphere which reigns there. The garden in *SLS* is quite different since it seems luxurious at first glance, as sign of wealth and prosperity. In its description, however, many elements belonging to the lexical field of violence can be noted, such as "*violent*," "*steaming with heat*," "*harsh cries*," "*hissings*," "*thrashing sounds*," and "*savage,*"[27] which could be seen as a reference to the atmosphere which reigns among the Venable– Holly family. In *ASND*, the houses are "*weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs,*"[28] in stark contradiction with Belle Rêve, *a "great big place with white columns.*"[29] Places thus also reflect the oppressive atmosphere which reigns, as well as time and its passing. While the glorious Belle Rêve symbolized a prolific era of wealth for plantation owners, times have changed, society has become harsher, has decayed, and this can be seen through the states of the buildings, which now reflect the generally gloomy morale in the South. The sense of decay is also brought about through the evolution of the characters' mental state, and their relationships to others, which significantly deteriorate throughout the plays, as we shall see further down.

In all three plays, there is clear tension within the family, which will ultimately catalyze the mental downfall of the protagonists. Firstly, in *SLS*, tension is palpable between Catharine's mother, Mrs. Holly, and her brother, George, but primarily between Catharine herself and Violet. "Aunt Vi", as they call her, even goes so far as saying, "*Don't call me 'Aunt'. You're the niece of my dead husband, not me"*[30] and also: "*These people are not blood-relatives of mine, they're my dead husband's relations. I always detested these people, my dead husband's sister and her two worthless children."*[31] Catharine's relationship is also complicated with her brother and mother, since they do not believe her, but also because Violet threatens to stop helping them financially if Catharine continues to lie. Catharine's brother illustrates this very clearly in Scene 4 of the play:

> You see mama, she's crazy like a coyote! […] We won't get a single damn penny, honest t'God we won't! So you've just GOT to stop tellin' that story about what you say happened to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo, even if it is what it couldn't be – TRUE![32]

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[26] *TGM*, Sc. 1: 233.
[27] All terms are taken from *SLS*, Sc. 1: 113.
[28] *ASND*, Sc. 1: 115.
[29] Ibid: 119.
[30] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 140.
[31] Ibid: 139.
[32] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 134.

The money issue is very important in the Holly family, since they depend on Violet's generosity. If Catharine does not comply with her aunt's demands, she will be bereft of the money she is supposed to get from Sebastian's will, and her aunt will stop giving her family money. This echoes the traditional Gothic stories, in which the lead female character is deprived of her independence and autonomy, as is the case for Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*.

In *ASND*, it is undeniable that Blanche and Stanley have great difficulty getting along, and this starts with their confrontation concerning the Napoleonic Code, which would mean that half of the sales outcome from the sale of Belle Rêve should go to Stella and him. When he reaches into her trunk to retrieve the papers about it, he grabs a pile of letters from her deceased husband, which puts Blanche into a terrible emotional state, as it shows in their exchange:

> STANLEY: What's them underneath? [He indicates another sheaf of paper].
>
> BLANCHE: They are love-letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy. [He snatches them up. She speaks fiercely] Give those back to me!
>
> STANLEY: I'll have a look at them first!
>
> BLANCHE: The touch of your hand insults them!
>
> [He rips off the ribbon and starts to examine them. BLANCHE snatches them from him, and they cascade to the floor.]
>
> BLANCHE: Now that you've touched them, I'll burn them! (*ASND*, Sc. 2:139.)

Throughout the play, they both seem to be fighting a passive aggressive war, making petty remarks about each other to Stella, who is stuck in between them. Some climax in the tension between the two is reached in Scene 10 of the play, when Stanley comes back to the apartment while Stella is in the hospital, and rapes Blanche. This will be dealt with in more detail further on, in order to provide an in-depth analysis of this pivotal moment in Blanche's mental state.

The two sisters, Blanche and Stella also maintain a complex relationship, which is highlighted as soon as they start chatting when Blanche arrives in the first scene. Blanche holds her younger sister partially responsible for the loss of the family's plantation, Belle Rêve. She tells her:

> You came to New Orleans and looked out for yourself! I stayed at Belle Reve and tried to hold it together! I'm not meaning this in a reproachful way, but all the burden descended on my shoulders […] You are the one that abandoned Belle Reve, not I! I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it! (*ASND*, Sc. 1: 126.)

Blanche seems to take her status, that of the elder sister, very seriously, giving Stella lessons on life, patronizing her (particularly in Scene 4, when she questions all of Stella's life choices, including her marriage, to which the younger sister ends up answering "*Don't you think your superior attitude is a bit out of place?"*[33]

Finally, Laura and her family also have issues in their relationships. These are almost exclusively centered on Laura's shyness and her inability to live the life her mother thought out for her. One of the main tense moments of the play is when Amanda finds out that her daughter has been pretending to go to school, while in reality going to the park instead, out of extreme shyness:

> AMANDA: I went to the typing instructor and introduced myself as your mother. She didn't know who you were. Wingfield she said. We don't have any such student enrolled at the school! I assured her she did, that you had been going to class since early January.
>
> 'I wonder' she said 'if you could be talking about that terribly shy little girl who dropped out of school after only a few days' attendance?'
>
> […]
>
> And she said 'No – I remember her perfectly now. Her hands shook so that she couldn't hit the right keys! The first time we gave a speed-test, she broke down completely – was sick at the stomach and almost had to be carried into the wash-room! After that morning she never showed up any more. We phoned the house but never got any answer' […] I felt so weak I could barely keep on my feet! I had to sit down while they got me a glass of water! Fifty dollars' tuition, all of our plans – my hopes and ambitions for you – just gone up the spout, just gone up the spout like that. [Laura draws a long breath and gets awkwardly to her feet. She crosses to the victrola and winds it up]

Their relationship is both close-knit and strained, Laura being frightened of her mother's judgment and of her own incapacity to live up to her expectations.

In addition to this, the situations within two of these plays are or become horrific, starting with Catharine's detailed description of Sebastian being dismembered by savages, which happens to be incredibly gruesome. Catharine, under the effect of a truth serum, painfully describes the scene in the final moments of the play

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[33] *ASND*, Sc. 4: 162.

> When we got back to where my cousin Sebastian had disappeared in the flock of featherless little black sparrows, he – he was lying naked as they had been naked against a white wall, and this you won't believe, nobody has believed it, nobody could believe it, nobody, nobody on earth could possibly believe it, and I don't blame them! – They had devoured parts of him. […] Torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with, they had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs. (*SLS*, SC. 4: 158.)

Cannibalism definitely contributes to the Gothic nature of the play and provides a very efficient shock factor. The entire play builds up to this moment, and the reader or the audience can now understand why Catharine has been refusing to confess the truth all along, and more so why nobody would believe such a horrific tale. The shock and the trauma caused by this event, tend to justify psychiatric attention, thus Catharine's institutionalization at St. Mary's asylum.

It is quite the reverse in the encounter between Blanche and Stanley since, the rape itself is not evoked onstage, the audience only witnesses Stanley saying:

> Oh! So you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house! [He springs towards her, overturning the table. She cries out and strikes at him with the bottle top but he catches her wrist] Tiger – tiger! Drop the bottle-top! Drop it! We've had this date with each other from the beginning! [She moans. The bottle-top falls. She sinks to her knees. He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed. […] (*ASND*, Sc. 10: 215.)

Illustrations 2 & 3: Blanche's rape by Stanley (Scene 10)

This is how the scene ends and the stage directions enable the reader to get a better idea of what is really going on, though what happens after that is solely left to the imagination, perhaps making the image of the rape even more vivid in the minds (see Illustrations 2 & 3, which show Stanley's brutality with Blanche, which foreshadows the act). Rape is undoubtedly a serious matter in any circumstances, yet in this play, Williams takes this sordid act to a whole other level since Stanley is the perpetrator. Not only is he Blanche's brother-in-law, which means that he is cheating on his wife by having unconsented sexual intercourse with the latter's sister, but the act itself takes place the day Stella gives birth to her first child with Stanley. As if he had decided to celebrate fatherhood by raping his wife's sister on his own bed, which delivers a sense of pure horror in what may be considered as typically Southern Gothic.

The frontier between the graphic and the imaginary enables Williams to guide the audience in a certain direction. While Blanche's rape is only suggested – perhaps Stanley did not even accomplish the act – the account of Sebastian's demise is very detailed and the reader/viewer can clearly picture what happened to him. In both cases, Blanche and Catharine have evidently been the primary victims of shock and trauma. In order to deal with the traumatic aftermath, the need for medical attention seems quite understandable, which now brings us to study the mental asylum, thus bringing forth another key element of the Gothic genre – the notion of confinement.

2. Studying the Mind: The Asylum

The asylum has often been an important element in popular culture, since it is a symbol for everything bizarre, unsettling and marginal. The mystery of what happens to people behind the walls of mental institutions was, and still is a great resource in terms of literature. Tales of criminally-insane people being locked up for the rest of their lives or popular images such as dark and cold cells, screams and potentially illegal treatments have been widely spread over the centuries, particularly with the emergence of Gothic literature, as I have evoked above. This is what makes the mental asylum interesting – it is both a medical institution – therefore a physical space – but also a symbol of mental disturbance and insanity. It is therefore also a concept, since one's mind can be an asylum for one who suffers from schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder or any deep form of autism, dysfunctions which lead people to become prisoners of their own minds.

a) Popular Perception of Mental Illness and the Institution

Let us start with the image that is associated with the institution. Tennessee Williams' writing career spanned over almost fifty years, starting in the later 1930s and reaching an end with his sudden death in 1983. During that period of time, the perception of mental illness and psychiatric ailments evolved greatly. Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) had already enabled great progress in terms of trying to understand mentally unstable individuals and actually considering them as ill. Prior to that, hysterical people were just thought to be crazy or possessed and could not be helped. They were either thrown away in prison – if they represented a threat to others – , placed in a hospice, or died or took their own lives. There was no "happy ending" for those people who, once singled out, could never go back to a somewhat normal existence.

With his studies on hysteria and the development of psychoanalysis and hypnosis, Freud found a cause, and sometimes a cure for women who suffered from hysterical outbreaks, depression and dissociative identity disorders. Notwithstanding, his ideas were questioned by many, both in his lifetime and later on, since the main factor he associated to hysteria was a problem concerning sexuality, thus inferring that women with mental disorders, which were not all defined as hysteria, had a problem with their sexuality. This created a new form of stigma, which went on in the 20th century. Like teenage mothers who

went to live with distant cousins in the country, the "bad seeds", that is to say people suffering from depression or "dementia praecox" (the term used to define what we now label schizophrenia), were quietly sent away for a short or extended period of time, in order to preserve the family's reputation. Social stigma against the mentally ill during the first half of the 20th century was similar to racial segregation, particularly in the very religious South, where the fear of demons and the Devil was omnipresent. Any ailment having to do with the mind was considered contagious, therefore mental "freaks" were ostracized and institutionalized. The subject was very close to Tennessee Williams essentially due to his sister's illness. The entire Williams family and their peers had set her aside, leading her to spend her whole adult life in a mental facility.

Catharine is clearly a victim of an erroneous perception as well, since no one believes her in her family and she is not well perceived by anyone, except Dr. Cuckrowicz. The difference with Rose is that the latter actually suffered from schizophrenia, while Catherine is a prisoner of her own trauma. Her interaction with Sister Felicity in Scene 2 is very telling since we clearly understand that Catharine is seen as a danger. All her rights have been taken away from her; she cannot smoke and she cannot be let out of sight. Her attitude is such that St. Mary's, a private and costly facility, can no longer keep her and she is to be transferred to a state asylum – Lion's View.

The following quote has already been given but it may be useful to understand the difference in perception between private institutions and state-run asylums: "*Cathie can't go to Lion's View. Everyone in the Garden District would know you'd put your niece in a state asylum, Aunt Vi.*"[11] It enlightens us on the difference in perception between private institutions and state-run asylums and leads me to consider Williams' treatment of the latter in particular, in keeping with their calamitous reputation (at the time).

b) The Facility Itself and Medical Treatment

As I have previously mentioned, Catharine is the only one of the three characters we are studying who is in a mental institution. It is important to take into consideration the environment in which she is staying in order to understand her mental state. Because of the transitory state in which she finds herself – she is going to be interviewed by a doctor to see whether she is to be transferred from the private facility in which she is, to a public one. This would mean a great deterioration in her mental state but also in her living conditions. Yet, she gives us an insight on her fate by declaring: "*No place for lunatics is a sweet, sweet*

place,"[34] which shows that her capacity to think is still intact. Blanche is confronted to the same fate since she ends up being taken to what seems to be a private asylum at the very end of *ASND*.

Private and public asylums were extremely different in the early 20th century and still are to this day. The first is generally a home transformed into an institution, and is generally reserved for wealthy patients. It provides high-quality, state-of-the art services and amenities while the environment is generally calm and relaxing. The aim is for the patient to be in the best environment possible, free of stress and negative mental triggers.

Public institutions were quite the contrary, as shown in an article written by Dr. Ellen Holtzman for the American Psychological Association, entitled "A Home Away from Home", which deals with mental hospitals in the United States generally:

> Patients at public hospitals were usually involuntarily committed, and they typically displayed violent or suicidal behavior before their hospitalization. The public hospitals were overcrowded and dirty, with bars on the windows. The staff was poorly paid and frequently treated patients harshly. Given these terrible conditions, well-to-do patients used their wealth to take shelter in a physician's home and escape the fate of the poor. Not surprisingly, the cost of a private hospitalization was steep. Sidis, for example, charged $50 to $100 and "upwards" a week ($50 would be equivalent to roughly $1,000 today).[35]

Tales of the horrors perpetrated within state asylums became widespread over the decades, particularly in terms of medical treatment, regarding which the dichotomy between public and private facilities were even more prominent.

Private facilities opted for progressive treatments, such as Freud's psychoanalysis and hypnosis, known as "talking cures", whereas public institutions opted for more radical methods, including electric shock treatments, insulin injections in order to induce hyperglycemic comas, but also what is known as malariotherapy. The latter is a form of treatment created by Julius Wagner-Jauragg which consisted in injecting the malaria virus into the bloodstream of patients. This caused a fever which was supposed to eradicate the disease. This therapy was very risky and many patients died, it was therefore abandoned.

One of the most prominent forms of treatment in public asylums before the invention of synthetic drugs was lobotomy.

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[34] *SLS* Sc. 4: 137.
[35] HOLTZMAN, Ellen. "A Home Away From Home". *Monitor on Psychology* 43 (March 2012): 24.

c) Lobotomy – A Physical and Psychological Weapon

In the first scene of *TGM*, Violet Venable and Dr. Cuckrowicz discuss Catharine's case and her inability to stay at St. Mary's because of her violent behavior. Doctor Sugar, as he asks to be called, specializes in a new type of procedure for difficult patients to be more docile. Here is an extract from their conversation:

> DOCTOR: […] My work is such a new and radical thing that people in charge of state funds are naturally a little scared of it […].There is a good deal of risk in my operation. Whenever you enter the brain with a foreign object…
>
> MRS VENABLE: Yes.
>
> DOCTOR: Even a needle-thin knife…
>
> MRS. VENABLE: Yes.
>
> DOCTOR: – In a skilled surgeon's fingers…
>
> MRS. VENABLE: Yes.
>
> DOCTOR: There is a good deal of risk involved in – the operation…
>
> MRS. VENABLE: You said that it pacifies them, it quiets them down, it suddenly makes them peaceful.
>
> DOCTOR: Yes. It does that, that much we already know, but –
>
> MRS. VENABLE: What?
>
> DOCTOR: Well, it will be ten years before we can tell if the immediate benefits of the operation will be lasting or – passing or even if there'd still be – and this is what haunts me about it! – any possibility, afterwards, of – reconstructing a – totally sound person, it may be that the person will always be limited afterwards, relieved of acute disturbances but – limited, Mrs. Venable…
>
> MRS. VENABLE: Oh, but what a blessing to them, Doctor, to be just peaceful, to be suddenly – peaceful… […] After all that horror, after those nightmares: just to be able to lift up their eyes and see […] – a sky not as black with savage, devouring birds as the sky that we saw in the Encantadas, Doctor.
>
> DOCTOR: Mrs. Venable? I can't guarantee that a lobotomy would stop her – babbling! (*SLS*, Sc.1: 125.)

Lobotomy, or "prefrontal leucotomy" was made popular by Dr. Walter Freeman and Dr. James Watts in the 1940s, though first invasive procedures on the brain to treat mental illness date back to 1888 with Gottlieb Burkhardt. It is a:

> [s]urgical procedure in which the nerve pathways in a lobe or lobes of the brain are severed from those in other areas. The procedure formerly was used as a radical therapeutic measure to help grossly disturbed patients with schizophrenia, manic depression and mania (bipolar disorder), and other mental illnesses.[36]

The aim of this procedure was to make psychotic patients more docile. In an article published in the *Journal of Neuropsychology* in July 2015, Dr. Daniel Nijensohn confirms this:

> The surgery was done on patients with "undesirable habits" to make them 'quiet, placid and uncomplaining'. A new 'malleability' would ensue and the operation would be indicated for patients who were 'difficult to manage.' [37]

This is the case of Catharine in *SLS*. She is violent in her words and attitudes, as in Scene Two of the play when she burns Sister Felicity's hand with her cigarette. The direct consequence that arises from this situation is that the private institution in which she is placed, St. Mary's, does not wish her to stay any longer. That is why Dr. Cukrowicz is mandated to evaluate her and determine if she requires transorbital leucotomy before being transferred to a state-run asylum, Lion's View. Since neuroleptic drugs such as chloropromazine, which appeared in the 1950s, were not available to soothe patients, leucotomy seemed to be the most efficient solution at the time.

Mental ailments were thought to be caused by dysfunctional connections within the brain. Therefore, destroying these synapses would cure the patient of the mental disease they suffered from, as said by Dr. Egas Moniz, a Portuguese neurosurgeon who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1949:

> It was necessary to 'change the synaptic facilities and also the path which is chosen by the stimuli in their continuous process, in order to change the corresponding thoughts and to force them into other channels. For this reason, […] I decided to cut the connecting fibers of the neurons concerned.'[38]

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[36] Encyclopaedia Britannica (http://global.britannica.com/topic/lobotomy#ref205578)
[37] NIJENSOHN, Daniel. "Prefrontal lobotomy on Evita was done for behavior/ personality modification, not just for pain control". *Neurosurg Focus* Vol. 39 (July 2015): 5.
[38] GROSS Dominik & SCHÄFER Gereon. "Egas Moniz (1874 – 1955) and the "Invention" of Modern Psychosurgery: a Historical and Ethical Reanalysis Under Special Consideration of Portuguese Original Sources", *Neurosurg Focus* Vol. 30 (February 2011): 2.

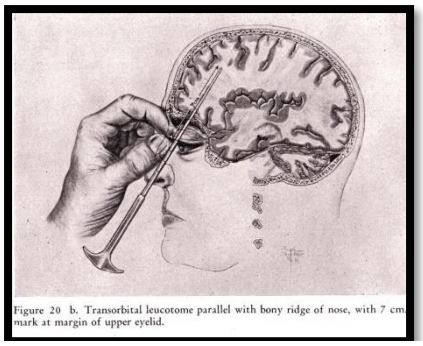

Illustration 1: A Transorbital Lobotomy

The procedure was very controversial – it first consisted in drilling holes through the skull while the patient was under general anesthesia. Thanks to Freeman and Watts, it quickly evolved into the "transorbital lobotomy,"(see Illustration 1) which involved driving an icepick– shaped instrument called "leucotome" through the eye-socket with a mallet on a patient who was made unconscious by electric shock treatment. The gruesome procedure was very popular within the psychiatric community and was seen as a painless solution to soothing hysterical patients (who were mostly women). Its apex was reached between the 1940s and the 1960s.

In terms of side effects, opinions differ concerning the efficiency of the procedure. Still according to Dr. Daniel Nijensohn:

> Up to 60% of patients exhibited a good response after lobotomy. Pain relief itself might not have been achieved, but a lack of emotional response was apparent. Patients would no longer seem to care, even if they continued to suffer from pain. In addition, prefrontal lobotomy was used for control of aggression, violence, and belligerence. (p.2)

In the same article, however, which discusses the case of Eva "Evita" Peron, and the lobotomy she underwent to relieve her from the pain caused by cervical cancer, Nijensohn brings to light the dire side effects of the transorbital leucotomy:

> Dr. Poppen [the surgeon who performed the procedure] was troubled by his role in Evita's treatment and surprised by her quick postoperative decline and early death. Evita basically stopped eating after the lobotomy.[39]

Lobotomy can also be considered as a weapon in the case of Catharine since her aunt, Violet Venable, wishes to make her pay for bereaving her of her son, but also to make her stop "*smashing [her] son's reputation.*"[40] Violet sees Catharine as a threat and is paying as much money as she can to get rid of her. She even tries to bribe Dr. Cuckrowicz, who is in a difficult financial situation, so that he will do the procedure:

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[39] Ibid: 4.
[40] *SLS*, Sc. 1: 125.

> I wrote you that my lawyers and bankers and certified public accountants were setting up the Sebastian Venable Memorial Foundation to subsidize the work of you people like you that are pushing out the frontiers of art and science, but have a financial problem. You have a financial problem, don't you, Doctor?[41]

Rose, Tennessee Williams' sister, suffered from what was called "dementia praecox" (now known as schizophrenia), as does Catharine, and underwent a bilateral prefrontal lobotomy in 1943, which changed both siblings forever. He had to live with the guilt of their estrangement leading up to the surgery, and she was condemned to be institutionalized for the rest of her existence. Tennessee never got over this. We shall discuss this matter more thoroughly later on.

When analyzing lobotomy, the case of Blanche DuBois also seems important when for two reasons – the most striking one seems to be that she will face the surgical intervention once she is institutionalized, her schizoid and hysterical symptoms making her an ideal patient for this treatment. Her sister Stella even goes as far as saying: "*[…] Don't let them do that to her, don't let them hurt her! Oh, God, oh, please God don't hurt her!*"[42] Moreover, her rape (if indeed she is raped), perpetrated by her own brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski, could be seen as a symbolic lobotomy, making her "evolve" from a hysterical state to an apathetic shell of herself, as if something had triggered a natural lobotomy. In the final scene of *ASND*, Blanche has no idea where she is actually being taken to, just drifts telling the doctor "*Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,*"[43] proof that she has absolutely no idea of who he is or of where she is going and that she has indeed lost touch with reality (now an easy prey to institutional power, for whom the audience is enticed to feel pity or compassion).

[41] *SLS* Sc. 1: 124.
[42] *ASND*, Sc. 11: 224.
[43] *ASND*, Sc. 11: 225.

