



# From Supernumerary to Principal: The Role of Trauma as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

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From Supernumerary to Principal:  
The Role of Trauma as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Tennessee Williams's  
*A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

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A Thesis in the Field of Dramatic Arts  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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## Abstract

Through the lens of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), this thesis examines Williams's characters, Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar named Desire* and Brick Pollitt from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as trauma survivors who struggle to find or reject pathways toward wholeness. Blanche seeks relief from the symptoms of PTSD, but is thwarted by her community, while Brick rejects resolving overwhelming trauma, engaging in subsequent destructive behaviors despite the admonishment and enablement by his family. This thesis delves deeply into the initial onset of trauma within each character's history, as well as the demonstrated symptoms of PTSD due to unresolved trauma.

PTSD's roots originate within trauma research, specifically in the early writings of Charcot, Janet, and Freud. Despite the long history of trauma research, it wasn't until the 1980s that PTSD was recognized by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and codified into a series of symptoms. The traumatogenic event separates the survivor from her/himself, and cognition of this wound may be impeded by the overwhelming nature of the trauma. If the survivor is unable to integrate the trauma into the quilt of experiences over a lifetime, she/he continues to exist in separateness, which may develop into PTSD. While this thesis is not a clinical analysis on trauma, a primer on PTSD and its associated symptoms based on texts by notable authors in the field are included in order to present a more defined and supported argument. Evidence for this thesis includes lines from the text,

critical analyses from peer reviewed journals and university press textbook anthologies.

This investigation concludes that critical analyses have been limited to observations that Blanche and Brick have undergone trauma, however there has not been sufficient investigation into the etiology of the trauma. Critical analyses without examining the etiology of the trauma enables limited portrayal of these characters, whereas a psychological understanding empowers comprehensive portrayal that is reflective of the entire spectrum of an individual. Lastly, these findings offer deeper understanding to the subtext of a life-long story arc from an initial trauma that occurred distantly in the past, as well as the subsequent manifestations of PTSD that occurred more recently before each play begins and recurrently appear while in action on stage.

## Biosketch

Krista Carmichael (née Ernewein) is a graduate of Newcomb College of Tulane University with a B.S. in Cell and Molecular Biology, and worked in laboratory research setting from 1994- 2002. In 2006, Krista joined Harvard University as research administration staff in the Office for Sponsored Programs. In 2010, she joined the Organismic and Evolutionary Biology department as a senior research administrator. Krista's love of science, its introspection into the "how's and why's" of life, are evident in this thesis. Informed by research experience in the biological sciences, this humanities thesis enjoys an intersection of science and art.

Krista is a lyric mezzo-soprano singer-actor. She is a soloist for sacred and secular events. She has performed in local musical theatre and light opera programs as well as sung the National Anthem (American) at several sport arenas. She enjoys participating in the New England Conservatory summer opera program, singing with Jazz ensembles (1930s - 1960s standards), as well as performing improvisational immersive theatre with the Marley Bridges theatre company in Newport, RI. Based on Krista's performance experience, this thesis is grounded in the methodological character study and analysis.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to those who are searching within themselves to find wholeness and healing, as well as to those guiding luminaries who supportively assist growth during the journey.

## Acknowledgements

In acknowledgement for his assistance and sage insights, I remain grateful to Professor Thomas Derrah for serving as my Thesis Director. Thank you to the staff in the Extension School for their support of my thesis, in particular to Dr. Talaya Delaney and Asst. Dir. Sarah Powell.

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## Introduction

The curtain rises, the stage is lit, the audience awaits the actor's first movement that kinetically discharges into a kaleidoscope of experience. For well-written plays, these experiences of paused breaths, explosive expansions, plot twists and character journeys create an alchemical process that transforms the audience. By the curtain call, despite having seen the same performance, it's unlikely that any audience member would be able to speak to their experience in the same way. The same might be said of literary readings of plays by Tennessee Williams. Readers might enter page one and leave the last page with completely different understandings of the text. This is true of well-made art. It is able to inspire, to transform experience into various shades of personal meaning- on whose canvas are painted vivid spectrums of opinion.

Williams, throughout his career, was able to write in such a way that captures the imagination and critical reflections of readers. So moving are his theatrical writings that several decades after their initial publication, they continue to elicit comment and interaction through "off-stage dialogue" found in museums such as the Key West exhibit, conventions such as the esteemed literary festival in New Orleans, and critical analyses. Many writers have contributed to the matework surrounding Williams's art. Within this thesis, I hope to meaningfully contribute to the thoughtful body of work by exploring in depth the rich texture and complexity found in Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Specifically, that the characters Blanche and Brick have undergone such significant trauma that they both develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While Blanche uses limited resources available to her to find reprieve from PTSD, her community thwarts these attempts. As a counterpoint, I will show that Brick refuses pathways to health or forgiveness, despite his family's continual assistance. Through this thesis, I hope that actors, directors, interested audiences, and scholars may find sub-textual information to deepen their understanding of these works.

This thesis comprises five chapters. Chapter one includes a primer on early trauma theory and the contemporary work on trauma studies, specifically of post-traumatic stress disorder. This chapter provides a basis by which Blanche and Brick may be assessed. Chapter two briefly addresses theatre and its treatment of trauma in staged work. It touches upon the lineage of PTSD in theatrical work through some of the earliest Greek plays. Lastly, it includes a brief overview of some of Williams' other works to demonstrate that undergoing trauma does not automatically confer PTSD. Chapter three explores Blanche as a survivor of PTSD by her presented symptoms in the action of the play. It examines critical works on *Streetcar*, situating Blanche as a PTSD survivor in the milieu of scholarly thought. Chapter four reveals Brick as a character whose lifelong adversities (narcissism, drug use, identity adjustment) as well as disavowed culpability for the loss of his bosom friend, Skipper, culminates in the development of PTSD. It intersperses critical thought and assessment of Brick's relationship with his family and himself as it relates to his PTSD. Chapter five provides the final curtain in conclusion of the thesis.

## Chapter I

### Trauma Theory: Then and Now

Studies on hysteria provided some of the earliest glimpses to trauma research. As expressed in his 1920 work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud evidences trauma as a wound, an “interruption of consciousness,” due to an event that has occurred too quickly and unexpectedly to be fully grasped as it occurs. Because the trauma survivor is unable to fully understand the event, it “imposes itself repeatedly” by flashbacks, nightmares, and the repetitive actions of the survivor (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4, 91, 104). “Freud would call this repetitive self injury after the trauma, as *traumatic neurosis*... trauma repeat[ing] itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (2). Janet, a contemporary of Freud, noted a difference between the recall/memory of the traumatic event and the other non-traumatic memories in a person’s life. Recall of the traumatic event may occur in clear, minute detail, whereas other non-traumatic memories may fade over time. In order to label