3. A Mental Prison – Case Study of the Characters

While the asylum can be seen as the physical representation of the mind, where the darkest facets of a human being are brought to light, some individuals are trapped within their own psyche and fail to seek help or even be helped. This seems to be the case of Blanche and Laura, who appear to have passed the point of change, whereas Catharine, thanks to Dr. Cuckrowicz, still has a chance to overcome her trauma.

The realm of mental ailments is quite vast, and it is quite difficult to analyze pathologies and discuss treatments that were given back in the 1950s with our 21st century knowledge. Though lobotomies are still conducted in Scandinavian countries – extremely rarely – , techniques have evolved considerably and have nothing to do with the procedures that took place in the mid-20th century.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) was created in 1952 by the American Psychiatric Association, and contains the medical elements which enable a diagnosis. It has since been revised five times, yet the perception of mental disorders remains the same – they are "*reactions of the personality to psychological, social, and biological factors.*"[44] This definition is quite telling since it suggests that these illnesses are "reactions" and not a biological feature which is imprinted in our DNA, but also that they can be treated. Given that the early editions of the DSM are very hard to find, we will base our analyses on the DSM-5.[45]

Each of the three women reaches a breaking point, either a positive one – in the case of Catharine – or a negative one – in the case of Blanche and Laura. The plays were written and staged in order to create a build-up, with a rise of tension and complex situations, which lead up to a pivotal moment.

Let us stress that what is written here comes from a non-medical point of view, and is solely based on conclusions drawn from diverse analyses of medical papers and publications.

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[44] American Psychiatric Association Official Website: https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm/history– of– the– dsm (consulted on May 9th 2016).
[45] Ibid.

a) "You see, I still think I'm sane" – Catharine

As I have previously mentioned, Catharine is the only character to be within the walls of a mental institutions, since her mental breakdown supposedly happened prior to the play, back when she was in Cabeza de Lobo with Sebastian, that is to say the previous summer (hence the title of the play). It is obvious that Catharine suffers from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder given what she has seen. According to Medline Plus,[46] the latter is:

> A psychological reaction that occurs after experiencing a highly stressing event (as wartime combat, physical violence, or a natural disaster) outside the range of normal human experience and that is usually characterized by depression, anxiety, flashbacks, recurrent nightmares, and avoidance of reminders of the event.

Individuals who suffer from PTSD, prominently war veterans and civilians having experienced war nowadays, are haunted by the memory of a traumatic event, which completely alters their personality, as well as their relationships with others. If left untreated, this illness can lead to dire consequences, amongst which features suicide.

One of the first elements to confirm this "diagnosis" is that she oftentimes relives what happened. Violet Venable mentions it to Dr. Cuckrowicz when she tells him:

> They can't shut her up at St. Mary's […] She babbles! They couldn't shut her up in Cabeza de Lobo or at the clinic in Paris – she babbled, babbled! Smashing my son's reputation. (*SLS*, Sc.1: 124.)

Catharine is haunted by this traumatic event, and this affects her very deeply, not only because it reminds her that she has lost her beloved cousin, but also because she sees the gruesome vision over and over again. While alone with Sister Felicity in scene 3 of the play, she says "*WHEN CAN I STOP RUNNING DOWN THAT STEEP WHITE STREET IN CABEZA DE LOBO?",* which shows us how much of a prisoner of her own mind she truly is. At that time, PTSD was not an ailment that was known as such – in fact it only started to be classified as a psychiatric condition after the Vietnam War – and Catharine's story is so unbelievable that it is difficult for anyone to give any credibility to the tale. This, of course becomes a never-ending circle, which draws her closer and closer to an irreversible fate – lobotomy. Because nobody believes her, this leads Catharine to become more and more

[46] Medline Plus Official Website: http://c.merriam– webster.com/medlineplus/posttraumatic%20stress%20disorder (Consulted on May 9th 2015).

frustrated and more and more hysterical since she is asked to tell the truth but not the actual truth, only the one others want to hear, a more 'proper' version of what happened.

We could draw a parallel between this and Martin Scorcese's 2010 movie *Shutter Island*. Teddy, the main character, has been given the opportunity to realize that he is the one who killed his wife and children. If he does so, he will stay in the asylum. If he stays in his fantasy in which he is searching for his wife's murderer, he will undergo a lobotomy. In the final scene of the movie, Teddy says "*Which would be worse: To live as a monster, or to die as a good man?*", before joining the doctors (one of which has an ice pick wrapped in a towel in his hands) Though the ending is left as such, it seems that Teddy has in fact realized that he is the murderer, but he prefers to let them believe that he is still in his fantasy and to undergo the procedure. He would thus be freed from the guilt of the murders, but would also stop immersing himself in his imaginary world time after time. In the film, Teddy clearly suffers from schizophrenia (or dementia praecox), as is the case for Catharine, supposedly.

The film adaptation of *SLS* – though frowned upon by Williams himself, who considered it too distant from the original play – provides us with much more information concerning Catharine and her illness. In the scene between Violet and Dr. Cuckrowicz, they clearly state Catharine is suffering from dementia praecox:

> DOCTOR: You say that your niece suffers from dementia praecox. There must have been a more exact diagnosis?
>
> VIOLET: Such a pretty name for a disease. Sounds like a rare flower, doesn't it? Night blooming dementia praecox.
>
> DOCTOR: What – um – what form does her disturbance take?
>
> VIOLET: Madness – o –o – obsession. Memory. She – lacerates herself with memory.
>
> DOCTOR: Memory of what?
>
> VIOLET: V– v– visions. Hallucinations. It– it all started last summer […][47]

The hallucinations she suffers from are in fact reenactments of what actually happened. Catharine is considered schizophrenic because her entourage refuses to believe that it is true, and would rather consider her as mentally ill than actually believing her.

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[47] MANKIEWICZ, Joseph. *Suddenly, Last Summer* (screenplay and film direction). United States: Columbia Pictures, 1959.

Dementia Praecox (which literally stands for "*early dementia*", a degenerative mental disorder which is characteristic of old age), is the name that was given to schizophrenia in the 1940s– 1950s. The DSM-5 states that this illness "*involves a range of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dysfunctions, but no single symptom is pathognomonic […] schizophrenia is a heterogeneous clinical syndrome.*" What we can understand from this is that schizophrenia is made up of various symptoms, thus making a potential diagnosis very difficult. The disease is generally:

> [c]haracterized by mild or subthreshold forms of hallucinations or delusions. Individuals may express a variety of unusual or odd beliefs that are not of delusional proportions […], they may have unusual perceptual experiences (e.g sensing the presence of an unseen person); their speech may be generally understandable but vague; and their behavior may be unusual but not grossly disorganized. […] Individuals who had been socially active may become withdrawn from previous routines.

Patients suffering from schizophrenia alternate between what are called "active" and "residual" periods, which lead the symptoms to be more or less prominent. During the residual phases, the schizophrenic will seem relatively normal and will only seem incoherent at times, while the active phases, are accompanied by severe hallucinations, paranoia, intense mood swings and oftentimes mystical delirium (feeling one is God or the Messiah). Catharine is thought to be suffering from dementia praecox because of her hysterical outbreaks, yet it seems as if her diagnosis were incorrect. She does in fact show symptoms of a mental illness and clearly shows an abnormal attitude as regards others and her environment, yet in Scene 4, Dr. Cucckrowicz gives her an injection of what seems to be a truth serum in order to find out if the story she is telling is a lie or the actual truth. We find out that Catharine does not change her story, which the others – that is to say Violet, Ms. Holly and George – have an extremely difficult time believing. The striking element is that Doctor Cuckrowicz seems to believe has, as he says in the final line of the play: "*I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true.*"[48] We do not know what happens next since the play ends at that exact moment, but it is absolutely possible to imagine that Catharine is saved, and that she will not undergo a lobotomy, much to Aunt Violet's dismay. Dr. Cuckrowicz's support of Catharine by confirming she is telling the truth could lead to her recovery from the traumatic event.

[48] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 159.

Now that we have a better understanding of Catharine, let us now focus on Blanche DuBois, who clearly shows signs of mental illness as well.

b) "I'll tell you what I want. Magic!" – Blanche

Though her symptoms seem to appear progressively in the play, Blanche seems to suffer from what is called "Borderline Personality Disorder". According to the DSM-5, it is:

> A pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self– image, and affects, and marked impulsivity beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts.

One of the first symptoms of this illness is "*frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment*". Blanche is no stranger to this feeling, and this can be felt directly at the beginning of the play, when she tells Stella "*you are the one that abandoned Belle Rêve.*"[49] By this we can imagine that Blanche includes herself in the notion of the plantation because she is the one who stayed there to take care of it, and was therefore abandoned by her sister who went to live her life in New Orleans. Furthermore, after the fight between Stella and Stanley during the poker night (in Scene 3), Blanche desperately tries to convince her sister to leave Stanley and come with her. At one point she tells her "*I have a plan for us both, to get us both – out!"*[50] which shows that she is desperate to leave the apartment but will not do so without Stella. At first glance, it seems that it would be to protect her sister and her unborn child, yet, as we get to know Blanche throughout the play, it is also for more selfish reasons, in order for her not to be alone.

Mitch also senses that Blanche is afraid to end up alone, but not for the same reasons. She seduces him because he is a potential husband and Blanche does not wish to end up being an old maid. Out of the fear of abandonment comes that of being alone – in the romantic sense. This is why Blanche has supposedly seduced so many men throughout her life – in order to be sure that she will not end up all alone when old. At the end of Scene 6, when Mitch and Blanche are alone in the apartment after a date, he tells her "*you need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be – you and me, Blanche?*"[51] At this point in the play, we do not know if Blanche is using Mitch – given her reputation in Laurel, this would not be a surprise – or if she is genuinely interested in him. We will later find out that

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[49] *ASND*, Sc. 1:126.
[50] *ASND*, Sc. 4: 161.
[51] *ASND*, Sc. 6: 184.

she was truly drawn to Mitch and wanted to start anew with him, a man who did not know of her past and who did not judge her according to petty gossip ("*You should just know the line she's been feeding to Mitch. He thought she had never been more than kissed by a fellow! But Sister Blanche is no lily! Ha– ha! Some lily she is!*[52]"). Stanley ruins this by telling Mitch about it, thus crushing Blanche's dream.

Two other symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder are "*a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation*" and "*affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood*". This is most prominent in Blanche's relationship with men, starting with Stanley. It is no secret that their relationship is extremely complex and that their tolerance of each other oscillates very much. On the one hand they cannot stand each other, Blanche thinks he "*acts like an animal, has an animal's habits*" and she tells Stella that she "*can't live with him*."[53] On the other hand, she sometimes enjoys his company, as we can notice in Scene 2 of the play when she tells Stella: "*Yes – I was flirting with your husband, Stella!*"[54] If we set aside the idea that Blanche is knowingly flirting with her brother-in-law and deliberately telling her sister about it – which is quite disturbing in itself – we can see that she tries to charm him when she first meets him. Moreover, in scene 8, on the night of her birthday when they are waiting for Mitch to arrive:

> BLANCHE: Tell us a funny story Stanley! Something to help us out!
>
> STANLEY: I didn't think you liked my stories, Blanche.
>
> BLANCHE: I like them when they're amusing but not indecent. (*ASND*, Sc.8: 192.)

This clearly seems to be an olive branch that Blanche is offering Stanley, a form of truce between the two for their own good, as well as that of Stella and her baby. She seems to be making an effort to pacify her relationship with him – even if it is just to make small talk. This attempt proves to be a failure though, as their relationship will continue to degrade.

Blanche's relationships with men as love interests also seem very complex, starting with her deceased husband. Stella provides us with an incredibly accurate description of what Blanche felt for him:

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[52] Stanley to Stella (*ASND*, Sc. 7: 186).
[53] Both quotes are from *ASND*, Sc. 4: 163.
[54] *ASND*, Sc. 2: 141.

> I think Blanche didn't just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human! But then she found out – […] this beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate. (*ASND*, Sc.7: 189– 190.)

Her first experience with love turned out to be a disaster, since she not only found out her husband was a homosexual by walking in on him engaging in a sexual act – as we will discuss later on –, but she also had to live with the guilt of him committing suicide because of her disgust of him. These events most likely led to severe trauma for Blanche, and perhaps creating a form of Post– Traumatic Stress Disorder, but they also triggered the downward spiral that followed. As Stanley tells Stella, Blanche engaged in devious practices at the infamous Flamingo Hotel in Laurel:

> STANLEY: Our supply-man down at the plant has been going through Laurel for years and he knows all about her and everybody else in the town of Laurel knows all about her. She is famous in Laurel as if she was the President of the United States, only she is not respected by any party! This supply-man stops at a hotel called the Flamingo […] A second-class hotel which has the advantage of not interfering in the private social life of the personalities there. The Flamingo is used to all kinds of goings– on. But even the management was impressed with Dame Blanche! In fact they were so impressed that they requested her to turn in her room-key – for permanently! […] The trouble with Dame Blanche is that she couldn't put on her act anymore in Laurel! They got wised up after two or three dates with her and then they quit, and she goes on to another, the same old lines, same old act, same old hooey! But the town was too small for this to go on forever! And as time went by she became a town character. Regarded as not just different but downright loco – nuts. […] And for the last year or two she has been washed up like poison. […] did you know there was an army camp near Laurel and your sister's was one of the places called 'Out of Bounds'? (*ASND*, Sc.7: 187– 188.)

We can see that there are two sides to her – that of the fragile bird, who is delicate and refined, and that of the *"destitute woman*"[55] as Blanche calls herself in Scene 10. It seems as if Blanche were too ashamed to admit what she did, which is understandable given the family and social status she comes from. Yet, it is most likely because of what happened with her husband that she became this way. If he was in fact gay, their sexuality must have been severely impaired, creating a form of underlying frustration, even though she did not feel it at the time. Finding out about his true sexual tendencies perhaps triggered the opposite reaction, that of unrelenting desire for sexual activity. This can explain why Blanche acted this way with her lovers – not only did she need to feel seductive, she perhaps also had to prove to herself that it was not her fault that the man she loved more than anything else

[55] *ASND*, Sc. 10: 211.

preferred men. According to Ruhina Jesmin in her article "A Psychoanalityic Insight into Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* – Psychic Strength from Defense Mechanism":

> Her pain was to lessen in intensity over time but the sadness, desperate alienation never completely went away. She is time and again haunted by that repressed memory making her existence intolerable. Sex became the substitute for shelter, protection, because sex was not exercised for its own sake but for the sake of getting marginal gratification by which she could temporarily forget the agonizing aspects of her life [56]

By engaging in sexual debauchery, Blanche only seemed to be trying to numb the pain and the guilt that she had in fact caused herself.

Her attraction towards younger men is also very important when trying to understand Blanche. In the same tirade in Scene 7, in which he exposes Blanche's actual lifestyle, Stanley tells Stella that Blanche lied about her being on a sick– leave from her job at a high– school in Laurel. She had apparently got kicked out of the school because of "*a seventeen-year-old boy – she'd gotten mixed up with".* This, again is confirmed by Blanche's actions, in Scene 5, when an unidentified "*young man*" comes to offer the newspaper. She offers the boy a drink, smokes a cigarette next to him and tries to start a conversation with the boy, who clearly does not seem interested by her at all – he only wants to be paid. At one point, she tells him "*You make my mouth water*" when he refers to a cherry soda he previously had drunk, but the sense of this is quite devious since it seems to be a clear reference to the boy himself. At the end of the scene, Blanche tells the boy:

> Well, you do, honey lamb. Come here! Come on over here like I told you! I want to kiss you – just once – softly and sweetly on your mouth. [Without waiting for him to accept, she crosses quickly to him and presses her lips to his.] Run along now! It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good and keep my hands of children. Adios! (*ASND*, Sc.5: 174.)

The lust she feels for young boys may be seen to relate with the one she felt for her husband who was "*a boy, just a boy when [she] was a very young girl,*"[57] as if she were desperately looking in young men or boys for the husband she loved so dearly, but of whom she was bereft. It seems clear that Blanche did not and still does not accept Allan's (her husband's) sexual orientation or the way he died, and she has involuntary trapped herself in the time frame that she spent with him. This would explain her eternal quest for youth and power to

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[56] JESMIN, Ruhina. "A Psychoanalityic Insight into Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* – Psychic Strength From Defense Mechanism", *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 2:3 (March 2012): 406.
[57] *ASND*, Sc. 6: 182.

seduce, but also her attraction towards underage men, as if to recreate an ideal version of her first and most significant love story.

In addition to Borderline Personality Disorder, Blanche seems to be using what Sigmun Freud defined as "defense mechanisms" in order to escape from the reality of her existence. To quote Ruhina Jesmin again:

> All defense mechanisms share two common properties: They often appear unconsciously and tend to distort, transform, or otherwise, falsify reality. In distorting reality, there is a change in perception which allows for a lessening of anxiety, with a corresponding reduction in felt tension. Defense mechanisms work by distorting the id impulses into acceptable forms or by unconscious blockage of these impulses (p. 404).

This notion of distorting reality is crucial when studying Blanche's character, and mostly her relationships.

The most prominent example is that of Shep Huntleigh, who apparently was her boyfriend in college. He is now a rich oil tycoon living in Texas. Blanche constantly refers to him in the play, at first to reassure her sister by telling her that he can take care of them if they both run away. Then, she tells both Stella and Stanley that she has received an invitation to join him, and that she will be leaving their apartment. At the end of the play, when she is being taken away to a medical facility, she still believes that she is on her way to see Shep. However, she never seems to be able to reach him. The first time is with Stella in Scene 4; she wants to call, but then is carried away by her thoughts and never does so. The second time is in Scene 10, when she feels that she is in danger with Stanley, but she does not have the time to make the call past the operator. This inability to reach this man who supposedly represents her salvation could symbolize many things, the first one being that Blanche cannot escape the fate the she has brought upon herself by her actions, and therefore must pay for them. Another axis may be that Shep Huntleigh is only a fantasy, one that Blanche has fantasized in order to create an outlet for herself whenever her life or the situation she is in seems to be getting out of her control.

It seems that Blanche always needs to have the upper hand and to control situations, to bring people into the direction in which she wants them to go, but she has reached a point where her lies, which she created to protect herself both mentally and physically, have got the best of her and she can no longer run away. Stanley, who exposes her, seems to be the allegory of a form of divine justice, a wall against which she crashes and which exposes her.

As Femi Oyebode states in the chapter "Tennessee Williams and the Theater of the Mind" in her book *Madness at the Theater*:

> The multiple losses of loved ones, the responsibility of watching them die and tidying up the family affairs coupled with diminishing family resources appear to have created a fault in Blanche's defenses that were finally broken by Stanley's assault. But all these events were dangerous and potentially fatal because she had suffered a much earlier loss of someone she loved.[58]

Finally, we shall now discuss the case of Laura, who unlike Catharine and Blanche, does not seem to suffer from an apparently severe mental illness, but who is deeply affected by her own ailment nonetheless.

c) "But Mother – […] I'm – crippled!" – Laura

TGM is a memory play, that is to say that Tom, the main character, gives the reader/viewer his account of and viewpoint on the events which took place in the past. We therefore have his vision of his sister, Laura Wingfield, which is unwillingly biased. Laura is a fragile character both physically and mentally. We can first see this in the character description, at the very beginning of the play, we are told that "*a childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace*". This physical ailment, which is the most noticeable one at first glance is only the tip of the iceberg. We also learn in Scene 2 that she had an "*attack of pleurosis*,"[59] more commonly-known as pleuritis, an infection of the lungs. Laura is also a fragile girl in terms of health.

In *Portrait of a Girl in Glass*, the short story Williams wrote which led him to write the play, we are given a more in-depth perspective of the character of Laura:

> As for my sister Laura, she could be classified even less readily than I. She made no positive motion towards the world but stood at the edge of the water, so to speak, with feet that anticipated too much cold to move.[60]

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[58] OYEBODE, Femi. "Tennessee Williams and the Theater of the Mind". *Madness at the theatre*, The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2012: 65.
[59] *TGM*, Sc. 2: 246.
[60] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. "Portrait of a Girl in Glass". *Collected Stories*. New York: New Directions Books, 1985: 110.

As the play unfolds, the reader discovers that Laura clearly seems to be suffering from Social Anxiety Disorder, also known as "social phobia". It is a:

> Marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others. Examples include social interactions (e.g., having a conversation, meeting unfamiliar people), being observed (e.g., eating or drinking), and performing in front of others (e.g., giving a speech). […] The individual fears that he or she will act in a way or show anxiety symptoms that will be negatively evaluated (i.e., will be humiliating or embarrassing; will lead to rejection or offend others). The social situations almost always provoke fear or anxiety [and are] avoided or endured with intense fear or anxiety.[61]

One of the main examples of this ailment is given in Scene 2 when Laura and Amanda, her mother, discuss the reasons why she secretly quit attending classes at Rubicam's Business College. It appears that Laura stopped going there after a very embarrassing situation, during which she "*broke down completely – was sick at the stomach and almost had to be carried into the wash-room*"[62] and "*threw up –on the floor.*[63]" For two months, Laura pretended to go to school each morning, while she was actually walking in parks and going to museums instead, out of fear that her mother would find out and be disappointed in her, but also because she preferred to live a lie than to face the other students at the business school. Moreover, she seems reluctant to go and buy butter at the grocery store, even more so if she has to make some special request:

> AMANDA: Laura, are you going to do what I asked you to do, or do I have to get dressed and go myself?
>
> LAURA: Going, going – soon as I get on my coat! [She pulls on a shapeless felt hat with nervous, jerky movement, pleadingly glancing at TOM […]] Butter and what else?
>
> AMANDA […]: Just butter. Tell them to charge it.
>
> LAURA: Mother, they make such faces when I do that.
>
> AMANDA: Sticks and stones may break our bones, but the expression on Mr. Garfinkel's face won't harm us! […] (*TGM*, Sc. 4: 256.)

It seems as though Laura were afraid of any type of social interaction, which was certainly triggered by her crippled leg. Being self-conscious about her physical ailment, Laura most

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[61] American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*. American Psychiatric Association. Arlington VA, 2013, Limited Online Preview: https://books.google.fr/books?id=–JivBAAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&hl=fr&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false (Consulted on May 9th 2016).
[62] *TGM*, Sc. 2: 243.
[63] Ibid: 244.

likely developed a form of inferiority complex, because of which she withdrew from social interactions – thus creating an even greater gap between herself and the outside world.

Furthermore, Laura's seclusion strains her relationship with her mother, since she does not live up to the life Amanda thought out for her. As a mother who wishes the best for her child, Amanda either wants her daughter to have a successful career or marry well. In the first scene of the play, the family is at dinner and discusses the subject of potential suitors for Laura, which Amanda calls "gentleman callers". When Laura tells her "*I'm not expecting any gentleman callers,"*[64] Amanda is dumbstruck. She compares Laura's situation to her own, to when she was a young lady who received seventeen young men who hoped to become her husband. Seeing that her daughter is not as successful is very difficult to accept for Amanda, who declares: "*Not one gentleman caller? It can't be true! There must be a flood, there must have been a tornado!*"[65] To this, Laura responds: "*It isn't a flood, it's not a tornado, Mother. I'm just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain […] Mother's afraid I'm going to be an old maid*." What is striking here is that Laura does not even seem to be affected by the situation since she expresses her mother's concerns as opposed to her own. The idea of ending up alone never seems to sadden Laura, her strongest reaction being sadness to see her mother disappointed.

Laura also seems to withdraw voluntarily from social interactions, even when she is forced to. When her mother took her to the Young People's League in order to make friends, Amanda says "*she spoke to nobody, nobody spoke to her. Now all she does is fool with those pieces of glass and play those worn-out records. What kind of a life is that for a girl to lead?"*[66] This is why Amanda convinces Tom to bring one of his co-workers to dinner, as to find a suitor for Laura.

When Jim comes to the Wingfield residence, in Scene 6, Laura realizes that he is the boy she had feelings for when she was still in high school, the only boy for whom she has ever had feelings. First she refuses to answer the door, and when her mother insists on her doing so, after which she immediately runs to hide in another room. It is not until she is forced to come to the dinner table by Amanda that she enters the dining room but she soon

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[64] *TGM*, Sc. 1: 237.
[65] Ibid: 239.
[66] *TGM*, Sc. 4: 262.

collapses onto a chair. When the power runs out, Jim and Laura are left alone, which turns the situation Laura dreaded so much into reality. Jim, however, manages to take Laura out of her shell and encourages her to speak by telling her that "*being shy is something you have to work out of kind of gradually*."[67] He gradually makes her put things into perspective by showing her that everyone can be self-conscious, everyone has problems, and that she does not need to set herself aside from the others because of this. He even takes interest in her glass ornaments and she transcends her shyness by letting him hold her most precious one (*"Go on, I trust you with him"*[68]), the unicorn. He unfortunately drops it, which breaks its horn. Surprisingly, Laura does not break down, she considers it as a "*blessing in disguise*"[69] since by this awkwardness of his, the unicorn is now rid of what made it different. This perhaps may symbolize Laura's decision to stop setting herself aside, and actually be a part of the real world. This is encouraged by Jim telling her that she is pretty and kissing her, a completely unexpected move, which could be Laura's salvation. Her hopes, however, are completely destroyed when Jim tells her: "*I've – got strings on me,*"[70] which means that he is already dating another girl and can therefore not be with Laura. The character of Jim might be seen as Laura's shepherd, who is the one breaking her shell. Yet, this process does not seem to be completed.

Though we do not know what happens to Laura after that night, it seems that her encounter with him changed her. But is it enough? Most likely not. In Tom's closing speech, as he says "*Oh Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!*"[71] we understand that the most faithful man in Laura's life ends up being her brother.

Laura's incredible shyness and fear of the outside world are major disadvantages in her life, and completely cut her out from the real world and send her into the utopian world of her glass menagerie:

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[67] *TGM*, Sc. 7: 295.
[68] *TGM*, Sc. 7: 300.
[69] Ibid: 303.
[70] Ibid: 306.
[71] *TGM*, Sc. 7: 313.

> The most pathetic illusory world, of course, is that of Laura. Slightly crippled in one of her legs and suffering from an inferiority complex, she withdraws into her shell. She creates a small artificial wall o[f] her own in her collection of glass figurines of animals. She has completely identified herself with these translucent and fragile entities. The glass menagerie is a beautiful world of illusion that cannot stand the impact of the outer world.[72]

She is so attached to her glass animals that they have taken the place of human beings (as shown for instance by her use of "him" instead of "it" to refer to her model unicorn). Her social interactions are restricted to this tiny immobile world where she is not judged by those who surround her, where she chooses to interact with others. Her extreme attachment to these glass figures as well as her detachment from reality could almost suggest a form of autism.

Here is a detailed description of her collection:

> The charm of the room was produced by my sister's collection of glass. She loved colored glass and had covered the walls with shelves of little glass articles, all of them light and delicate in color. These she washed and polished with endless care. […] I have no idea how many articles there were of this delicate glass. There must have been hundreds of them. But Laura could tell you exactly. She loved each one.[73]

It almost seems as though the glass figures were her children, with Laura proudly displaying them in her room for every visitor to see, like a parent would boast the beauty of their offspring. This, of course is a great source of frustration for Amanda, who wants her daughter to step out of her seclusion. In Scene 2, she expresses her true feelings to her daughter:

> So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? (*TGM*, Sc. 2: 245.)

Laura is very ill-at-ease with this situation since she is torn between her true nature and her fear of disappointing her mother. The dynamic between Laura and Amanda is almost one of submission and domination, where Laura, who knows what her mother has been through with her father's departure, only wants her mother's happiness and is willing to do anything to make her happy. This leads us to discuss a less evident disorder when considering the character of Laura – the Separation Anxiety Disorder. This illness is a:

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[72] DANIEL, Jemima. "The World of Illusion in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*", *International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology* Vol. 2, Issue 11, (November 2013): 2.

[73] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. "Portrait of a Girl in Glass". *Collected Stories* (1985). New York: New Directions Books, p. 112.

> [d]evelopmentally inappropriate and excessive fear or anxiety concerning separation from those to whom the individual is attached" and is characterized by "recurrent excessive distress when anticipating or experiencing separation from home or from major attachment figures; […] persistent reluctance or refusal to go out, away from home, to school, to work or elsewhere because of fear of separation[74]

Again, in Scene 2 of the play, Laura justifies her actions by telling her mother that "*when [she, Amanda is] disappointed, [she] get[s] that awful suffering look on [her] face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum*"[75] and that she (Laura) "*couldn't face it.*" This fear of her mother being disappointed most likely sparks from a fear of being abandoned by her. Laura and Tom's father, whom we never see in the play, is often referred to by Amanda and Tom, but only in negative terms, since he abandoned the family many years before. As Tom states during an argument with his mother: "*If self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is – GONE!*"[76] Since the two children grew up without their father, Amanda has become their sole parent and their only figure of authority. This may be why Laura never engages into an argument with her mother – because losing her or living without her would be unbearable.

We have now brought about the main features that characterize Catharine, Blanche and Laura. All three women are different and have different reactions to their own state and their environment. While Catharine fights to be part of a world which refuses to accept her, Laura voluntarily excludes herself because she is too frightened and automatically labels herself as different. Blanche, like Laura, strives to build herself a fantasy world in order to take refuge from the realities of her life, but also wishes to forget her past life in Laurel and start anew in New Orleans. This, unfortunately, will not happen and she will slowly but surely fall back into the abyss of the life she has lived. All three women have suffered a traumatic experience, be it witnessing the death of a loved one, being the cause of a loved one's death, or facing the abandonment of a loved one, and they are not able to transcend their own insecurities to live a "normal" life. All of these situations, combined with the environment or pending threats (psychosurgery, involuntary psychiatric hold, a life of

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[74] American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*. American Psychiatric Association. Arlington VA, 2013, Limited Online Preview: https://books.google.fr/books?id=–JivBAAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&hl=fr&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false (Consulted on May 9th 2016).
[75] *TGM*, Sc. 2: 245.
[76] *TGM*, Sc. 3: 252.

solitude) have triggered or accentuated the mental ailment in them. Let us now study the factors which lead up to these women's "breakdown".

Part II: Reaching the Breaking Point

While mental illness is generally a biological predisposition, some individuals are more prone to depression and emotional distress than others. This is generally the case for people who are very sensitive by nature, or who faced a difficult childhood. Whichever the case may be, external factors play a critical role in the process of mental disturbance and further on mental breakdown – they are triggers.

It is through negative stimuli that the individual is consciously or subconsciously reminded of past traumatic experiences or put into a mentally-destabilizing position. This is when defense mechanisms set in so as for the individual to protect himself/herself, but when the former are not sufficient, the effects on the mind can be catastrophic, as it is primarily the case for Blanche DuBois, Catharine Holly and Laura Wingfield.

We can wonder what these contributing factors are, how intrusive and traumatizing they are, and how they are brought about into the characters' lives. The two main triggers I shall look into will be sexuality as linked with death, fear and family, as well as the image of men conveyed by the play, principally through the images of the father, the gentleman and finally the dichotomy between the image of the savior and that of the punisher.

1. Sexual Innuendos

Sexuality is a predominant theme in Tennessee Williams' theater, be it explicit or suggested in a more subtle manner. We all know of the struggle between Maggie the "Cat" and her husband Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* as brilliantly portrayed by Dame Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman in the 1958 film adaptation. Sexuality also plays a strong role in the interpersonal relationships involving Blanche, Laura and Catharine. Each of these women apprehends the matter in a different fashion, yet for all three, sex is associated with negative connotations, namely death, fear and family.

a) Death

When referring to the notion of sexuality linked with death, the Freudian dichotomy between "Eros" and "Thanatos" comes to mind. This symbolizes the struggle between the "life impulse" – associated with sexuality, the act of creating life – and the "death drive". A natural opposition between the struggle to live and a self-destructive force arises. This opposition is ever so present in Williams' theater, with characters wasting away but who possess an unrelenting will to live.

The first of the three women that comes to mind in relationship with the theme is Catharine. Let us remember that her cousin, Sebastian, was killed and eaten by cannibals right in front of her eyes whilst they were in Europe. Though his mother, Mrs. Venable, refuses to believe that her son would voluntarily put himself in such situation, he was the one who forced Catharine to join him on this trip, through which he was seeking sexual satisfaction for his homosexual tendencies. As we will discuss later on, homosexuality is a strong topic for Tennessee Williams, since he struggled all his life with his natural attraction towards men. When under the influence of the truth serum injected by Dr. Cuckrowicz, Catharine gives a detailed account of what exactly happened in Cabeza De Lobo. We find out that Sebastian used Catharine as bait in order to attract men, by making her wear a white swimsuit:

> CATHARINE: […] It was a one-piece suit made of white lisle, the water made it transparent! […] – I didn't want to swim in it, but he'd grab my hand and drag me into the water, all the way in, and I'd come out looking naked!
>
> DOCTOR: Why did he do that? Did you understand why?
>
> CATHARINE: Yes! To attract! – Attention. […] Don't you understand? I was PROCURING for him! (*SLS*, Sc.4: 152.)

By making Catharine wear provocative clothing, right next to a public beach, Sebastian knew that people would be looking, that men would come see her. This is how he would make indirect contact with him. In Cabeza de Lobo however, his plan did not go as he would have thought. Being used to country clubs and fancy restaurants, Sebastian did not know what awaited him when deciding to "hunt" for commoners, i.e. people who were among the general public. At one point, during a dinner on the beach, he told her "*I think we ought to go north […] I think we've done Cabeza de Lobo, I think we've done it, don't you?*"[77] which means that he was now bored with the place, he had made the encounters he wanted to make and wished to leave. Yet, as we will see with Blanche, the notions of fate and retribution and the impossibility of escaping them in Williams' theater, will not spare Sebastian. In this regard, we can notice many similarities between Sebastian and Blanche, almost as if they were each other's alter egos. It seems that Sebastian is not the only one being punished for his sins. Catharine, who was his helper, seems to be punished also in her own right, by being made thereafter to live with the image of her cousin being torn apart by savages, but also with the frustration of not being believed by anyone, and having her aunt crusading for her to be lobotomized so as to be rid of her.

Blanche's own experience with death is very relevant as well – her husband committed suicide by shooting himself at a dance party. A few hours before this, she had discovered his homosexuality by walking in on him with another man ("*Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming in suddenly into a room that I thought was empty – which wasn't empty, but had two people in it…*"[78]). At first she stayed silent, but showed nothing but disgust towards him when they got a chance to be alone together. Blanche describes the scene to Mitch in Scene 6 of the play:

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[77] Ibid: 153.
[78] *ASND*, Sc. 6: 183.

> […] Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later – a shot! […] Then I heard voices say – Allan! Allan! The Grey boy! He'd stuck a revolver into his mouth, and fired – so that the back of his head had been – blown away! […] It was because – on the dance-floor – unable to stop myself – I'd suddenly said – 'I know! I know! You disgust me…' (*ASND*, Sc.6: 183 – 184.)

It is striking that Blanche would discuss this so openly and provide such vivid details. This can be interpreted in several ways. Either Blanche can no longer live with the guilt that has been haunting her for so many years, and she feels the need to confess her sin in order to seek redemption, or it is a strategy which she puts in place in order to trigger a sense of pity on Mitch's behalf, therefore drawing him into her web of lies to seduce him. She may even have told the story to other men in the past in order to get what she wanted from them. However, given Blanche's apparent attachment to Mitch ("*I want his respect*"[79]), and her desire to start anew after what happened in Laurel, it is likely that she is trying to shed her praying mantis image, and therefore trying to build a real relationship with him. As we know though, this will not happen because Stanley ends up sabotaging any chance of a potential relationship by revealing Blanche's past to Mitch. As Arthur Ganz states in his article for *The American Scholar*,

> The stage action of *A Streetcar Named Desire* […] consists almost entirely of the punishment that its heroine, Blanche DuBois, endures as atonement for her act of rejection, her sin in terms of Williams' morality. [80]

As we discover progressively through the play, Blanche has spent her entire life seducing men, engaging in less than respectable sexual acts, and perhaps using sexuality as a way to cope for what happened during her youth. While she was able to maintain a clean slate for the majority of her life, her actions finally caught up with her, leading her to be kicked out of the school she was teaching in and of the hotel she was staying in, but also to be banished from the town she was living in by the mayor himself. She confesses her past to Stella when the latter confronts her with what Stanley has told her:

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[79] Blanche to Stella. *ASND*, Sc. 5. 171.
[80] GANZ, Arthur. "The Desperate Morality of the Plays of Tennessee Williams. *The American Scholar* Vol. 31, No.2 (Spring 1962): 278 – 294 (Consulted on JSTOR May 10th 2016): 284.

> I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft – soft people have to go to court the favour of hard ones, Stella. Have got to be seductive […] just in order to pay for – one night's shelter! […] People don't see you – men don't – don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection. (*ASND*, Sc. 5: 169.)

By saying this, it almost seems that Blanche considers sexuality as a means of survival, not only to have a roof to sleep under but to obtain "protection". There may be many explanations as to what she means by this term. It could be the basic sense, which is that she needs to eat and a place to sleep, and having intercourse with a man, be it for money or for companionship, would provide this – thus protecting her from a life of poverty. The term could also take a psychological dimension – having the attention of a man would take her own attention off her guilt and off the sad life she has been living. Feeling important for a man, even if it is only for a few minutes, would enable her to break free from her sword of Damocles. Yet, what seems to be an outlet for Blanche becomes her downfall. As Ganz puts it:

> […] However compassionately Blanche is viewed, she remains a woman who, in effect, has killed her husband by her cruelty, and her attempts to turn away from death to its opposite – "the opposite is desire", as Blanche herself says – are fruitless. (p. 286)

Sexuality is what caused her husband's death, but it is also what causes her psychiatric "death" – not only has the guilt ravaged her soul, Stanley, in an act which may be seen as divine retribution, puts her into a situation which makes her lose contact with reality. He forces himself onto her, giving her a dose of her own medicine in a sense, and sends her into a psychological abyss from which it seems that she will never come out.

b) Fear

When thinking of sexuality as linked with fear, it is the character of Laura Wingfield who first comes to mind.

A trait which all three women share is the fear of rejection, whether it has actually occurred or is simply theoretical. Blanche wants Mitch – and men in general – to accept her, to love her and to provide for her, and is in constant fear that her looks will no longer suffice. Catharine cannot stand to be set aside by her family because she is telling the truth, which does not satisfy their expectations. Violet refuses to accept it because it seems to be defamatory towards the memory of her son. Ms. Holly and George also seem to distance

themselves from Catharine because her story could potentially cause them to be left out of Sebastian's will. Laura, on the other hand, is so fearful of others because of the image that she has of herself, that she prefers to barricade herself in her fictitious world of glass animals, where she knows she will be accepted, unlike in the real world. Accepting a man into her life seems impossible throughout most of the play, until she meets Jim. The young man seems to enable Laura to open up more than anyone before, but her hopes are crushed when she finds out he is already involved in a serious relationship. As Ganz states in his article:

> […] the central character, a woman who has retired from life, lives in a closed world that excludes sexuality, "the primal life urge". Into this world comes a man […] the sexual force designed to release the woman from her bondage. […] The figure of Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* […] is described by Williams as having "the delicate, almost transparent quality of glass". […] Laura's gentleman caller gives her only a momentary glimpse of normal life before she drifts back into the fantasy world of glass animals. In Williams' moral system the rejection of life is the greatest crime, and those guilty of it are visited by the kind of punishment that falls upon Blanche DuBois in *Streetcar* and Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. Laura, however, is innocent; she does not reject but rather is rejected, not because of her limp […] but because she is the sensitive, misunderstood exile […] one of the fugitive kind, who are too fragile to live in a malignant world. (p. 281 – 282)

Laura is both a victim of the world she lives in and guilty of maintaining herself in the restricted environment and childish world in which she lives. This is what Jim tells her when he says "*[p]eople are not so dreadful when you know them. That's what you have to remember! And everybody has problems, not just you, but practically everybody has got some problems.*"[81] Throughout their conversation, Laura seems to open up and even starts trusting him by introducing him to her glass animals, letting him hold her most treasured piece, a unicorn. She even lets him convince her to dance with him, tell her she is pretty, and even kiss her, thus transcending her own physical disability as well as her fears. This is the only moment in the play, and perhaps in her life, that Laura is put into a context of potential sexual tension, when a man expresses interest in her. This all comes to a brutal end when Jim tells her that he is not available. The stage directions, which we will study later on provide a clear indication of Laura's emotions at that moment: "*The holy candles in the altar of Laura's face have been snuffed out. There is a look of almost infinite desolation*."[82] Her worst nightmare has now come true – the only moment she has enabled herself to distance

[81] *TGM*, Sc. 7: 295
[82] Ibid: 307.

herself from her shyness becomes one of incredible disappointment, which could lead her to sink even deeper into her imaginary world.

Blanche seems to go through the same situation with Mitch. When he does not show up at her birthday party, she seems completely oblivious of the truth – that Stanley has told him every gruesome detail of her less-than-stellar reputation in Laurel –, and she starts wondering why he has suddenly decided to disappear from her life. In Scene 9 of the play, the two meet again, alone in the apartment, and the discussion turns into a full-fledged confrontation. While Mitch seems defensive at first he becomes very aggressive when he rips the paper lantern off the light in order to "*take a look at [her] good and plain.*"[83] While she tries to maintain the illusion of her clean and proper image, she then explodes:

> […] I stayed at a hotel called The Tarantula Arms! […] Yes, a big spider! That's where I brought my victims. […] Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed to fill my empty heart with. […] I thanked God for you because you seemed to be gentle – a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in! The poor man's Paradise – is a little peace… But I guess I was asking, hoping – too much! (*ASND*, Sc. 9: 205.)

Blanche finally decides to expose her past, in what could be seen as a final attempt to hold on to the illusion that her life could become better, and that Mitch could be a part of that. Her hopes come to a brutal end when he declares: "*You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother,*"[84] which sets her off into hysterical outrage. Yet, through the defense mechanisms that she has been using to cope for years, Blanche distorts the truth both in her mind and when speaking to others. When she discusses the encounter with Stanley, she tells him: "*He returned with a box of roses to beg me forgiveness! He implored my forgiveness. But some things are not forgivable. Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable.*"[85] This, of course, is a far shot from the truth, since Mitch did not beg Blanche for forgiveness, which Stanley does not fail to point out. It is only an illusion she has created within her mind to avoid having to deal with the feeling of rejection. This is the first trigger of Blanche's mental breakdown, which will be concluded by her final confrontation with Stanley, her brother-in-law.

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[83] *ASND*, Sc. 9: 203.
[84] Ibid: 207.
[85] Ibid, Sc. 10: 212.

c) Family

The Family plays a paramount role in Catharine's, Blanche's and Stella's emotional disturbance, particularly in what regards sexuality. They are either victims of pressure from family members, or collateral victims from the latter's actions, which echoes the theme of the Southern-Gothic genre, with eerie family situations.

Catharine is a clear example of the latter. She finds herself compelled to cope with the consequences of Sebastian's actions. In a sense, it almost seems as if he had taken the "easy way out" by immediately dying, and not having to be held accountable for his actions, though his death was gruesome and absolutely horrifying. Catharine is the one who has to live with the aftermath, when in fact she is solely a victim of the situation, simply because she is an attractive and sensual woman. Sebastian took advantage of the fact that she was lost in her life, that she had been humiliated by a man (who took advantage of the fact that she was drunk to drive her home and have a sexual relationship with her, while he was in fact married) to take her abroad, buy her countless amounts of clothes and bring her to fancy hotels. It almost seems that Sebastian was bribing her. Yet, Catharine's persecutor is not her cousin, it is her aunt, Violet Venable. While it seems that Violet solely wants to reestablish Sebastian's reputation, which has supposedly been slandered by her niece, the perspective of a lobotomy is in fact a revenge that Violet seems to orchestrate out of jealousy for Catharine. She believes that Catharine was in love with Sebastian and took advantage of an aneurysm that Violet suffered from to take her son away from her. The relationship between Violet and Sebastian seems quite controversial, and clearly Oedipal – in an inverted way since it seems that Violet was the one to feel more than motherly feelings towards her son, referring to herself and him as a "*famous couple*":

> People didn't speak of Sebastian and his mother or Mrs. Venable and her son, they said 'Sebastian and Violet', 'Violet and Sebastian are staying at the Lido, they're at the Ritz in Madrid. Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian have taken a house at Biarritz for the season' and every appearance, every time [they] appeared, attention was centered on [them]! Everyone else! Eclipsed! (*SLS*, Sc. 1: 123.)

Violet clearly seems to have been attracted to her son beyond her role of a mother, and even perhaps to have felt lust for him and to have been willing to do whatever it took to stay close to him. In her confession to Dr. Cuckrowicz, Catharine informs him of Violet's actions with Sebastian, pointing out that he was also using her to attract potential preys:

> She [Violet] used to do it, too. […] not consciously! She didn't know that she was procuring for him […] Sebastian was shy with people. She wasn't. Neither was I. We both did the same thing for him, made contacts for him, but she did it in nice places and in decent ways and I had to do it the way I just told you! (*SLS*, Sc. 4: 152.)

Sebastian thus appears as a mastermind and an expert at manipulation, using the feelings his mother had for him to obliviously attract sexual preys, as he did with Catharine. The difference between the two women was that Catharine was aware of what he was doing while Violet believed her son to be "chaste". She had absolutely no idea of his true sexual orientation, or perhaps she did, but refused to believe it, thus explaining why she would accuse Catharine of having feelings for him and trying to pervert him, when in fact he was the deeply perverted one, perhaps above all because of Violet's own abusive love of him.

The idea of predation seems like a key notion when considering the relationship between Catharine and Sebastian, as it does when observing that of Blanche and Stanley. While Sebastian does not prey on Catharine, it seems clear that Stanley does on Blanche. He does not demonstrate any attraction towards her throughout, but the never-ending tension and power struggle between the two seems to incidentally spark an underlying sexual tension between them, which leads up to Scene 10 of the play, when Stanley confronts Blanche head on without leaving her a chance to escape, leading up to her rape (from what we can deduce). Stanley is therefore the ultimate trigger in Blanche's demise as Ganz suggests, while relating it with the very cause of her guilt:

> Although Kowalski's primary function, to destroy Blanche, is clear, there are certain ambiguities evoked by his role. By becoming Blanche's destroyer, Kowalski also becomes the avenger of her homosexual husband (p. 284)

This is true in the sense that by destroying Blanche both mentally and physically, Stanley is serving justice and "reestablishing" natural order. In an ominous statement, she tells him in Scene 2: "*I hurt him in the way you would like to hurt me, but you can't! I'm not young and vulnerable anymore.*"[86] It seems that Blanche is not even aware of how vulnerable she really is. Yet, by punishing her, he becomes no better than her and might from then on to live with the guilt of his actions. Indeed, in keeping with the idea of family, it also seems that Blanche is the symbolic victim of retribution as regards the sins of her forefathers. As she says herself when evoking the loss of Belle Rêve:

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[86] *ASND*, Sc. 2: 139.

> Our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications – to put it plainly! (*ASND*, Sc. 2: 139.)

Blanche evokes the degeneracy in the family line, the debauchery in which her forefathers engaged, and because of which she lost her house, symbol of the happier times in her life. She is thus only following in their footsteps through her own questionable behavior, destroying her own happiness, as they did before her.

Laura's case is different from Catharine and Blanche since she has never experienced sexuality, at least this is what can be deduced from her attitude but also from the fact that the only boy she has admitted to liking, Jim, only kissed her out of some kind of brotherly love. It was not a passionate kiss that was given out of feelings for her, just something to boost her self-confidence. The issue rather seems to be her mother, who smothers her with all the hope she has fostered for her. This can already been noted in the first scene of the play, when Amanda compares her daughter's absence of gentleman callers with her own large number of suitors when she was young. Laura does not seem to be affected by this, and seems more concerned about the sadness her remaining on her own would cause her mother, while Amanda is trying to re-live her life by proxy, trying to make her daughter avoid making the same mistakes as her though, notably like marrying Laura's father, which is all the more oppressive as her phantasm of another life would deny Laura's very existence.

Her insistence and obsession clearly prove to be counterproductive, since it prevents her from understanding that something is wrong with Laura as is shown in her conversation with Tom in Scene 5:

> TOM: Mother, you mustn't expect too much from Laura.
>
> AMANDA: What do you mean?
>
> […]
>
> TOM: Laura is very different from other girls.
>
> AMANDA: I think the difference is all to her advantage.
>
> TOM: Not quite all – in the eyes of others – strangers – she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house. (*TGM*, Sc. 5: 270.)

By refusing to acknowledge Laura's difference, Amanda unwillingly traps her in her bubble – that is to say that by forcing her to act "normally", rather than trying to bring

her out of her shell progressively, Amanda is anything but helpful towards Laura. In addition to this, she almost forces her son to bring a young man from work to meet his sister, and when he comes it almost seems as if Amanda were the one to meet a suitor and not Laura. She is wearing the dress "*in which [she] led the cotillion, won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, wore one spring to the Governor's ball in Jackson. […] [She] wore it on Sundays for [her] gentlemen callers*"[87] although she does stuff tissues into Laura's bra in order to make the latter's breasts appear bigger, calling them "*gay deceivers,"*[88] which is at odds with Laura's true nature.

It is clear that Amanda wants Laura to live her life according to what she thinks is best, this is why she enrolled her in a business college in which Laura felt completely ill at ease, why she desperately wants to find a suitor for her, when Laura is terrified of relationships. Though Amanda has her daughter's best intentions at heart, it most likely seems that because of her oppressive attitude and desire of control over the latter's life, Laura will never leave the family home, her mother making the world outside seem to her even more of a threat. A perfect example of this is that the only moment when Laura opens up and dares to let herself go is when her mother is not there, being in another room with Tom trying to get the power back up. As soon as the lights come back on, Amanda is heard through the door and this is when Jim tells Laura that he is already taken.

We have now seen the determining role of sexuality for these three women, whether they are responsible for their own demise – such as Blanche who is paying for her own past wrongdoings, as well, however, as those of her forefathers – or pay the consequences of someone else's actions – which is the case of Catharine with Sebastian's manipulation of her as of everyone else around him –, or they are the victims of someone's excessive good intentions – which is the case of Laura with her mother Amanda. Moreover, all three women are overcome with fear, be it the fear of themselves, of their own flaws, or of others, mainly the fear of rejection. The mixture of all these elements constitute bits and pieces of the triggers setting off their final breakdown.

[87] *TGM*, Sc. 6: 276.
[88] Ibid: 275.

2. The Ambivalence of Male Characters

Though men are not the protagonists in these dramatic situations (apart from Tom, since *TGM* presents us with his recollection of the events), they play a very important role in the lives of these three women. They are either physically present on the stage (Stanley, Mitch, or Jim) or evoked (Sebastian, Allan or Mr. Wingfield), but have all touched these heroines in a mostly negative way. We shall now see the reason for this.

a) An Absent Father Figure

The father figure is clearly absent in *ASND, TGM* and *SLS*, which seems to be a reflection of Williams' own story. His father, an itinerant salesman, was often absent and ended up abandoning the entire family, thus forcing Edwina to raise her three children by herself. The primary character who seems to be a direct portrayal of Cornelius Williams is Mr. Wingfield. There is nothing left of this man except for a portrait, which is "*a grinning photograph.*"[89] The main character who refers to him is Amanda, who is obviously bitter about having married him. In the first scene of the play, in which she recalls her gallant past and all the suitors she had, she ends her speech by saying "*And I could've been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But – I picked your father!*"[90] In Scene 2, she reprimands Laura for quitting school without telling her, saying,

> When people have some slight disadvantage like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it – develop charm – and vivacity – and – charm! That's all you have to do! [She turns again to the photograph.] One thing your father had plenty of – was charm! (*TGM*, Sc. 2: 247.)

It seems as though there is a conflict, Amanda refers to Mr. Wingfield, as an example which is not to be followed, except here in terms of his charm, suggesting perhaps how he tricked her into marrying him. Besides, by constantly alluding to her bitter memories, Amanda seems to put an excessive amount of pressure on her children, but also to give them a very flawed image of the adult male. This is particularly telling in the relationship between Amanda and Tom, when time after time she compares him to his father, telling him that he is going to abandon them just as Mr. Wingfield did. Of course, as time goes by, Tom is fed up with this and the final straw is reached when Amanda lashes out at him for having brought

[89] *TGM*, Sc. 4: 235.
[90] *TGM*, Sc. 1: 239.

an engaged man to meet his sister. Tom then leaves and never comes back to the apartment. Amanda's attitude and her words instill a very negative image of men in her children's minds. For Tom, Mr. Wingfield seems to be the person that he does not wish to become, whom his mother does not wish for him to become, yet involuntarily pushes him to become by basically driving him out of their home.

For Laura, he is the image of the man that she is not to marry. Given what her mother tells her, and how much she over protects her, it is easy to understand why Laura has such little self–-confidence and why her image of others, particularly men, is so flawed. Moreover, the absence of a father, who was a drunk before his departure, must have had a severe impact on their education, since Amanda acted as a double parent. Children oftentimes refer to the images of the "good cop" and the "bad cop" when in contact with their parents. One of them reprimands, while the other one is generally more comprehensive. These roles can shift depending on the situation, but if one of the parents is lacking, it is even more difficult for the children to have a balanced childhood. It is also quite possible that Amanda and Mr. Wingfield mainly had arguments when he was still with his family, which most likely left a very negative imprint on the children, particularly on the very sensitive Laura. This could be an explanation as to why Laura is so detached from the outside world, why she prefers to shut out emotions – this way she does not have to place her hopes on a man who will most likely deceive and disappoint her. How could it even be possible for her to have a positive outlook on the male gender with an absent father, a brother who leaves in his turn, and a suitor who gives her hope but shatters it instantaneously?

In keeping with this, Blanche and Catharine also have to live with the absence of their father, but for very different reasons. Blanche's father died, and this was quite the traumatic experience for her, as she tells Stella in the first scene of *ASND*:

> I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! […] You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths – not always. (*ASND*, Sc. 1: 127.)

To Blanche, the death of her family members, including that of her father, together with that of her mother, was excruciating, since it also meant that her innocence was gone. Innocence is, as meant here in the sense that her carefree youth was then, gone, she is the one who had to take care of her parents when and before they died and to take over Belle Reve, in terms of maintenance and upkeep but also in terms of legal matters. With the

protective figures of the mother and father being gone, Blanche was sucked even more violently into the world of responsibility, which became even more difficult and somber with the loss of Belle Reve.

As regards Catharine, we know nothing about her father, but we may presume that he is in fact either dead or gone, since he is never referred to, and we can imagine that he would be present if ever he were still part of Catharine's life. This clearly does not seem to be the case, and could potentially be seen as a contributing factor to the downward spiral in which Catharine has embarked, since, like Blanche, she came to be considered as a ruined woman in the upper-class circles after what happened with a married man. Violet confirms this when she says:

> Nobody liked her when I brought her out. Oh, she had some kind of – notoriety! […]And halfway through the season, she was dropped off the party lists, yes, dropped off the lists in spite of my position. Why? Because she'd lost her head over a young married man, made a scandalous scene at a Mardi Gras ball, in the middle of the ballroom. Then everybody dropped her like a hot rock. […] (*SLS*, Sc.4: 139 – 140.)

The idea of her possibly seeking to retrieve some lost father figure in her falling for a married man may seem a bit far-fetched, because it is mainly based on conjectures, yet it could be an interesting theme to consider in a potential future study.

b) The "Gentleman Caller"

The image of the "gentleman caller" is associated with that of the Southern Belle, as the typical figure of one courting belles in order to marry well. Given their past, this figure is an important part of Blanche's, and Amanda's, and also Violet's lives. It a figure associated with their faded youth, of a time when they were young, and beautiful and had the world in the palm of their hands. He also represents the idea of another era, one that was much more peaceful for the rich, and when women could be carefree because their husbands took care of matters. Moreover, this man is also one who marries the chaste young girl and transforms her into a woman, both physically and mentally.

In the case of Blanche, it seems as though Allan, her former husband, was a gentleman caller, with whom she fell deeply in love. Since homosexuality was not accepted in those days, it is more than likely that Allan played the role of the heterosexual male and used Blanche as a foil in order to maintain the illusion that he was a proper man. As long as

Blanche was unaware of this, he could be married to her and give in to his homosexual impulses on the side. This world of illusion was one of perfection for her since her oblivion made her madly in love with the boy. As Emmeline Gros states:

> In this world deprived of father– figures and of God, (i.e. the ultimate model of ideal masculinity), the gentleman caller himself has disappeared, being replaced by this something that possesses all the looks attached to the southern ideal of masculinity, but that uses them to better deceive the people (women in particular) who do not look beyond appearances. (p. 320)

This idea is confirmed by the characters of Mitch and Jim, who clearly seem to lack the charm and manners of the old southern ideal. The former even says so himself when he meets Blanche: "*I guess we strike you as being a pretty rough bunch*,"[91] since he is one of Stanley's working-class friends. Stella seems to have strayed from her upbringing and all the values which Blanche stands for by choosing a man like Stanley, who is a Polish immigrant. This can perhaps be seen as her adapting to the modern lifestyle while her older sister stays trapped in her illusion of a world that no longer exists. Yet, when Mitch finds out about Blanche's reputation, he becomes spiteful and disgusted, a reaction which can be associated with that of Blanche when she walked in on Allan with another man. Thus, he is indeed at a far distance from the prim and proper image of the gentleman that Blanche has set inside of her mind.

Similarly, Jim is a young man who works at the factory with Tom, Laura's brother. Neither he nor Mitch come from a rich or noble background, but they represent the hard-working men of that generation, and are the only possible suitors for Blanche, whose reputation is ruined, and who thereby rushes to seduce the first remotely decent man she seems to meet, and for Laura, who has not had any other opportunity with a man (and will surely not in the future). Tom himself refuses to fit into the mold, he prefers writing poetry, drinking and going to the movies rather than trying to find the proper girl to marry.

The figure of the gentleman caller is therefore one of times past, which gave way to a new generation and a new lifestyle, which the women from the previous era, namely Blanche and Amanda, have a very difficult time adjusting to. While he is supposed to be the one to sweep the damsel off her feet, it is clearly not the case, and this is embodied by the somewhat egotistic character of Jim. While he apparently seems moved by Laura, he acts

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[91] *ASND*. Sc. 3: 150.

more like an elder brother or a father figure than a potential suitor. Even his actions seem to be ungentlemanly – he is engaged to a girl whom he never sees, he is dating another girl named Betty, with whom he seems madly in love, yet he kisses Laura. Though this kiss is deprived of any romantic ring, it still remains a minor sexual hint, which deceives Laura into thinking that he is available. Moreover, it seems that as soon as he thinks of Betty, Laura is completely obliterated from his mind. The stage directions such as "*[Laura sways slightly forward and grips the arm of the sofa. He fails to notice, now enrapt in his own comfortable being]*" and "*[Leaning stiffly forward, clutching the arm of the sofa, Laura struggles visibly with her storm. But Jim is oblivious, she is a long way off]*", both in pages 306 and 307 of *TGM*, indicate that he has turned to his own ideas and illusions, and that he and Laura are no longer in the same world, thus shutting her even more into her own.

c) The Savior vs. the Punisher

Men play a very important role in the lives of Catharine, Blanche and Laura, and are somewhat responsible for their downfall. While some may be trying to help them, like Mitch or Jim, and others bring them down, like Stanley or Sebastian, the reality of this dichotomy is not so Manichean though. While it seems clear that Stanley's aim is to destroy his sister– in– law and unconsciously avenge Allan – as we have seen previously – on the contrary Tom appears to have been doing everything he can to help Laura and defend her when Amanda gets carried away with her illusions.

Jim, Mitch and Sebastian seem to be in– between "good" and "evil". At first, we can notice that they are very supportive of these women. The scene between Jim and Laura (Scene 7) is very telling in this regard since he is the one taking her out of her shell:

> Has anyone ever told you that you were pretty? […] Well, you are! In a very different way from everyone else. And all the nicer because of the difference, too. […] I wish that you were my sister. I'd teach you to have some confidence in yourself. The different people are not like other people, but being different is nothing to be ashamed of. Because other people are not such wonderful people. […] They're common as – weeds, but – you – well, you're Blue Roses! (*TGM*, Sc. 7: 304.)

The message Jim conveys to Laura shows that he has very tender feelings for the girl and shows a fair amount of affection towards her. Here, he tells her to embrace her difference, that it is what makes her unique. The perspective of hearing this one day in her life, apart from her mother and brother telling her so seemed to be unhoped for, yet this is not a fantasy

situation which Laura has created inside her mind – it is reality. It is also important to point out the foreshadowing element in this speech, when he declares "*I wish you were my sister*," which brings forth, in a somewhat subtle fashion, Jim's true feelings for Laura. Rather than considering being in a romantic relationship with her, Jim establishes that he sees himself more as a mentor for her, as another elder brother who would watch over her while she comes out of her shell (which would clearly imply that Tom, by comparison, is not living up to his status). His involuntary breaking of the glass unicorn's horn also stands as symbolic of the barred sexuality between them.

In the same regard, Mitch first seems to be a very positive influence on Blanche. When they first meet, during the poker night in Scene 3 of the play, he seems very keen on getting to know Blanche, even flirting with her by declaring "*You may teach school but you're certainly not an old maid.*"[92] This of course has a direct impact on Blanche since she starts to consider him as a potential suitor and even feels the variation of emotions that come with it, including euphoria and anxiety. In Scene 5, she shares her feelings with Stella:

> I don't know why I screamed! […] Mitch – Mitch is coming at seven. I guess I am just feeling nervous about our relations […] He hasn't gotten a thing but a good– night kiss, that's all I have given him, Stella. I want his respect. […] I want to deceive him enough to make him – want me… […] Yes – I want Mitch… very badly! (*ASND*, Sc.5: 171.)

Mitch clearly seems to have a good influence on Blanche, since she feels like her younger self again: confident, seductive and charming. Though it seems that for her it is not so much the man as the idea of having a man that matters most to Blanche, Mitch is her escape from the sorry life she now lives. In Scene 6, after their date, which seems to have been a fiasco, Mitch confesses to Blanche: "*I like you exactly the way you are, because in all my – experience – I have never known anyone like you.*"[93] These words are sweet music to Blanche's ears – her ego is flattered, she knows that her plan is working. Though Mitch is not the type of man Blanche would have ever considered marrying in the past – he lacks refinement, he is not wealthy, and he still lives with his mother –, he appears opportunely at a time of her life when she is lost and needs guidance. Mitch seems to be her savior in the

[92] *ASND*, Sc. 3: 150.
[93] *ASND*, Sc.6: 177.

tumult that her life has become, the knight in shining armor coming to sweep her off her feet, in sharp contrast with the crude and ruthless brute embodied by Stanley.

Though these two gentlemen seem to have the best intentions, having a positive impact on Laura and Blanche who seem trapped within the sadness of their own existences, they become a trigger, however, of their respective mental breakdowns. This is in large part related with the notion of alterity as an external factor is the cause for the course of events to change. In the case of Jim and Laura, it is the mention of Betty, Jim's fiancée, which destroys the young girl's hopes. Not only does he crush Laura by mentioning Betty right after kissing her (the epitome of her romantic life, which is obliterated by this information), but he also seems to forget her presence wholeheartedly when speaking about his fiancée. Jim fails to notice the physical manifestations which Laura goes through as her hopes are shattered before her eyes. The expressionist metaphor of the glass unicorn is very telling – while Jim and Laura dance, he bumps into a table and the horn of Laura's favorite glass ornament, the unicorn, breaks off. Though this situation could potentially be tragic for Laura, she does not seem daunted and tells Jim: "*Now it is just like all the other horses.*"[94] While this could symbolically mean that, thanks to Jim, Laura has become like everyone else, that like the unicorn she has been relieved of what made her different (i.e. her low self-esteem), it could also be seen as Laura becoming no different from all the other women in Jim's life, becoming quite anonymous to him, which happens to be even more striking as soon as he mentions Betty. Try as she might, Laura will never be more than the sweet and innocent "Blue Roses" to Jim.

In addition to this, the notion of otherness also plays a very important part in the relationship between Mitch and Blanche. While Betty is Jim's source of detachment from Laura, Stanley is the one who gets into the way of the potential couple. By providing Mitch with slanderous details from Blanche's past, he sabotages any chance of them building a relationship. During their confrontation in Scene 9, a bitter Mitch declares:

> I don't mind you being older than what I thought. But all the rest of it – God! That pitch about your ideals being so old– fashioned and all the malarkey that you've dished out all summer. Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen anymore. But I was a fool enough to believe you was straight. (*ASND*, Sc.9: 204.)

[94] *TGM*, Sc. 7: 302.

The man clearly seems hurt, betrayed, and Blanche's lies have finally been exposed. She is cornered, without the possibility of creating a new situation which would turn to her advantage. Mitch has transitioned from the role of auxiliary to that of persecutor/punisher, though he is only a pawn in the power struggle between Blanche and Stanley.

As the glass unicorn for Laura, the paper lantern is very symbolic when analyzing Blanche and her relationship with Mitch. In Scene 3, Blanche asks Mitch to place the lantern onto the light bulb:

> BLANCHE: I bought this adorable little coloured paper lantern at a Chinese shop on Bourbon. Put it over the light bulb! Will you, please?
>
> MITCH: Be glad to.
>
> BLANCHE: I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can rude remarks or a vulgar action.[95]

The image of the paper lantern comes again during the "couple's" confrontation in Scene 9:

> MICTH: Let's turn the light on here.
>
> BLANCHE [fearfully]: Light? Which light? What for?
>
> MITCH: This one with the paper thing on it. [He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb. She utters a frightened gasp.]
>
> BLANCHE: What did you do that for?
>
> MITCH: So I can take a look at you good and plain. (*ASND*, Sc. 9: 203.)

The object appears as a very important symbol in the two's relationship: Mitch is the one who put it up when they first met, and he is the one to tear it off when they end their relationship, as a cycle had ended its run. Moreover, it also seems to represent the notion of illusion: because Blanche hates naked light (it accentuates her features and shows her aging), she needs to cover it in order to be more at ease, as if she were trying to hide from reality. She even says so herself: *"I don't want realism*"[96] when coming clean – which also sounds as a metatextual hint by Williams regarding his scripts. The lantern seems to be a veil which is placed over reality and enables Blanche to create a world of illusion, where she is in control. Mitch ripping off the lantern marks his refusal to continue embarking into this artificial world and his desire to see the real Blanche, both physically and mentally. As soon

[95] *ASND*, Sc. 3: 150.
[96] *ASND*, Sc. 9: 204.

as she is exposed by the naked bulb, the illusion is shattered and Blanche is finally forced to confess the truth, which results in her completely losing grip on reality.

Sebastian Venable's attitude towards Catharine also proves to be quite ambiguous, between that of benefactor and manipulator. As Violet Venable tells Dr. Cuckrowicz, Sebastian "*felt sorry for [Catharine]*"[97] and took her under his wing. At the time, she was absolutely lost and had nobody to turn to especially after the party at the fateful Duelling Oaks, where she was humiliated by the married man. This is supposedly why he offered to bring her to Europe with him. Catherine describes Sebastian's attitude in the beginnings with great detail in Scene 4:

> It began with his kindness and the six days at sea that took me so far away from the – Duelling Oaks that I forgot them, nearly. He was affectionate with me, so sweet and attentive to me, that some people took us for a honeymoon couple […] Then in Paris, he […] bought me so many clothes that I gave away my old ones to make room for my new ones in my new luggage to – travel. (*SLS*, Sc. 4: 148.)

Though Sebastian seems to have been the caring man who only wants Catharine to forget what happened to her – i.e. her humiliation with the married man – and making her contemplate a new way of life and leave her past behind, he might in fact have been slowly building her trust in him by buying her affection, in order for her to feel indebted and grateful. Indeed he may well have carefully elaborated his plan to use Catherine to make her "procure" for him. The illusion of the considerate cousin actually concealed his true personality, that of a pervasive narcissist. Catharine's shock, trauma and the aftermath which she faces only represent collateral damage compared with how he was finally caught up by his wrongdoings (much like Blanche in her own right).

[97] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 140.

Part III: Finding a Voice

Through their struggle to survive mentally and to find their place in a hostile world, Blanche, Catharine and Laura strive to find their true selves and be accepted as such. By this, they attempt to find their true voice, be it literal or symbolical. As we shall see, each of their paths evolve in different directions, which can sometimes be a radical change, as it seems to be the case for both Blanche and Catharine. Though Laura's journey does not seem as drastic as the former two, her trials and tribulations trigger an evolution, despite its relatively brief nature.

All three women express their feelings, their hopes, as well as their fears, through their voice. The latter is by definition one of the most paramount means of communication for human beings, and is one of the first features which can be noticed when a baby is born – he screams. When a child is angry, excited or frightened, he or she uses his or her voice to express it. The ability to speak is one of the first media which a child develops, and as opposed to animals, is a skill proper to humans. We have the capacity to communicate through speech, a very complex mechanism which associates just about anything to a word, and by saying this word, we will be understood by the person we are addressing. It is on this basis that therapies through speech, such as psychotherapy, psychoanalysis or hypnosis, developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, with Sigmund Freud serving as a precursor. Yet, speech does have its limits, starting with physical ones. People who are mute, have an impairment such as aphasia, or who can simply not speak because of overwhelming emotions, express themselves in different ways. As the saying goes: "actions speak louder than words". Our bodies, gestures, facial features, attitudes also provide an alternate form of speech which can convey emotions beyond words. For this reason, it becomes necessary to study these characteristics in Williams' plays to understand these women. To quote Femi Oyebode again:

> [I]n Tennessee Williams' hands, language can also be the vehicle for exteriorizing inner tension and conflict, for explaining and exploring the origin of anguish, and finally for establishing the hierarchy of moral worth in contrast to what might be superficially the case.[98]

As regards the symbolic nature of the voice, Catharine, Laura and Blanche can be seen as allegories for the struggle that was mental illness in the first half of the 20th century. Tennessee Williams provided a public platform in order to enable women, who had been belittled and silenced for so long, to finally be acknowledged. Though not every aspect of the characters' situation is relatable, particularly in Catharine's case, it is their reaction in the wake of the events they have faced which falls into the realm of realism. In addition to this, and given the highly autobiographical nature of the elements which structure the plays, we cannot omit to point out the playwright's voice, since he is the one who is speaking directly through them, and expressing his vision. Whether it is the theme of homosexuality, of lobotomy, of the broken family, of the decadent American South, the images conveyed come from a deep personal perspective.

[98] OYEBODE, Femi. "Tennessee Williams and the Theater of the Mind". *Madness at the theatre*, The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2012: 66.

1. Understanding the Characters Through the Text

Williams was very meticulous in structuring his plays and put a strong emphasis not only on the characters and situations, but also on the almost imperceptible details which surround them, be it the lighting, the music played or simply gestures. Reading a play by Tennessee Williams is an experience that can be compared to watching a movie (he in fact wrote screenplays for the adaptations of his works as well as original scripts), given the intricate details provided in the stage directions, this is why studying the more literary aspects of these three plays is essential to understand these women and their psychological turmoil.

As we expressed in the first part of this dissertation,[24] Williams stresses his will to provide a realistic and truthful depiction of life, while not discarding expressionism, and this was through the use of unconventional techniques, such as the use of a screen on which words and/or images were projected in the background, which echoed the situation which was unfolding in the scene, specific lighting in order to convey the atmosphere of the jungle-like garden in *SLS*, or music such as the ominous polka in *ASND*. Moreover, the playwright provided extremely numerous and highly-detailed stage directions, so as to enable stage directors and actors to recreate the scenes he envisioned as precisely as possible. Punctuation also plays an important role in the conveying of Blanche's, Catharine's, and Laura's psychological evolution – as their mental state evolves, so does their speech, the length of their sentences and their emotional state.

The aim of this study being to study characters as Williams envisioned them, a close study of the text itself and stage direction seems to be the most effective means of understanding the characters on a deeper level.

a) The Role and Evolutions of Punctuation and Syntax

Before proceeding to the analysis of the text itself, let it be known that this can seem hazardous when dealing with theater, since the author's initial intentions oftentimes differ from what is conveyed in the actual play. The actors are submitted to the stage director's vision and thus the performance varies from one adaptation to another – cues can be cut, as well as sentences and even passages, in order to bring the final production in a specific

direction. This is in large part due to trends and movements, taking the plays out of their original context in order to bring novelty and longevity to them (especially in the case of notorious works, which is the case for Williams' works). In the context of this study, which is not based on interpretation, but on the characters, it is more interesting to try to perceive the initial personalities of the characters, as the playwright envisioned them.

Even before she enters the stage in *SLS*, the viewer is informed that Catharine "*babbles,*" thus inferring that whenever she speaks, she cannot stop herself. When Catharine first steps onstage in Scene 2 with Sister Felicity, we are presented with an image that is a far cry from the one Violet first presented us with though. Her response to the sister are solely made of single sentences, but nothing more:

> SISTER: What did you take out of that box on the table?
>
> CATHARINE: Just a cigarette, Sister.
>
> SISTER: Put it back in the box.
>
> CATHARINE: Oh please, let me smoke, Sister!
>
> SISTER: Give it here.
>
> CATHARINE: Please, Sister Felicity. (*SLS*, Sc. 2: 128.)

Her sentences are short, they sometimes lack verbs, and contain many commas and dashes, thus leading us to believe that she makes regular pauses, either to gather her thoughts or to control what she says. This is true throughout Scenes 2, 3 and 4 until Catharine is alone with Dr. Cuckrowicz. It seems as though Catharine were physically present, but her mind were filtering itself – it clearly seems that the young woman is under the effect of medication, which is meant to calm her down. She even refers to it in Scene 2 when she declares: "*I was half unconscious under medication.*"[99] As all tranquilizing drugs do, the medication under which Catharine is has put her in an altered state of mind, where she seems unable to be completely present and involved in what is happening around her. The only moments when Catharine finds herself to be loquacious is whenever she refers to Sebastian and what happened the previous summer. While we have shown Catharine's lack of conversation at

[99] *SLS*, Sc. 2: 128.

the beginning of Scene 2, she completely changes by the end of the scene when she sees Dr. Cuckrowicz at the window, which triggers an unexpected flashback:

> CATHARINE: Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, he was fed– up with dark ones and was famished for blonds. All the travel brochures he picked up were advertisements of the blond northern countries. I think he'd already booked us to – Copenhagen or – Stockholm. – Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that's how he talked about people, as if they were – items on a menu. – 'That one's delicious– looking, that one is appetizing,' or 'that one is not appetizing' – I think because he was really nearly half– starved from living on pills and salads… (*SLS*, Sc. 2: 130.)

We finally discover the Catharine that Violet was referring to in the first scene of the play. Not only does her monologue seem incoherent – she refers to him as 'famished' when speaking about people, which hints to a form of cannibalism as an ominous reference to his fate, though she is alluding to his sexual appetite. Her sentences are very repetitive, with the incessant leitmotiv of "*famished*" and "*fed up*" (the latter working as some unconscious pun). Her sentences are longer and it seems as though she were speaking very fast, as if her reminiscence of the past were obsessive and triggered and catalyzed by random elements, here it is the fact that Dr. Cuckrowicz is blond. It almost seems as though she were delivering a stream of consciousness speech, saying everything that comes to her mind without filter. As soon as the image she is reliving is too difficult for her to bare, however, Catharine starts to stutter:

> DOCTOR: In what way did you love him?
>
> CATHARINE: The only way he'd accept: – a sort of *motherly* way. I tried to save him – Doctor.
>
> DOCTOR: From what? Save him from what?
>
> CATHARINE: Completing! – sort of! – *image*! – he had of himself as a sort of! – *sacrifice* to a! – terrible sort of a–
>
> DOCTOR: God?
>
> CATHARINE: Yes, a cruel one, Doctor. (*SLS*, Sc.4: 143.)

This is typical in patients suffering from Post– Traumatic Stress Disorder – Catharine is haunted by these images of her cousin, and has difficulty re-living the situation. Her words are cut, the exclamation marks show that she is overwhelmed by emotion and the italics (which are present in the original text) seem to lay an emphasis on key words. This is common with Catharine throughout the play, but as the situation unfolds, she speaks more and more, almost engaging in soliloquies in which no one can intervene, as if letting out the

truth were a way for her to atone for everything that had happened. This is mostly the case when the doctor injects her with the truth serum and performs hypnosis on her in Scene 4. She warns her mother in Scene 3 when they are alone together:

> CATHARINE: […] If they give me an injection – I won't have any choice but to tell exactly what happened in Cabeza de Lobo last summer. Don't you see? It makes you tell the truth because it shuts something off that might make you able not to and everything comes out, decent or not decent, you have no control, but always, always the truth! (*SLS*, Sc.3: 133.)

As the play reaches an end, Catharine becomes more and more frantic, her exchange with Dr. Cuckrowicz faster, as if to build a sense of suspense and tension leading to the climax – with the evocation of Sebastian's death and Catherine's liberation from what had been parasitizing her since the previous summer, after which she "*wanders out into the garden.*"[100]

Conversely, Blanche DuBois evolves from the talkative mundane Southern Belle to a diffident, fragile being, who barely speaks. When she first arrives at Stella's apartment, she declares in a rather dramatic:

> BLANCHE: Now, then, let me look at you. But you don't look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I've bathed and rested! And turn that over-light off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare! […] Come back here now! Oh, my baby! Stella! Stella for star! […] I thought you would never come back to this horrible place! What am I saying! I didn't mean to say that. I meant to be nice about it and say – Oh, what a convenient location and such – Ha – a – ha! Precious lamb! You haven't said a word to me.
>
> STELLA: You haven't given me a chance to, Honey! (*ASND*, Sc. 1: 120.)

Blanche's true nature seems to be encapsulated in this example, one of a woman who is very concerned about her looks, who speaks everything that is on her mind, in a stream of consciousness, just like Catharine. And as Stella points out, she monopolizes conversations. Her sentences are long, almost never– ending and the profusion of exclamation marks demonstrates her very theatrical attitude, which is hers throughout the play.

In addition to this, Blanche has great difficulty speaking about Allan (as marked by the proliferation of dashes in her speech). When Stanley asks her about him when they first meet, she responds: "*The boy – the boy died. […] I'm afraid I'm – going to be sick!*"[101] We can see here that Blanche, caught off guard, struggles with her words, which is emphasized

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[100] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 159.
[101] *ASND*, Sc. 1: 130.

by the repetition of "*the boy*". It is the same when she speaks of his death with Mitch: "*It was because – on the dance-floor – unable to stop myself – I'd suddenly said – 'I know! I know! You disgust me…*"[102] She is visibly distraught and the emotion prevents her from expressing herself correctly.

The height of Blanche's breakdown is reached in Scene 10, a few hours after her final encounter with Mitch. She is alone and visibly inebriated:

> BLANCHE: How about taking a swim, a moonlight swim at the old rock–quarry? If anyone's sober enough to drive a car! Ha– Ha! Best way in the world to stop your head buzzing! Only you've got to be careful to dive where the deep pool is – if you hit a rock you don't come up till tomorrow… (*ASND*, Sc. 10: 208.)

We can notice that Blanche's sentence are visibly shorter and more numerous, that the tempo of her speech is much higher than at the beginning of the play where she is seemingly more poised. As this is the case for Catharine, this acceleration in her alcohol– fuelled speech is an indicator that the breaking point, both in her mind and in the play, is about to occur. As the scene unfolds with the arrival of Stanley, Blanche seems to sink progressively into the realms of her mind, as if she were shutting down:

> STANLEY: Was this [Mitch's supposed dismissal by Blanche] before or after the telegram?
>
> BLANCHE: What telegram? No! No, after! As a matter of fact, the wire came just as–
>
> STANLEY: As a matter of fact there wasn't no wire at all!
>
> BLANCHE: Oh, oh!
>
> STANLEY: There isn't no millionaire! And Mitch didn't come back with Roses 'cause I know where her is –
>
> BLANCHE: Oh!
>
> STANLEY: There isn't a goddamn thing but imagination!
>
> BLANCHE: Oh!
>
> STANLEY: And lies and conceit and tricks!
>
> BLANCHE: Oh! (*ASND*, Sc. 10: 212.)

[102] *ASND*, Sc. 6: 184.

As we have previously seen, Stanley is the instigator of Blanche's mental breakdown. She who had eloquently lied her way through the play finds herself speechless in the face of her accuser and her own lies. As she realizes that she can no longer save herself from this situation, Blanche, for the first time in the play (and most likely in her life) is at a loss for words. She is only able to utter a simple "*Oh!*" After, this Blanche changes radically, she is far more panicked, and suffers from small hysterical outbreaks, as when the nurse and doctor come to pick her up and she "*retreat[s] in panic*": "*I don't know you – I don't know you. I want to be – left alone – please!*"[103]

Laura Wingfield is a notoriously shy character and though she is one of the main characters in the play, she is far less present onstage than her mother and her brother. What differs with Laura in comparison to Blanche and Catharine is that she does not transition from one state to another, her overall attitude stays the same, but only changes when she feels comfortable with Jim. This change in attitude occurs for a very brief moment in the play, and therefore an even shorter time lapse in her life. Overall, Laura remains the self–conscious and socially-fearful girl from start to finish. In the second scene of the play, which is a confrontation between Laura and her mother about her dropping out of business school, Laura is noticeably nervous and apprehensive when answering:

> AMANDA: Laura, where have you been going when you've gone on pretending that you were going to business college?
>
> LAURA: I've just been going out walking.
>
> AMANDA: That's not true.
>
> LAURA: It is. I just went walking.
>
> AMANDA: Walking? Walking? In winter? Deliberately courting pneumonia in that light coat? Where did you walk to, Laura?
>
> LAURA: All sorts of places – mostly in the park. (*TGM*: Sc. 2: 244.)

As always in the play, Amanda dominates the conversation and has the upper hand. Laura provides blunt responses, which are straight to the point. It is highly likely that she is intimidated by her mother, and does not seek confrontation.

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[103] *ASND*, Sc. 11: 223.

As her brother says, Laura is "*very different from other girls,*"[104] and this can be felt when she speaks. Her attitude can also be likened to that of a child, especially in decisive moments. When Tom knocks over her glass animals during a fight with Amanda, Laura screams "*My glass! – menagerie…*"[105] Moreover, when Jim is about to arrive and her mother puts padding in her bra, she declares "*You make it seem like we were setting a trap,*"[106] as if she did not want to be considered as a grown woman with adult features. In keeping with this, her vision of seduction seems very innocent and childlike: enhancing female assets in order to appeal to Jim appears as a form of disguise, as if she were playing a role. In addition, when the young man finally arrives, Laura appears to be terrified at the idea of opening the door, as it would be the case for a child who were afraid to do so or to answer the telephone. She declares that she feels sick, she begs her mother to go in her place ("*Please, you answer it, please!*"[107]). The situation changes when she is alone with Jim. Though she stays true to herself in the beginning of the conversation, only providing brief answers such as the frequent "*thank you,*"[108] and with frequent ellipses, conveying her shyness and her uncertainty. As the conversation moves forward, in large part thanks to Jim, she becomes much more open and talkative, especially when presenting him with her most prized possession, her glass ornament collection:

> JIM: Now how about you? Isn't there something you take more interest in than anything else?
>
> LAURA: Well, I do – as I said – have my – glass collection – […]
>
> JIM: I'm not quite sure I know what you're talking about. What kind of glass is it?
>
> LAURA: Little articles of it, they're ornaments mostly! Most of them are little animals made out of glass, the tiniest little animals in the world. Mother calls them a glass menagerie! Here's an example of one, if you'd like to see it! This one is the oldest. It's nearly thirteen. (*TGM*, Sc. 7: 300.)

Laura seems at ease with Jim, she goes into detail, sharing what could be perceived as anecdotal information, yet which is paramount for her. By sharing these precise elements, Laura is letting Jim into her intimacy. He is the first person who shows interest in her passion,

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[104] *TGM*, Sc. 5: 271.

[105] Ibid, Sc. 3: 252.
[106] Ibid, Sc. 6: 275.
[107] Ibid: 279.
[108] Ibid, Sc. 7: 291– 292.

therefore she can hardly contain her excitement; this is shown by the many occurrences of exclamation marks. Laura's "break" from her shy self proves to be quite short, since a few moments later she sinks back into her former habits, and does not speak for the remainder of the play.

We have seen that punctuation and syntax play an essential role in understanding these women. An evolution in their speech – be it their tone or the length of their sentences – translates a change in their mental state, whether it is excitement, fear, uncertainty or despair. Bearing this is mind, let us now focus on another textual specificity which plays a decisive role in grasping the essence of Blanche, Catharine and Laura, made obvious by the actresses who are playing them.

b) When Words Bring Characters to Life – The Importance of Stage Directions

Theater is a very specific genre of literature since it is not meant to stay solely on paper. The printed words serve as a medium to express situations and give substance and life to the characters. When writing a play, the playwright has a very specific idea as to how his characters should be, how they should act and how the stage should be set. In order for actors and stage directors to reach this vision, he provides them with stage directions. Williams' work contains extremely present and detailed stage directions, since he had a very specific vision of the final outcome of the stories he told, and also since many elements were drawn from real-life people and/or situations. Given the sometimes excessive amount of details provided by these directions, many publishers provided both the normal edition of the plays and an "acting edition", in which the initial stage directions were almost completely taken out. Williams, of course, strongly disapproved of this, as did some critics:

> It is my contention that the paratext of Williams' plays is as important as the text, and that The Glass Menagerie is a case in point. […] The almost universal preference for the Acting Edition is one of the reasons that Williams' plays have suffered so badly in the hands of various film and theatre directors, who have failed to appreciate the full significance of Williams' stage directions in particular, regarding them as unnecessary incursions into the director's territory.[109]

[109] TYRELL, Susan. Tennessee Williams' 'Plastic Theatre': an Examination of Contradiction. PhD. Keele University (January 2013): 31.

In all three plays, stage directions enable the reader to get a very precise image of the setting in which the characters are evolving. The Wingfield apartment is:

> [a] building, which runs parallel to the footlights, [it] is flanked on both sides by dark, narrow alleys which run into murky canyons of tangled clothes– lines, garbage cans, and the sinister lattice– work of neighboring fire escapes (*TGM*, SC. 1: 233.)

We have already studied the settings of *ASND* and *SLS* and their paramount role in the plays au-dessus in our study of the South and its symbolism. In each case, the setting provides key elements in the understanding of the plays and the characters, whether it be the jungle-like garden with the plants reminding the viewer of intestines (thus echoing Sebastian's fate),or the gloomy streets and decrepit façades in *ASND* and *TGM*, which translate the tonality of the plays and foreshadow the characters' somber fates.

In addition to this, music plays a very important role within the plays, since they translate a state of mind which brings back the memory of an event. In Blanche's case, it is the "*music of polka,*"[110] the "*Varsouviana,*"[111] which plays each time she is reminded of Allan. It was the music which was playing when he killed himself, and which still haunts Blanche to this day. The music playing provides the viewer with an insight into Blanche's mind, and her feelings. When she describes the discovery of Allan and his lover to Mitch, another musical (and visual) effect is introduced:

> A locomotive is heard approaching outside. She claps her hands to her ears and crouches over. The headlight of the locomotive glares into the room as it thunders past. As the noise recedes, she straightens slowly and continues speaking. [111]

It seems as though the violence of the train's movement echoed the shock Blanche felt when she initially experienced the feeling. The emotion is not described, it is suggested, which is typical of Tennessee Williams and his writing. It seems that there is a certain reserve to his writing, and that the viewer does not need to be shown everything. The impact is thus greater on the latter, since his imagination sets it. Other occurrences of this include Blanche's rape by Stanley – when he is only seen taking her towards the bed, and the lights fade to black

[110] *ASND*, Sc. 1: 130.
[111] Ibid, Sc. 6: 183.

and a new scene starts – and Sebastian's murder – which is described in great detail by Catharine, but never shown.

Catharine's situation is in fact very similar to that of Blanche, since music also intervenes when she is reminded of the fateful day when Sebastian died. The audience can hear "*jungle birds scream in the garden,*"[112] "*jungle clamour,*"[113] and *"percussive sounds.*"[114] It seems that sounds and music are a direct reference to memory, and that each incursion of an audible element is precisely thought out for a specific purpose.

TGM combines music and visual effects in order to recreate memories. A screen is intended to be set up in the background in order to project images or words which pertain to the content of the scene. Whenever the subject of Laura is brought forth, her theme music, entitled "The Glass Menagerie" starts playing and the legends "*The Glass Menagerie*" or "*Laura*" appear on the screen, as is the case in Scene 3,[115] Scene 4[116] or in Scene 7[117]. Images are also introduced, such as those of typewriters when Amanda and Laura are arguing over business college or Jim's yearbook picture from high school when he arrives. These images, paired with the music, create specific atmospheres in order for the audience to feel the right emotions.

Stage directions also play an important role in conveying the characters' state of mind through their actions. When Blanche understands that Stella knows about her past and that she has to confess, she "*rises from her chair. She seems faint; looks about her with an expression of almost panic.*"[118] In keeping with this, the introduction to Scene 10 is very telling as regards Blanche's mental state:

[112] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 134.
[113] Ibid: 138.
[114] Ibid: 157.
[115] *TGM*, Sc. 3: 253.
[116] Ibid, Sc. 4: 259.
[117] Ibid, Sc. 7: 300.
[118] *ASND*, Sc. 5: 168.

> BLANCHE has been drinking fairly steadily since MITCH left. She has dragged her wardrobe trunk into the center of the bedroom. It hangs open with flowery dresses thrown across it. As the drinking and packing went on, a mood of hysterical exhilaration came into her and she has decked herself out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers with brilliants set in their heels. Now she is placing the rhinestone tiara on her head before the mirror of the dressing table and murmuring excitedly as if to a group of spectral admirers. (*ASND*, Sc. 10: 208.)

These directions give the reader, as well as the actor who has to reenact the scene, context in order to understand Blanche's state of mind. The incredibly precise details concerning her clothing translate her love of fashion. She has also been drinking because of her encounter with Mitch, which justifies her delirious state and her addressing fictitious people. She is in a mood of "*hysterical exhilaration,*" most certainly a defense mechanism to avoid having to cope with the harsh reality of her life. Rather than accepting her fate, Blanche is intoxicated, and thus in an imaginary world in which she can be happy. Yet, her state will also play a part in her downfall, since it will prevent her from escaping from Stanley shortly after. A correlation can be drawn with Catharine after being injected with the truth serum, who at first feels dizzy and falls into Dr. Cuckrowicz's arms, as he had warned her:

> DOCTOR: You see, you lost your balance.
>
> CATHARINE: No, I didn't. I did what I wanted to do without you telling me to. [She holds him tight against her]. Let me! Let! Let! Let me! Let me, let me, oh, let me… [She crushes her mouth to his violently. He tries to disengage himself. She presses her lips to his fiercely, clutching his body against her […]] Please hold me! I've been so lonely. It's lonelier than death, if I've gone mad, it's lonelier than death! (*SLS*, Sc. 4: 147.)

Catharine's actions seem like a desperate attempt to grasp on to life as she would like it to be. By forcing herself onto Dr. Cuckrowicz, she seeks to prove to herself that she still has the power to seduce and be loved, despite what happened in Cabeza de Lobo, and its aftermath. This also seems like a cry for help – the terms "*crushes,*" "*violently*" and "*fiercely*" clearly indicate how desperate she truly is, and how vehemently she wishes to be normal again. By admitting the kiss was intentional, Catharine breaks free from the constraints she has been under for the past year and takes a step forward to become her former self once again. Catharine was a very seductive woman prior to the events, she had a "*notoriety*"[119] as Violet claimed. This is the first act which is triggered by the truth serum,

[119] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 139.

and the first statement Catharine makes which will lead her to reveal the truth and finally be freed from her ordeal.

The opposite outcome is encountered by Laura with Jim, as soon as he rejects her:

> [[…] The holy candles in the altar of LAURA's face have been snuffed out. There is a look of almost infinite desolation] […] [She bites her lip which was trembling and then bravely smiles. She opens her hand again on the broken glass ornament. Then she gently takes his hand and raises it level with her own. She carefully places the unicorn in the palm of his hand, then pushes his fingers closed upon it] (*TGM*, Sc. 7: 307.)

Laura's response to Jim's act is presented with great detail, as though the stage directions were directly taken from a novel. The metaphor comparing her face to an altar provides a clear image of her emotions. Yet, however tragic the situation may be, Laura proves to be incredibly courageous, transcending her own fears to "*bravely [smile*]"[120] and present Jim with the one glass ornament she cherishes most. This act of kindness is also a reminder of Laura's true, delicate nature, and her lack of resentment. Throughout the play, stage directions also provide significant details regarding her nature. When speaking about boys with her mother, she seems very ill-at-ease and "*twists her hands nervously*"[121] before confessing to liking Jim in high school. In Scene 3, while Amanda and Tom are arguing, Laura "*stands […] with clenched hands and panicky expression*."[122] Laura's mental struggle and her uneasiness seem to be translated by her body, and mainly her hands, which is a typical sign of shyness in individuals.

By providing such true-to-life details, Tennessee Williams brings a sense of reality to his characters, and thus to his theater. The former become relatable and even the most imperceptible details, such as a polka music in *ASND*, the cries of birds in *SLS* or Laura's hands in *TGM*, make them believable, though their symbolic nature also plays a strong role, since Williams also makes us perceive his characters' emotions though the symbolic sounds and gestures. It is through his careful choice of words, of atmospheres and of situations that Williams succeeded in creating plays which reflect the audience's intimate realities, which proved to be a recipe for success. Beyond the popularity of the plays lies an even greater

[120] *TGM*, Sc. 7: 308.
[121] Ibid, Sc. 2: 245.
[122] Ibid, Sc. 3: 249.

accomplishment – that of providing a voice to women, of expressing their struggles and their emotions in a world dominated by men.

2. Defying Social Standards: Voices of Women

As we have previously mentioned, women were not truly given a platform to express themselves prior to the 20th century. Female writers, such as George Sand, the Brontë sisters or even Harper Lee chose to use male pseudonyms in order to publish their works without risking their husbands' reputation or their own. What is more, mental ailments were widely frowned upon and were generally attributed to women rather than men. Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath notoriously battled severe depression in their own times and both nevertheless committed suicide in the end. Charlotte Perkins Gillman expressed the issue in great detail in her 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Considered as one of the first feminist works, it depicts the life and mental degradation of the female protagonist (which is largely autobiographical) while on a rest cure due to post– partum depression. The short-story is also considered as a pioneer work in dealing with mental issues from a woman's own perspective.

Feminist movements had already started in the late 19th century in the United Kingdom with the suffragettes and in the United States with the Women's Temperance Union, but the movement's height was only reached with the second wave in the 1960s, when women would sometimes violently protest in the streets and burn their bras, demanding sexual freedom and equality with men. For this was, and still is, the social bone of contention: being considered equal, in legal, financial and ideological terms.

All three of Williams' female protagonists embody the struggles of real-life females, especially in the 1940s. A young lady was either to marry well and become a proper housewife, as is expected of Laura or what should have been Catharine's and Blanche's fate, or find a proper and steady job in order to fend for herself, which is the route which the latter took by becoming an English teacher in a high-school. Emotions had to be concealed and the woman was at the mercy of her husband and his decision-making. Thus, mental fragility, and what is more its public manifestation were not accepted. How compelling it is, then, that a young playwright such as Tennessee Williams should have chosen to explore the darkest, most intimate aspects of their psyche, the complex dynamics between men and women, as well as the harsh evolution of society in the postwar South and the sense of decay which ensued. The stage was now a platform to provide a form of therapy for the female viewers

and exorcize their own demons, by convincing them that these situations could happen to everyone, that they were not alone.

Wherefore, we shall now focus on the more ideological notions linked with these lead characters' struggles. In order to do so, we shall first bring forth the theories of Sigmund Freud in order to understand how women with mental ailments were perceived in the early 20th-century, but also to bring forth the limits of his theories. Likewise, we shall focus on gender roles and how Williams proceeds to a complete reversal of the latter in order to provide these women, and women in general, a public voice. We shall then focus on the writer's voice, and how a male author can achieve an on point portrayal of the opposite sex's struggles.

a) Freud's Psychoanalytical Input and its Limitations

Sigmund Freud was one of the most prominent figures in neurology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He conducted many studies on female patients suffering from hysteria, and developed new methods of treating this ailment, mainly psychoanalysis, also known as the "talking cure", to which we previously referred, and hypnosis. According to Tareq Zuhair Sa'id Mahmood in his 2004 thesis:

> Psychoanalysis arises as a result of the desire to find out how the human psyche works and why there are people of different personalities and different behavior. […] According to Freud, the causes of fear and hysteria for people are numerous and diverse. While studying many cases, Freud noticed that the past experiences form the true causes of fear or hysteria. Freud traced the etiology of the disease from its mid nineteenth century image as a disorder of the nerves to its twentieth century as a psychological condition, in a way which facilitated the discovery of the basic principles of psychoanalysis – the analytic method itself, the existence of the unconscious, repression, fantasy, infantile sexuality.[123]

Freud, through countless trials on patients, thus demonstrated that hysteria (and what would today be known as severe depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) was not a physical ailment caused by nerves, but a psychological and psychiatric phenomenon. It was therefore useless to apply physical measures such as electric shock treatment or the bleeding of a patient in order to cure them – the response was to try and discover which elements from the patients' past triggered their degraded mental state.

[123] MAHMOOD, Tareq Zuhair Sa'id. A Psychoanalytic Reading of Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie and Lord Byron's Love Letter, Thesis, University of Jordan (2004): 7.

Since many of his patients suffered from hysterical outbreaks and delusional fantasies, probing their minds through speech proved to be a difficult, sometimes impossible task. Traumatic events were either censored by the mind through some defense mechanism, or the memory of the event seemed too vivid and painful to express. Freud developed hypnosis as a tool to counteract the resistance of the mind:

> In the great majority of cases it is not possible to establish the point of origin by a simple interrogation of the patient, however thoroughly it may be carried out. This is in part because what is in question is often some experience which the patient dislikes discussing; but principally because he is genuinely unable to recollect it and often has no suspicion of the causal connection between the precipitating event and the pathological phenomenon. As a rule it is necessary to hypnotize the patient and to arouse his memories under hypnosis of the time at which the symptom made its first appearance; when this has been done, it becomes possible to demonstrate the connection in the clearest and most convincing fashion.[124]

By making the patient enter an altered state of mind, Freud was able to trace back to the origin of the ailment, generally to an event which deeply traumatized the patient and led him/her to build an entire defense mechanism around the memory in order to avoid being faced with it. By keeping the memory in their subconscious, and refusing to deal with it, the latter would suffer a mental breakdown triggered by any element which had a link with the event. Hypnosis was therefore a means to bypass the defense mechanism and enable the patient to release the trauma without breaking down.

In *SLS*, Dr. Cuckrowicz uses Freud's method on Catharine after administrating the truth serum:

> DOCTOR: […] Close your eyes for a minute […] Miss Catharine? I want you to give me something.
>
> CATHARINE: Name it and it's yours, Doctor Sugar.
>
> DOCTOR: Give me all your resistance.
>
> CATHARINE: Resistance to what?
>
> DOCTOR: The truth. Which you're going to tell me.
>
> […]

[124] FREUD, Sigmund. *The Complete Works*. Ivan Smith [online PDF document] (2000, 2007, 2010): 6.

> CATHARINE: […] You know what I think you're doing? I think you're trying to hypnotize me. Aren't you? You're looking so straight at me and doing something to me with your eyes and your – eyes… Is that what you're doing to me?
>
> […]
>
> DOCTOR: You will do what I ask.
>
> CATHARINE: Yes, I will try.
>
> DOCTOR: You will tell the true story.
>
> CATHARINE: Yes, I will.
>
> DOCTOR: The absolutely true story. No lies, nothing not spoken. Everything told, exactly. (*SLS*, Sc.4: 145 – 146.)

By using hypnosis paired with the serum, Dr. Cuckrowicz is trying to break Catharine's "*resistance*", as he says, to reliving the event in Cabeza de Lobo. With the use of Freud's method, the doctor is taking her back to the previous summer and making her relive the scene of Sebastian's death, which is the cause of her trauma. The verbal trigger he uses to make her go back to that time is "*Shall we begin with last summer?"*[125] The experience is very painful for Catharine but also for her relatives, mainly Violet, who refuses to accept the circumstances of her son's tragic demise. Yet, she breaks down all the barriers which were built up inside of her mind and she is able to tell the whole story in great detail. This is a source of salvation for Catharine since she is now freed from the emotional burden which was placed upon her; the truth is finally known, and what is more, the doctor believes her, which seems to be a truly positive indicator of the outcome of this interview. Let us however call attention to the briefness of the therapy – psychoanalysis paired with hypnosis generally break through defense mechanisms over the course of several months or years. It seems quite surprising that Dr. Cuckrowicz should be able to break through to Catharine and cure her in a single session. This is perhaps due to the fact that the play needs to show the essential elements to enable the resolution of problems, therefore the encounter with Dr. Cuckrowicz would be a summary of sorts of the mental process which Catharine has been undergoing for the past year.

The notion of defense mechanisms is another feature of Freud's theories, which we have seen at word in the case study of Blanche *au-dessus*. We have seen that she creates an

[125] *SLS*, Sc.4: 149.

illusory life for herself, together with a glorified past, in order to stay clear of the memory of Allan's suicide and the events in her life which followed. Let us not forget the love letters Stanley finds in her trunk while searching for the legal documents concerning Belle Reve. She preserves them as if they were treasures and refuses for anyone else to touch them. A lifetime of concealing the truth and playing a role leads Blanche to fall under some punishment and completely lose touch with reality.

Another feature of his theories is the link Freud drew between hysteria and the libido, or sexuality. According to him:

> The sexual instinct is undoubtedly the most powerful source of persisting increases of excitation (and consequently of neuroses). Such increases are distributed very unevenly over the nervous system. When they reach a considerable degree of intensity the train of ideas becomes disturbed and the relative value of the ideas is changed; and in orgasm thought is almost completely extinguished. Perception too – the psychical interpretation of sense– impressions – is impaired. An animal which is normally timid and cautious becomes blind and deaf to danger. On the other hand, at least in males, there is an intensification of the aggressive instinct. Peaceable animals become dangerous until their excitation has been discharged in the motor activities of the sexual act. A disturbance like this of the dynamic equilibrium of the nervous system – a non-uniform distribution of increased excitation – is what makes up the psychical side of affects.[126]

This theory privileges excitation and its uneven distribution within the body would be the cause of psychiatric ailment, rather than severe trauma caused by a tragic event, though Freud also considers traumatic events which occurred during childhood. Though sexuality plays a very important role in the case of Blanche, Laura and Catharine, defining sexuality itself as the cause of their mental state would seem presumptuous. Though Sebastian's death seems to be an indirect consequence of his sexual deviance, Catharine's trauma is caused by seeing him being eaten alive by savages. Considering that the actual reason for her hysteria would potentially be a form of arousal triggered by the scene seems rather false. It does not seem that there is any direct link between arousal and trauma in Catharine's situation. The absence of her father and perhaps the paternal role Sebastian played could be linked with a reversed Oedipus complex, through his jealousy of her seductiveness.

Laura's situation also differs from this theory, since she has never engaged in sexual activities. Sexual frustration caused by unsatisfied arousal generally manifests through

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[126] FREUD, Sigmund. *The Complete Works*. Ivan Smith [online PDF document] (2000, 2007, 2010): 81.

aggressiveness, yet Laura never seems to be aggressive. There is never an element in the play which places her as a potential sexual being. Even when her mother tries to make her breasts appear larger, the young woman seems unwilling to sexualize herself in order to attract Jim. Perhaps this total absence of sexuality or of satisfaction of her potential sexual needs could be the reason for Laura's state, yet it is more likely because of her self-consciousness due to her crippled leg. It seems as though her physical ailment led Laura to automatically categorize herself as different and exclude herself from others.

An annihilation of her sexuality would then be a mere consequence of the timid mind– frame in which she has trapped herself, rather than its cause, which still lies in her castrating mother projecting onto her a model of her younger self, in relation with her own sexuality. Amanda thus denies her daughter's own sexuality through her smothering presence. We can relate this to the notion which Melanie Klein defines as the "good breast" and the "bad breast" in her book *Envy and Gratitude*. While the fetus is in the womb, it creates an incredibly tight bond with its mother, both physically – through the umbilical chord – and mentally. After birth, which can be a traumatic experience through the physical separation between the infant and its mother, the only physical link between them is the breast, a source of nourishment. Klein states:

> [t]he primal good object, the mother's breast forms the core of the ego and vitally contributes to its growth and […] the infant feels that he concretely internalizes the breast and the milk it gives. Also there is in his mind already some indefinite connection between the breast and other parts and aspects of the mother. […] The breast in its good aspect is the prototype of maternal goodness, inexhaustible patience and generosity, as well as of creativeness.[127]

This tight bond and the image of the "good breast" is one that follows the child throughout his entire youth. Klein associates this image as challenged by the notion of envy, which "*contributes to the infant's difficulties in building his good object*"[128] and "*puts badness […] into the mother […] in order to destroy her*"[129] thus transforming the breast into something negative, the "bad breast". It is through this that the feelings of jealousy develops which strains the relationship between mother and child.

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[127] KLEIN, Melanie. The Writings of Melanie Klein Volume III – Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946 – 1963. New York: The Free Press, 1975: 180.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid: 181.

In the case of Amanda and Laura, the former appears to maintain the initial bond with her daughter, perhaps out of some subconscious fear of the latter's rejection. The mother still feeds the child, not through the breast, but by providing food for her and trying to take care of her. Amanda does not seem to accept that Laura is different from what she would have wanted her to be, and seems to maintain her in a form of infant state, in which Laura is still dependent on her mother. The feeling of envy does not emanate from Laura, as of a child wishing to take the mother's place, but the other way round, with Amanda trying to re-live her youth through her daughter through the process of transference. It is through her overwhelming and oppressive desire to help Laura become an adult though she is not ready, at least not in those terms, that Amanda unwillingly provokes the opposite situation.

As regards Blanche's hysteria, it seems the traumatic event is Allan's suicide, which was in part her fault. Thus, her mental breakdown would be indirectly linked with sexuality, since finding out he was a homosexual is what caused Blanche to humiliate him. Yet, it also seems as though her sexual promiscuity was only triggered by her need to feel seductive, protected and loved. It does not seem that seeing Allan with his lover, or his suicide, was what caused excitation for Blanche; she declares herself that she felt nothing but disgust. The only truth that could be attributed to Freud's theories in Blanche's case would be that she needed to prove to herself that it was not her fault if Allan preferred men, that she did not fail as a woman (in the sense of not satisfying her husband on a sexual level) and that she was desirable, as a coquette would wish to feel. In order to do so, she had to seduce men constantly and sleep with them. Nonetheless, these actions are only the result of Blanche coping with the loss of the love of her life; she admired him so much that the love she felt for him was much deeper than physical contact. Losing him was also losing a part of herself (as the expressionist symbolic emphasis on the love letters she's kept from him for so many years also suggests in relationship with her perception of Stanley soiling them by touching them.

The image of women developed in Freud's theories is that of sexually– frustrated individuals who, unable to cope with the uneven distribution of excitement, suffer emotional breakdowns, and are envious of men, as Monique Plaza states in "'Phallomorphic' Power and the Pyschology of 'Woman'":

> The danger of psychoanalytic discourse (and of its practice) is that it leads to the belief that castration defines women that it sums up their psychic existence. However, the phantasm of castration is a violence done to women, which leads to the shattering of their identification as a "general being," which leads to the imposition on them of the signifier "woman– castrated" to define them. As for penis envy, it is nothing but the expression, in the terms imposed by the patriarchal Symbolic, of woman's desire to be something other than "woman" (woman– castrated). It only signifies "being like man" to the extent that the androcentric social organization confuses the general and the masculine.[130]

It goes without saying that the vision Plaza calls out stands completely flawed, is sexist and reductive. Why would it be that men could control themselves and their impulses by "discharging" but women would be unable to have any input on their own emotions because of frustration? And why would women feel a form of frustration resulting in the sociological idea that they are not men? Though her summary may be perceived as reductive, as Freud also took men into consideration when dealing with the uneven distribution of sexual excitation, Plaza brings forth an interesting take on the matter.

Williams clearly deconstructs these theories in *ASND*, *SLS* and *TGM*. Though he does not undermine the importance of sexuality, as it plays a great role in these women's lives, both directly and indirectly, the trauma which triggers his female protagonists' ailments proves to be far more consistent than mere frustration. The playwright tackles much deeper causes which are at the root of the problems: death, the loss of innocence, physical disabilities, social judgment and the pressure of society, among others. His plays were often considered scandalous and voyeuristic to a certain extent; he presented the audience with crude reality, rather than utopian situations. Yet, the novelty which lied within his theater was the importance given to women, who clearly dominate the plays, thus creating a reversal in the male and female dynamics.

b) Deconstructing Traditional Gender Roles

Tennessee Williams appeared to be well aware of women's struggle for equality, and he wished to break away with social norms by making women his central characters. Without a doubt the latter are flawed, and have to struggle to survive in a world which does

[130] PLAZA, Monique. "'Phallomorphic' Power and the Psychology of 'Woman'", *Feminist Issues* (Summer 1980): 91.

not seem to accept them. This problem is the root of his plays, which tend to reflect this social malady. Suchismita Dutta tackles the issue in her article:

> It has already been established that probing into the violence and terror infested mind is a complex task since it involves the tedious understanding of a culture with its varied states of mind like psychosis, neurosis and even paranoia. But one very important root cause of this abnormal psyche is also the striking discrepancies in gender. The Femme Mystique victory is never achieved because men and women never successfully take up their respective roles in the society. Hence gender inequalities become the unabashed rulers that create a 'void' which demands a lot of aggression (TERROR and VIOLENCE) for the "survival of the fittest."[131]

It seems as though the female protagonists' mental states were submitted to their relationship with men, and the power struggle which results from it. The inability to find a common ground between Blanche and Stanley, between Catharine and her brother George or between Laura and Jim testifies to this "gender inequality". It is because women overshadow men in these plays that chaos arises. Stanley is used to his somewhat submissive wife, but Blanche comes off as an extremely confident woman. She therefore becomes a threat to him, which triggers his unrelenting desire to destroy her. To a certain extent, Catharine was also a threat to Sebastian, as least in Violet's opinion, since she was the one who attracted men for him; her seductive power was above his own. Through his death, she loses her seductive powers, however, and drifts into the realm of insanity. This, however is reversed with Dr. Cuckrowicz and the kiss she forces onto him, as a sign of her reclaiming her sexuality.

Likewise, with this power struggle between men and women comes the notion of manipulation. Blanche has been a widow since she was a very young woman and has been supporting herself by teaching, and also by seducing men. Behind her looks of fragility and innocence, she is a woman who knows what it takes to survive in life, even if that means using her looks to seduce wealthy men. This also seems to be the case for Catharine, though her independence is questionable. She was fully aware of the idea that Sebastian was using her, that she was "procuring" for him while in Spain, yet, she never spoke about it to him, nor did she ever rebel. Her cousin provided her with a lavish lifestyle – she stayed in fancy hotels, met wealthy people, had more clothes than she could fit in her suitcase. At the time, Catharine seemed to consider her contribution to Sebastian's scheme as a decent price to pay

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[131] DUTTA, Suchismita. "Exploring Violence and Terror in Tennessee Williams's plays: *Summer and Smoke, Sweet Bird of Youth, A Streetcar Named Desire", e– Journal of Literary Explorations* Vol. 2 Issue III, (August 2014): 442.

for what she was awarded in exchange. Both Catharine and Blanche prove to have been masterminds at manipulating men in order to fulfill their goals and needs, although they pay for it in the end.

This seems to be a far cry from the innocent Laura, who has trouble maintaining a conversation with anyone other than her mother and brother. Despite this, she lives in a fictitious world in which she is content, which protects her from the hardships of life. Her encounter with Jim only confirms her necessity to retreat within the confinements of her fantasy. Whereas Amanda seems to have been and still be an incredibly strong woman, who has struggled her entire adult life to provide for her children after her faithless husband departed, Laura appears as the fragile bird, too afraid to leave the nest, and crushed by the others' expectations.

In a world where women are center stage, men act as mere auxiliaries in what would normally be seen as a paternalistic society. Gender roles are mainly altered in these plays due to the absence of a paternal figure, which generally represents order and authority. The lack of such a presence defines a new order in which women can be strong and can take a stand for themselves. This is why Catharine is so adamant about her story, and runs the risk of being lobotomized in order to reveal the truth. Likewise, Blanche does not give in to Stanley's chauvinistic criticism and outbreaks; she fights back and thus becomes a threat to him. It seems as though these women, who question the traditional patriarchal values, serve as a symbolic scapegoat for women everywhere, their fates, either positive or negative, seem to be determined by their actions and their relationships with men. By using the latter, Blanche, the "fallen woman" of sorts, has defied natural order and is somehow being punished for it. Had she been a man, she would have never been persecuted by Stanley with such vehemence; he might even have encouraged the behavior. It is the same for Catharine, who fully embraces her sexuality (mainly when she knowingly procured for Sebastian and when she kissed Dr. Cuckrowicz), and this is not accepted, neither by her well-to-do family nor society in general. Yet, she manages to break free from conventions to some extent, though her fate after the end of the play is not known.

Laura seems less self– assured than Blanche and Catharine, yet her case is also one of unconventional nature since she challenges social norms in spite of herself. Her pathological shyness and social anxiety make the traditional scheme of the life of a housewife impossible for her. In keeping with this, her nature also keeps her from finding

employment. As her mother stresses throughout the play, these are the only two options she is presented with. By unintentionally refusing to comply with either, Laura defies her mother's authority and the "normal" lifestyle which has been thought out for her. Thus, Laura becomes an unconventional being, as do the former two women. Her lack of sexuality also sets her aside from the norm. Where Blanche and Catharine tend towards an over-sexualization of their being, Laura stands on the opposite side of the spectrum, with a complete absence of sexuality.

In keeping with the idea of non-compliance with social norms through the alteration of gender roles, another notion comes to mind – that of the playwright. Tennessee Williams was a male author, which is striking given his uncanny understanding of women and the "Femme Mystique" as Suchismita Dutta states au-dessus.

c) The Voice of a Man

As we have previously discussed, the image of women conveyed in literature was generally one of a proper housewife, particularly in the 19th-century Victorian novels. Those who challenged natural order were often ostracized, such as Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Tess Derbeyfield in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or even Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. What binds these women together is their sexuality, which is also the cause of their downfall. As can be noted, all three of the novels mentioned above were written by male authors, and the adulterous woman was considered a sinner, who had to be punished (according to society, not from the author's personal perspective). It seems as though literature excluded female writers from dealing with the subject of their own sexuality, which seems quite outlandish nowadays. As Tania Woods states in her article "From Female Sexuality And Hysteria To Feminine Psychology: The Gender Of Insanity In Literature":

> Female sexuality in literature has long been subject to censorship. It has only been in the last hundred or so years that the experiences of women have been openly discussed in literature. Up until the 20th century there was a lack of female writers on the subject of female sexuality. Males who broached the area were, unintentionally, writing about a notion they couldn't possibly understand fully and hence imparting their own slant. It is interesting to see how the difference in literary voices, considering the topic, affect the reader's understanding of the issues faced by women. How do readers feel towards those women, who one way or another have experienced sexual repression or abuse? Is the reader's understanding affected by the sex of the author, the narrator or the protagonist? [132]

Women appear to have been portrayed through a biased male perspective of their gender and the standards that ensued. Thus, their thoughts, their reactions and their words as voiced in novels and short stories were also the product of a man's point of view and interpretation of the female psyche, which oftentimes proved to be a far cry from reality.

Tennessee Williams broke free from the stereotype mainly conveyed before his time (with the exception of a few authors, including Thomas Hardy, Nathaniel Hawthorne and John Fowles) of the frail and neurotic woman in need of protection by a man, by conveying the idea that a woman's psychological state does not solely depend on her "nerves" or on her "fragile" nature, but also on external factors, though this was not entirely the case for Hawthorne's or Hardy's characters, which broke away from social norms. In his plays, women are the rightful victims of the pressures of society and of family, pressures that trigger deep emotions in them. Blanche faced the loss of her husband, her parents and her property. Catharine saw her cousin die, she is bound to be disowned by her own family, and she lived with the frustration of not being believed for the truth. Laura is confronted with the absence of her father, her omnipresent mother who dictates her entire life, but also her non– conformist brother, who is in perpetual conflict with the latter. The mother figure is here a debunked one: instead of the nurturing figure who supports the child, Amanda, as well as Violet, are castrating women who live their lives by proxy. Yet, this may be related with the specific context of the South. Ruth Foley describes Williams as a "*dramatist of lost souls*,"[133] in her thesis entitled *Women as Victims in Tennessee Williams' First Three Major Plays*. In keeping with the context, she writes:

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[132] WOODS, Tania. "From Female Sexuality and Hysteria to Feminine Psychology: The Gender of Insanity in Literature", EvergreenEnergy Journal (2012): 32.
[133] FOLEY, Ruth. *Women as Victims in Tennessee Williams' First Three Major Plays*, Thesis, University of Nebraska, Lincoln (2013): 36.

> [He is] writing in the milieu of the faded antebellum South where lonely and vulnerable misfits are presented as "losers who were never meant to win" (Leavitt 3). Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are depicted as victims of their traditional Southern upbringing, struggling to find their place in a culture stuck in the middle of a stagnant past and a present to which they cannot adapt. Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* is a victim of a different type, one who is helplessly suffering the throes of desertion from an irresponsible and self-centered father addicted to alcohol, and whose mother is a hopelessly maladjusted Southern belle, left abandoned and totally unprepared to assume the role as head of a household.[133]

These women are subjected to the transition between two conflicting worlds: the past and the present. It seems as though Catharine is the least affected by this change whereas Blanche cannot adjust, as it is also the case for Amanda, and Laura as a consequence. Beyond staging Southern issues in the background, digging deeper into his characters' selves and the problems they are faced with, the playwright manages to create a feeling of empathy towards them, thus creating a form of psychological theater, which was truly groundbreaking at the time.

Eugene O'Neill, another prominent figure of 20th-century American theater, had already started to experiment with a psychoanalytical approach of characters with *Mourning Becomes Electra* in 1931 and *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1956. Both playwrights brought to light complicated family dynamics which sparked from deeply-rooted autobiographical elements. O'Neill, however, did not lay an emphasis on the condition of women and on their place in society and in their homes. This was novelty brought about by Williams, who adapted his plays to social changes which were happening in the United States at the time. As is shown through the characters of Blanche and Amanda women who were not married had to fend for themselves, and deal with the consequential social stigma, especially in the South as Ruth Foley suggests in her account of it:

> For women, jobs were more unstable, temporary, and seasonal than they were for men; consequently, unemployment was much higher among women. There was also a strong bias against women who worked. In fact, many women who were employed full time called themselves "homemakers" to avoid being stigmatized for assuming men's jobs. Neither men in the workforce, unions, nor the government were ready to accept the reality that women also had to work as breadwinners, and this bias caused females intense hardship, especially those who were single, divorced, or widowed.[134]

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[134] FOLEY, Ruth. *Women as Victims in Tennessee Williams' First Three Major Plays*, Thesis, University of Nebraska, Lincoln (2013): 23.

By depicting the intimate discussions which take place behind closed walls, Williams manages to bring forth the actual struggles that such women faced, he therefore provided them with a voice. Though he was a man, his incredibly close relationship with the women in his life, mainly his mother Edwina (as tackled further down) and his elder sister Rose, enabled him to accurately portray these strong yet vulnerable women, and to capture the essence of their character. His homosexuality may have made him closer to them in temperament and perception, too, and his acute sensitivity and compassion for the female gender was brought to light by his artistic abilities. This enabled his theater to appear detached from any male-driven bias. As we have previously seen, men are responsible for these women's downfall.

In keeping with this, Williams never claimed his theater to be political, nor was he openly involved in social or political activities. His sole intention was to capture moments of life, which would generally be evanescent, and to show the physical and mental struggles which every individual could face. His plays seldom assume a moralizing tone either. It is the viewer who is to draw his own conclusions. This is why the plays we are studying present an open ending – in order to leave a sense of mystery for each individual to imagine the rest of the events. Will Catharine be lobotomized? Will she be discharged from the asylum? Will Blanche? Will Laura ever leave the Wingfields' home and break free from her shyness? The answers are not provided within the plays, therefore the audience cannot be influenced by what the playwright would have imagined.

It is through the depiction of the characters' plight that Williams draws a much broader picture – that of any 20th-century woman, thus giving a platform to those who had been silenced in literature for so long. His on point portrayal of their emotions, their moments of joy, their hardships and their relationships to others create a sense of realism which completely erases the author's gender. This can be in large part attributed to the autobiographical dimension of the plays, which plays a key role in understanding both the playwright and the characters.

3. A Mirror of the Author – An Autobiographical Approach

In the mid-20th century, literary critics, led by Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes, embraced structuralism. In reaction to the exaggerated biographically– oriented literature studies of his time, the latter's 1957 essay entitled "The Death of the Author" suggested that biographical elements regarding an author should be entirely set aside, in order to provide an unbiased analysis of the text itself. This method was thought to enable a more profound comprehension of literature by creating a pure distinction between the author and his work. Though the movement was quite popular in the 1960s (and paved the way for theoretical and practical developments in literature studies), it seems quite evident that there are limits to structuralist theories applied to literature, particularly in the case of Tennessee Williams. Studying the plays without taking into consideration the author's background and the events which led him to deal with certain aspects would be bereaving them of their depth but also of their essence – and reference, if texts, plays, movies are also meant to refer to some reality as a basis for the constructs they offer.

Much like his characters, Williams was subjected to incredibly complex family dynamics and the pressures of a paternalistic Southern society. The former all seem to be inspired from people who had a great impact on the playwright, and even from himself. The struggles they face are those that he and his family had to endure throughout their lives, be it chronic depression, the absence of a father figure, or being committed to an asylum. Blanche, Catharine and Laura are all strongly inspired from real people, particularly his sister Rose as regards the latter two, and Tennessee himself for the former.

a) *"I am Blanche"* – the Playwright and his Alter Egos

It goes without saying the figure of the poet/author/playwright is undoubtedly present in these three plays, starting with Tom in *TGM*, who shares the same name as the playwright (Tennessee's birth name is Thomas Lanier Williams). He is described as "*a poet with a job in a warehouse*"[135] in the character descriptions. The two men share many common points:

[135] *TGM*, The Characters: 228.

> Specific events in the play are clearly autobiographical of Williams' own life, such as Tom's employment at the International Shoe Company, his getting fired for writing poems, the family's expensive light bill as a result of Tom's late -night writing, and his father's missing presence in the house.[136]

Both Toms faced the pressures of becoming surrogate paternal figures in order to protect the household. This entails having a stable job in order to provide for the family. However, both were torn between this and their true passion, literature. It seems clear in the play that Tom Wingfield is in perpetual conflict with his mother Amanda because of this. Her perpetual criticism of his going to the movies and his smoking, paired with the sardonic comparisons with his father drive Tom to abandon the family home. Tom Williams met quite the same resistance with Ms. Edwina while he was working at the shoe company. He earned a living, yet the dullness of the job drove him to major depressive episodes. He then decided to leave the family home, and his beloved Rose in order to pursue his career as a writer.

The character of Sebastian Venable also seems representative of the playwright, since he too was a poet, and as his mother Violet states:

> Sebastian was a poet. That's what I meant when I said his life was his work because the work of a poet is the life of a poet, and – vice versa, the life of a poet is the work of a poet, I mean you can't separate them. (*SLS*, Sc. 1: 114.)

Violet is the phantasmal supportive mother whom the playwright desperately longed for. She has a clear understanding of her son and of his true nature, which she chooses to embrace and encourage. She grasps the idea that an artist cannot survive without his art, a trait which Edwina, like Amanda Wingfield failed to develop. Sebastian therefore seems to be the poet Williams wished to be, as far as family and creative freedom are concerned.

Another facet that both Catharine's cousin and Tennessee share is that of homosexuality. Though Violet refuses to believe her son's true sexual orientation, Sebastian was indeed drawn to men:

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[136] ABDULLAH, Ikhlas Sabah. "The Relationship of Tennessee Williams' Autobiographical Artist and Fragile Female character and its Presence on his Life and Works". *Journal of the College of Basic Education* 18:74 (2012): 11.

> Sebastian used to have a perfect arrangement with his overprotective mother Violet, who took him on vacation to various chic places and used to procure for him. In Cabeza de Lobo, Violet was replaced by Catherine. As D. A. Miller calls her, Catherine is "queer bait." [Miller, 98] The idea is simple: if you are a lonely homosexual with money in the 1950s and you want to meet young attractive men, travel with a woman who has charm and an easy– going manner. The implication, of course, is that those young men Sebastian had sex with were not necessarily homosexual themselves.[137]

. The playwright struggled very deeply with his sexuality, particularly in his younger years. Growing up in the "Bible Belt" and in an extremely Christian family – his grandfather, who practically raised him was a former Quaker and a minister. It goes without saying that in this context, it was impossible for Tom to embrace his true sexuality. It was only by leaving the South that he was able to do so, by enrolling in the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa for his senior year of college. Yet, Williams' background seems to show in *SLS* with Sebastian's fate. By transgressing "natural order" and using his cousin to lure young men into his bed, the latter is struck by what appears to be divine retribution, as if homosexuality were a sin and if Sebastian were the sacrificial victim offered to a wrathful god. This is where the playwright distances himself from the character, since Williams ended up living his homosexuality freely when moving to New York City – perhaps the public death of Sebastian was a way for Williams to feel absolved of his sinful private life in a society which was far from gay-friendly.

Beyond the apparent resemblance between Williams and his male characters, the most striking alter ego seems to be his female lead Blanche, though. Ronald Hayman expresses this in his book, *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else is an Audience*: "*Flaubert may never have said 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi!' but Williams explicitly claimed that he was Blanche […]*"[138]:

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[137] GUILBERT, George– Claude. "Queering and Dequeering the Text – Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*", *Cercles* 10 (2004): 88.
[138] HAYMAN, Ronald. *Tennessee Williams – Everyone Else is an Audience*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London (1993): xiv– xv.

> Tennessee could identify with both Stanley and Blanche. Her self– hatred, her self– destructiveness, and the pleasure she takes in musing on her own death helped to provoke [Elia] Kazan's comment: 'Blanche DuBois, the woman, *is* Williams. Blanche comes into a house where someone is going to murder her. The interesting part of it is that Blanche Dubois – Williams is *attracted* to the person who's going to murder her… I saw Blanche as Williams, an ambivalent figure who is attracted to the harshness and vulgarity around him at the same time as he fears it, because it threatens his life.[139]

When closely studying the character of Blanche, many common traits can be brought forth, starting with addiction and self-destruction. Throughout the play, she is seen drinking many times, as if it were a way to escape reality. As Mitch points out during their confrontation: "*You ought to lay off his [Stanley's] liquor. He says you've been lapping it up all summer like a wild– cat."*[140] Williams was notorious for his substance abuse, mainly drugs and alcohol, which ultimately led to his death in 1983 when he choked on a bottle cap while inebriated. While causes for addiction may be diverse, it seems that Tennessee, like Blanche, searched for an escape from the harsh reality of his own life. In a piece entitled "A Streetcar Named Success", the playwright deals with the necessity of writing to escape from the dullness of reality:

> It is only in his work that an artist can find reality and satisfaction, for the actual world is less intense than the world of his invention and consequently his life, without recourse to violent disorder, does not seem very substantial. The right condition for him is that in which his work is not only convenient but unavoidable.[141]

Williams' outlet, his solace, is embodied by his writing, through which he created a parallel world where he was the ringleader and where he had control over situations. Blanche's imaginary lovers, her imaginary life, are all created in order to have a modicum of control over her existence and to experience the "magic" she so longs for. Something has been broken inside of her, as is the case for Catharine and Laura and was for Tennessee himself. This rupture is mainly caused by the world and the people which surround them, which is why they retreat into a world of imagination.

One of the main characters which embodies the retreat into a fictitious world is Laura, who is directly based on a truly essential figure in Williams' life – his beloved sister Rose.

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[139] Ibid: 117.
[140] *ASND*, Sc. 9: 202 – 203.
[141] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. « A Streetcar Named Success »

b) Tennessee's Muse – Miss Rose

As we have seen, if Tennessee Williams was not attracted to the opposite sex, women played an incredibly important part in his life, starting with his elder sister Rose, with whom he had an extremely close bond. The playwright often wrote about their relationship, including in his *Memoirs*:

> I may have inadvertently omitted a good deal of material about the unusually close relations between Rose and me. Some perceptive critic of the theatre made the observation that the true theme of my work is "incest." My sister and I had a close relationship, quite unsullied by any carnal knowledge. […] And yet, our love was, and is, the deepest in our lives and was, perhaps, very pertinent to our withdrawal from extrafamilial attachments.[142]

The two were so close that their relationship could seem like that of an actual couple, without its physical dimension, which echoes the Violet/Sebastian couple as well. The image of the poet and his muse is very strong in William's theater, particularly in *SLS* and *TGM*. Yet, Williams' own muse, his Rose, was a far cry from the ideal representation of this figure, given their upbringing and her mental illness:

> The two greatest forces in the life of Tennessee Williams were his writing and his sister Rose. Tennessee's relationship with Rose was the closest in his life. He and his sister shared a traumatic childhood, having grown up with an abusive, alcoholic father and a compliant, depressed mother, but they found solace in each other […] Rose was a schizophrenic who underwent a bilateral frontal lobotomy in 1943 to treat her condition. After the operation, Williams watched his sister fall into an inescapable madness. He never forgave himself for what happened to her.[143]

Williams established a deep connection with his sister throughout their childhood since the two children shared many interests, as opposed to their younger brother Dakin. She was a very pretty young woman but was ravaged by a severe mental illness. Though Williams tried to support her as best as he could, her hysterical outbreaks and aggressive behavior led to an estrangement of the two, encouraging the playwright to leave the family home (as did his mother's opposition to his literary aspirations). It was at that time that Rose underwent the fateful lobotomy, which changed her forever. The intervention traumatized

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[142] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *Memoirs* (1972). London: Penguin Books [Penguin Modern Classics], 2007 (Reprinted Edition): 119 – 120.

[143] ERIKSON, Anna Lyse. *The Writer and his Rose: the Relationship of Tennessee Williams' Autobiographical Artist and Fragile Female Character, and its Presence in the Life and Work of a Troubled Genius*. Thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder (2010).

Tennessee, who felt responsible for what happened by leaving her. This guilt followed him through the remainder of his life, and each visit with his sister was only a painful reminder of the guilt which burdened him. In what perhaps seemed to be an attempt to lessen it, Williams wrote many times about it, in the journal he kept:

> Grand, God be with you.
>
> A chord breaking.
>
> 1 000 miles away.
>
> Rose. Her head cut open.
>
> A knife thrust in her brain.
>
> Me. Here. Smoking.
>
> My father, mean as a devil, snoring – 1 000 miles away.[144]

The entry does not seem very explicit at first glance, yet it reveals a great deal as to how Tennessee felt about what happened to his sister. The shortness of the sentences and the parataxis throughout, which almost liken the poem to a haiku, seems to translate a sense of shock, but also of helplessness. Words are not sufficient to express the trauma this surgical intervention caused him, which may be why he is at a loss for these same words. The only time Williams clearly expressed his opinion on his sister's lobotomy was in his *Memoirs*:

> I regard that as a tragically mistaken procedure, as I believe that without it Rose could have made a recovery and returned to what is called "normal life," which, despite its many assaults upon the vulnerable nature, is still preferable to an institution existence.[145]

The playwright was convinced that his sister could be cured, and that the institution itself and the sense of confinement which ensued were what drove her to madness. A parallel can clearly be drawn between Rose and Catharine, with the ominous threat of lobotomy. Both women share the same ailment – dementia praecox – and both demonstrate violent behavior and hysterical outbreaks. In the play, the viewer is made to believe that Catharine will be saved from the procedure, as opposed to the person who inspired her, perhaps serving as a cathartic outlet to bring forth the situation the playwright would have wished for.

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[144] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. Tewannee, Tennessee: Margaret Bradham Thornton [University of the South Press], 2006: 361.
[145] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *Memoirs* (1972). London: Penguin Books [Penguin Modern Classics], 2007 (Reprinted Edition): 251.

Though Rose was not saved in real life, the play seems to be a way for the author to make amends to his sister, since his mother decided on it while he was away and not on speaking terms with his family.

Aside from the character of Catharine, Laura Wingfield bears the most striking resemblance with Rose. Though Williams insisted that *TGM* and his other plays were not entirely autobiographical:

> Many scholars have noted, and it is impossible to deny, that Williams' fictional work is heavily laden with remnants of his own life. Williams admitted that this was true. However he stated many times that actual situations and characters in his plays were not taken from his life, but rather the "dynamics of the characters, the tensions", corresponded with what was going on with him at the time[146]

Though Laura and Rose differ in many ways, starting with the former's physical ailment and her lack of social life (Rose did in fact make her debut and date men), their common retreat into a parallel and illusory world makes them very similar. Their obvious fragility, mental for both and physical for Laura, is also an important factor which binds these two figures. They also seem to depend on others, particularly on their mothers, Edwina and Amanda, as well as their brothers, both Toms, which serve as surrogate father figures. Laura's close relationship with her brother Tom is a reminder of Tennessee and Rose's own incredibly tight bond. Tom Wingfield's nostalgia transpires at the end of the play in Scene 7, when he describes his departure and the years he has spent away from his family and it seems clear that his biggest regret is to have left his sister behind. He is haunted by her memory when he says "*Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!*"[71] Tom's regrets regarding Laura clearly reflect Tennessee's own when reminded of Rose and the dilemma between staying close to her and developing his writing career:

> [This play] represent[s] a time in Williams' life in which he felt torn between a responsibility to care for his sick sister and move on with his own life and work.[147]

This dilemma followed Williams throughout his adult life, yet, contrary to Tom Wingfield, he stayed close to his sister until his own death. Though she was institutionalized her entire

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[146] ERIKSON, Anna Lyse. *The Writer and his Rose: the Relationship of Tennessee Williams' Autobiographical Artist and Fragile Female Character, and its Presence in the Life and Work of a Troubled Genius*. Thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder (2010): 3.

[147] Ibid: 12.

life after her 1943 lobotomy, he maintained a close relationship and kept her close to his heart, realizing that she was not responsible for the attitude she had had towards him, and that he was her only true friend. Though it was too late to pick up the broken pieces of his relationship with his sister prior to the intervention (much like the pieces of the broken unicorn in *TGM*), he strove to keep his deep connection with the person he stayed closest to throughout his life.

TGM was published in 1949, that is to say six years after the fateful lobotomy, and was Williams' first critically-acclaimed stage production, almost as if writing about an issue close to his heart came out as a recipe for success – thus elevating Rose to the status of muse for Tennessee. This was the first of many plays, adding to the poems and journal entries, which would compose the playwright's body of work.

It seems clear that aspects of Miss Rose's personality are distilled into each of Williams' characters, Catharine and Laura as we have seen, but also in Blanche DuBois. The latter's love of fashion and of anything beautiful or precious is a trait which was notable in Rose's personality, which Williams confirms in his *Memoirs*: "*Rose's passion, as well as Blanche's, was clothes.*"[148] Rose was also a very outgoing young woman prior to her major schizophrenic outbreaks, especially with men, and similarly to Blanche and Catharine, she could use her seductive power to attract the opposite sex:

> She [Rose] was a very normal – but highly sexed – girl who was tearing herself apart mentally and physically by those repressions imposed upon her by Miss Edwina's monolithic Puritanism.[149]

The world of illusion, filled with "magic", to which Blanche is so attached, is also the world in which Rose lived, both prior to the lobotomy and after it.

Tennessee's elder sister suffered from the prejudice caused by her mental ailment, leading her to be rejected by society and to end her life behind the closed walls of a sanitarium. He obviously took inspiration from the injustice of her situation to create these incredibly flawed and realistic characters, as if to bring to light his sister's plight and bring her justice in a way. Though Laura does not manage to escape her fate in 1949, Catharine, in a play which was written sixteen years after Rose's lobotomy, finally triumphs over her

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[148] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *Memoirs* (1972). London: Penguin Books [Penguin Modern Classics], 2007 (Reprinted Edition): 120.
[149] Ibid: 119.

family and the medical institutions, as if to serve his sister justice and provide her with the "happy ending" he had always envisioned for her. The characters and their evolutions thus mirror Rose's own state and its changes, their mental deterioration echoing her own.

In keeping with this, one of the contributing factors of Rose's mental state, her lobotomy, and one of Tennessee's everlasting demons was the family unit, or lack thereof.

c) Toxic Relationships: An Unhappy Upbringing

Tennessee Williams was always very pragmatic as to understanding the roots of his troubled existence, which served as an incredibly rich inspiration for his plays and characters. His upbringing strikes as clearly unconventional for the time. His father, Cornelius Coffin, was an itinerant salesman for a shoe company, and hardly ever home. He was an alcoholic, whose violent outbreaks created a climate of domestic violence in the Williams household. In addition to this, Tennessee was a fragile and sensitive child, unlike his younger brother Dakin, which led him to become a scapegoat for his father's violent behavior. This tense climate within his own family left deep scars in the playwright's mind and soul. His mother Edwina was distraught over Cornelius's behavior at home and his infidelities, but unwillingly complied. Williams painted a rather tame portrait of his father in his *Memoirs*:

> My father, Cornelius Coffin, grew up mostly without the emollient influence of a mother, as the beautiful Isabel Coffin Williams died of TB at the age of twenty–eight. Consequently he had a rough and touch character. It was not softened at the military academy of Bellbuckle […]. Mother claims that he remained good–looking till he took to drink. I never saw him during his time of abstention and good looks. […] He became a shoe salesman and was very popular and successful at this itinerant profession, during which he acquired a great taste for poker and for light ladies – which was another source of distress to my mother.[150]

On the rare occasions when Cornelius was home, which decreased with time, conversations turned to confrontations, leading Edwina to retreat back to her parents' home in Tennessee. The state, synonymous to the happier times of his childhood, would later on inspire the playwright when deciding to change his first name. Laura and Tom's absent father is only

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[150] WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *Memoirs* (1972). London: Penguin Books [Penguin Modern Classics], 2007 (Reprinted Edition): 12 – 13.

represented through a photograph in the play, described as "*a relic of the faithless Mr. Wingfield.*"[151] His desertion from the family home and his unfaithfulness vividly remind the reader of Williams' own father. Amanda is clearly bitter when reminiscing about her past gentleman callers and her eventually choosing the charming Mr. Wingfield as opposed to a decent young man.

Amanda's perpetual conflict with Tom over the necessity to be the man of the house in his father's place, and the fear of her son "*taking after his ways*"[152] pushed her to be incredibly harsh on Tom, as Edwina was with Tennessee. This eventually pushes both young men to leave the family home, out of exasperation, but also out of their need to find themselves. Both mother figures placed incredibly high hopes on their children, and eventually smothered them with their omnipresence in their lives. Amanda's will to help Laura ironically pushes her further into her world of illusion. It is because she wants her daughter to have a normal life that she goes out of her way to provide her with it, failing to understand her daughter's real needs. This is the case with the gentleman callers, with business school, but also with the dinner with Jim, when Amanda tries to transform Laura into a young woman she is not, with fake breasts made of tissue paper and ill-fitting garments. As we have previously mentioned, it is only when her mother is not around that Laura can fully be herself and open up, as is the case when she is alone with Jim. Miss Edwina was very controlling of her daughter Rose, in an effort to protect her and her well–being. As we have mentioned previously, her daughter's sexuality was a problem for the very Christian Edwina, who sheltered her very much. She also took medical decisions for Rose, including the lobotomy. As we know, the decision was highly questioned by Williams himself.

Likewise, Blanche tries to take on the role of the mother figure with her younger sister. When the sisters meet again in Scene 1 of the play, Blanche tells Stella "*You messy child, you, you've spilt something on that pretty white collar! About your hair – you ought to have it cut in a feather bob with your dainty features,*"[153]as an attempt to establish herself

[151] *TGM*, Sc. 3: 250.
[152] Ibid, Sc. 4: 259.
[153] *ASND*, Sc. 1: 122.

as a figure of authority. Blanche is a very proud woman and embraces traditional values, where the elder children are meant to take care of the younger ones. Yet, as the play unfolds, the sisters' roles are reversed and it is Stella who assumes the maternal role, particularly in the last scene when she says, "*How is my baby?*"[154] This reversal of roles between the siblings can also be observed in Williams' own life. His elder sister being very ill, he had to take the responsibility of caring for her and of protecting her when she was incapable of doing it herself, that is until their estrangement. It is most likely for this reason, and the regrets which ensued, that Williams created incredibly strong family bonds between his characters.

Resentment and bitterness are also key in understanding the link between the playwright's life and his works. Whether it is Amanda and Mr. Wingfield, Blanche and Stanley or Violet and Catharine, characters seem to be in perpetual conflict with each other. Blanche represents a threat to Stanley – she is the independent woman who supposedly fends for herself and her arrival into his home potentially means that she will try to convert Stella, the diligent housewife, to become more outspoken. Blanche stands for everything Stanley despises – she is a coquette, spends her money on trifles (perfumes, jewelry and clothing), she does not do any form of house work and she needs to be waited on. Yet, Stanley has to comply with her because she is a part of his family.

Violet also has to bear the cross of her deceased husband's relatives, whom she sees as a thorn in her side financially as well as socially. We have previously stated that she does not even consider them as her own family, yet she has been providing for them for many years. Violet sees Catharine as an enemy, who took her son, the apple of her eyes, away from her. She now seeks vengeance and to bereave her of what little sanity she has left by bribing a doctor into lobotomizing her. As opposed to the other plays, Catharine's direct family, that is to say her mother and her brother, do not directly support her, they are more worried about their financial profit than her well-being. Violet has been providing for Catharine and her family on a financial level, as we have previously mentioned. If Catharine continues to slander Sebastian's reputation, Violet will stop helping them financially. In Scene 4, George tells Catharine:

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[154] *ASND*, Sc. 11: 217.

> I'm sorry, Cathie, but you know we need that money! Mama and me, we – Cathie? I got ambitions! And, Cathie, I'm young! – I want things, I need them, Cathie! So will you please think about me? Us? (*SLS*, Sc. 4: 135.)

Here, we are presented with a figure of the brother which is unlike Tom Wingfield or Tom Williams. Where the latter two support their sister until they reach their breaking point, and have no other choice but to make a decision for themselves, George Holly does not even try to support or relate to his sister, his sole interest is his own self, another clear example of one of the contributing factors to Catharine's ill– being. Throughout the play, Catharine realizes the toxic influence her family has on her, that she can only rely on herself, which leads her to say "*I think the situation is – clear to me, now…*"[155] – the expression of her awakening, even though the revelations she has had are taboo, and it is unlikely thereby that she will ever be heard. This is perhaps a manifestation of the crumbling of her defense mechanisms and her finally understanding Violet's scheme.

The devices used by Williams, both through the tense writing itself, but also through the characters' tense relationships, enable the viewer to achieve a better comprehension of his lead female characters and their struggles. It is through the meticulous and sometimes imperceptible details, including the symbolic gestures or movements brought about by the stage directions, that we are made to grasp the subtle keys to their psyche. It may be a word written on a screen or a faint noise in the background, but these elements are essential to the author's vision and therefore to the viewer's perception.

The Freudian elements perceptible in the plays provide a better understanding, mainly when dealing with Catharine since it is the hypnotic process, paired with the truth serum, which enables her to finally voice the real story of what happened to Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo. Sigmund Freud's theories need readjustment however, because of their tendency to limit women (and men) to their sexual impulses. While Catharine and Blanche clearly stand as sexual figures, Laura cuts out a childish and almost angelic figure, deprived of any sexual connotation apart from the metaphor brought about by the unicorn. Though sexuality itself does play an important role in understanding them, it must clearly not be the main cause to take into consideration in order to understand why they are prone to an impending mental breakdown.

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[155] *SLS*, Sc. 4: 139.

Women, who had been stigmatized for so long, and who still are to a certain extent, were finally given a platform to share their ordeal. As Femi Oyebode states in *Madness at the Theater*: *"The effect of this closeness and affection is that Tennessee Williams treats difference, madness with understanding and sympathy.*"[156] Yet how is it that the playwright so truthfully portrayed such conflicted women? The essence of the answer is of a very personal nature – sending us back to his sister as his muse, but also to his homosexual tendencies and his difficulties in defining his own female identity perhaps. His own difference and marginality certainly made him more compassionate towards those who were oppressed because of their difference. It is also through these women that Williams, despite his male perspective, provided a voice not only to those suffering from the injustices caused by mental illness and its perception, but also to his dearly beloved Rose. Since she could obviously not be "saved" in the real world, he created an alternate reality through his plays in order to free her, and himself, from the harshness of their fates, although the plays' endings rather point to society getting rid of the female protagonists' rebellious or unconventional individualities by putting them away in asylums, perhaps as a reminder of an inescapable fate. It is through his plays that Tennessee could exorcise the demons which plagued his and his sister's childhoods, thus leading them to create their own fictitious worlds, much like he went on doing with his own characters. Other playwrights followed this path with intimate plays and the notion of inner worlds, such as Edward Albee in his 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?, which brings forth George and Martha's fictitious son, presented as a game between the couple.

[156] OYEBODE, Femi. "Tennessee Williams and the Theater of the Mind". *Madness at the theatre*, The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2012: 61.

Conclusion

The female protagonists of these three plays deeply struggle with the tensions, conflict and pressures which reign over their day-to-day lives. An explanation to these difficulties lies in the mental illnesses from which they suffer. While all three are victims of Post– Traumatic Stress Disorder, induced by an event in their lives – Laura's impediment and public humiliations, Catherine's witnessing of Sebastian's death and Blanche's responsibility for Allan's death – they are also affected by deeply rooted illnesses, Dementia Praecox (Schizophrenia) in Catharine's case and Blanche's to a certain extent, Borderline Personality Disorder for the latter, and Social Anxiety Disorder as well as Separation Anxiety Disorder for Laura. These ailments condition and provide an explanation to the characters' reactions, and thus enable an explanation as to their breakdown. While they are not all institutionalized, it seems as though their own minds become an asylum of sorts, in which they are trapped. The lobotomy, a treatment used to "cure" hysterical patients, is an active threat for Catharine, but also a theoretical one for Blanche and Laura, were they to lose contact with reality (thus resulting in a symbolical procedure and remain trapped in the displaced world of their invention). The surgical intervention is destined to make them more calm and docile, and would thus put these unconventional women into a mold of sorts.

We find that their breakdown is not solely caused by a biological predisposition, but also by surrounding factors, which include the pressures of society, the place in which they are and also their families. For it is the family nucleus and the dynamics it brings about which push these women towards madness. Had Laura's mother not been so controlling of her children's lives, the former would have perhaps emancipated herself and gained assurance, rather than sinking back into her illusory world after the encounter with Jim, and even more after Tom's sudden departure, as we may assume. Likewise, Blanche's own breakdown also results in Stella's inability to control her husband and protect her sister. What seems to be the most striking element, apart from Blanche being taken to a mental hospital at the end, is that she stays with Stanley and supports him in despite what he did to her sister. Could it be that she is unaware of his doings?

As for Catharine, it seems as though her destructive spiral, which was in large part fueled by Violet's crusade against her, has come to a halt, and her situation is in clear opposition with the previous two. Blanche seems a bit neurotic at the beginning of the play and her mental condition slowly degrades until she loses touch with reality. Laura starts off the play locked in her illusory world, briefly escapes from it, and is then sucked back into its realm at the end of the play. Catharine, on the contrary, is presented to us after a full year of mental struggle, and the play, which spans through one afternoon, while the others cover several days, is able to break free from her trauma as well as her family's negative influence. Dr. Cuckrowicz believes her, which could mean that she will be able to go back to a normal life.

The Southern Gothic elements which are present within the plays help us to understand the dynamics which involve these characters – the remnants of an antebellum society, to which Blanche, Amanda and Violet, the Southern Belles, are still attached, and which separate them from the modern world, respectively embodied by Stella, Laura (to a certain extent) and Catharine. It is partially because these characters do not belong to the same world that they fail to understand each other and live together. In addition to this, the atmosphere of the settings contributes to the underlying tension – the dampness, the heat, the decrepit buildings and the background music all play their part in the deconstruction of the characters' defenses.

It goes without saying that one of the most prominent factors involved in the protagonists' mental instability is their relationship with men. With the absence of their fathers, they are somehow drawn to men who embody the missing protective figure or fail to do so – as is the case for Catharine and Sebastian, since he cares for her whilst in Europe, Blanche and Mitch as well as Laura and Jim, since the men could potentially provide for and protect the two women. In addition to this, the role of the brother as a surrogate father is also very important in *TGM*, since Tom is somewhat expected to take his father's place and watch over his mother and his sister. It seems that the female characters are attracted to an ideal of what they would want these men to be rather than to who they actually are though, which leads to disappointment and conflict.

Sexuality also plays a key factor as a trigger to their downfall. Blanche and Catharine seem to be punished for being overly-sexual women, as is could also be the case for Laura, this time for her lack of sexuality, which deprives her of any seductive powers to attract men. This is why Jim sees her as a little sister rather than as a potential lover. Some

balance is what is truly missing in all their relationships; the women always seem to oscillate between extremes, particularly Blanche with the ambiguity between the chaste woman she portrays herself as and the fallen woman she actually is.

It appears that Blanche, Laura and Catharine primarily struggle with the dichotomy between who they are and who they want/are expected to be, which, if left unresolved, results in deep mental ailments. Laura is perfectly at ease with her glass animals and her fictitious world, yet she is violently pulled out of it so that she can lead a "normal" life, planned out for her by her mother – getting married and becoming a housewife – quite in vain. Blanche was bereft of the innocence of her love with Allan's suicide, which led her to engage in sex with men in order to be maintained by them, and perhaps to fill the void he left in her heart. But her life took an unwilling perverse turn as she aged since her never– ending love for the figure of her deceased young husband led her to get involved with a minor, the last nail in the coffin of her troublesome life in Laurel. Blanche tries to escape her past when arriving in New Orleans, she tries to become the delicate young lady she once was to seduce Mitch, but she has gone too far, and fate or some nemesis seems to strike her through the merciless character of Stanley. Catharine is made to either comply with her aunt's depiction of her, that of a man-eater, a praying mantis of sorts who used her beloved son, and her true self, the young woman who was used by a pervasive narcissist and has to deal with the aftermath of his horrible death. The former case would potentially save her from the lobotomy, while the truth would probably encourage the procedure. Though Catharine struggles deeply, the truth serum and hypnotic technique used by Dr. Cuckrowicz enable her to speak the truth and eventually be saved. She is the only character who breaks past this struggle and finds herself, which leads her to be freed from her ordeal, at least this is what is implied with the doctor's last statement, with which the play ends.

While certain circumstances in these plays seem unrealistic, starting with Sebastian's demise, the underlying message of these plays is deeply rooted in reality, and particularly in the playwright's own life. We have shown that each character embodies a facet of the people in Williams' life or of the author himself. The main influence behind these women was his sister Rose. Blanche, Catharine and Laura seem to be an in-between of the two siblings, as they share the same struggles, both on a mental level, but also on a social one, which gives great depth to the characters, and conveys a sense of realism which touches the reader/viewer. The sense of identification which results from this creates an intimate relationship between the characters and those to whom they are presented. This is

why the plays touched so many, particularly women, and enabled Williams to become one of the greatest American playwrights of his times.

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Illustration 1

Illustration of a Freeman– Watts Transorbital Lobotomy, from their book Psychosurgery. Intelligence, Emotion and Social Behavior Following Prefrontal Lobotomy for Mental Disorders (1942).

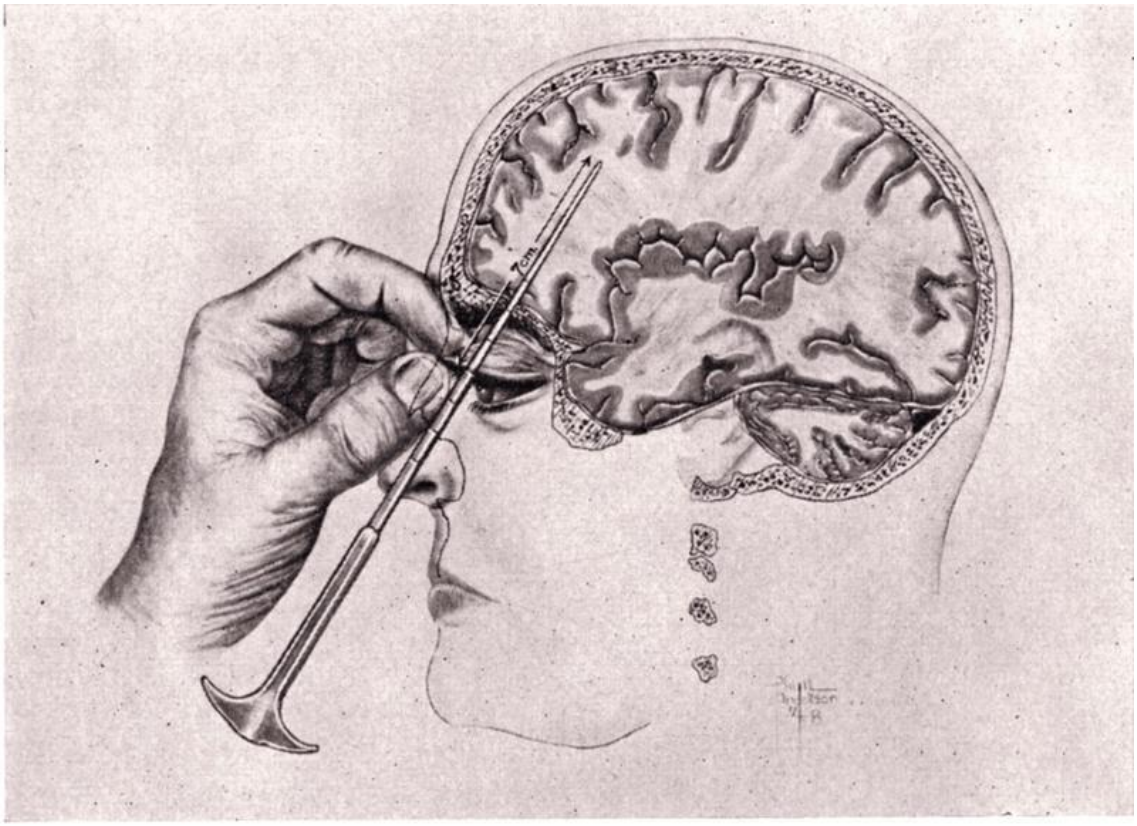

Figure 20 b. Transorbital leucotome parallel with bony ridge of nose, with 7 cm. mark at margin of upper eyelid.

Illustration 2

Blanche's rape by Stanley (Scene 10), taken from Elia Kazan's 1951 film starring Vivian Leigh and Marlon Brando

RÉSUMÉ

Les troubles mentaux sont longtemps restés tabous au fil des siècles, particulièrement au sujet des femmes. Dans la littérature, elles étaient représentées comme des marginales, qui peinaient, et échouaient bien souvent, à trouver leur place au sein de la société. Les progrès médicaux de la fin du XIXe et du début du XXe siècle ont permis de mettre en lumière ces maux et la souffrance qui en découle.

C'est suite à cela que la littérature s'est ouverte au sujet, tout particulièrement à travers l'œuvre de Tennessee Williams, qui s'inscrit en partie dans la veine du « Southern Gothic ». Les personnages y sont empreints de tourments psychologiques, dont les causes sont diverses : des familles dysfonctionnelles, une société rongée par les inégalités, et des évènements traumatisants plus ou moins sordides. C'est dans ce climat que nous découvrons les personnages de Blanche DuBois dans *Un Tramway Nommé Désir*, Catharine Holly dans *Soudain, l'Eté Dernier* et Laura Wingfield dans *La Ménagerie de Verre*. Ces trois femmes, que peu de choses rassemblent, se retrouvent plongées dans les profondeurs de leur esprit, jusqu'à sombrer dans la folie, ou bien s'en sortir.

Cette étude a pour but de mettre en lumière les facteurs déclencheurs ainsi que les mécanismes qui entrainement la descente aux enfers de ces personnages. C'est par une analyse des troubles psychologiques dont souffrent ces dernières, de leurs relations, du cadre confiné dans lequel elles évoluent, et des symboles mis en place par le dramaturge que nous tenterons de mettre en lumière la dégradation de chacune, ainsi que leur signifiance en regard des traumatismes d'enfance et d'adolescence de Williams lui–même.

SUMMARY SINTESI RESUMEN ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Mental illness was a taboo matter through the centuries, particularly concerning women. In literature, they were portrayed as outcasts, who struggled, and often failed, to find a place in society. Medical progress made at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century brought forth these ailments and the suffering which ensued.

Following this, the literary field opened up to the subject of mental illness, and particularly through Tennessee Williams' Southern Gothic work as far as the theater was concerned. His characters are marked by psychological torments, the causes of which are diverse: dysfunctional family dynamics, a society ravaged by social inequalities and traumatizing events of a somewhat sordid nature. It is in this climate that we discover the characters of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Catharine Holly in *Suddenly, Last Summer* and Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. These three women, who seem very different at first glance, all find themselves sucked into the depths of their own psyches, until they fall into the realm of insanity or break free from it.

This study aims to deconstruct and analyze the triggers and mechanisms which lead these characters to experience a mental breakdown. It is through an in– depth case study of the ailments which plague these characters, of their relationship, of the stifling environment in which they evolve, as well as the symbols which the playwright carefully sets up that we will try to bring forth the degradation of these female protagonists, as well as their significance in relationship with the traumatic childhood and adolescence of Williams himself.

MOTS CLÉS: Tennessee Williams, La Ménagerie de Verre, Soudain L'Eté Dernier, Un Tramway Nommé Désir, Maladie mentale, Folie, Asile Psychiatrique, Lobotomie, Rôle des Sexes, Southern Gothic, Dynamiques Familiales

Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, *Suddenly, Last Summer*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Mental illness, Madness, Asylum, Lobotomy, Southern Gothic, Gender Roles, Family Dynamics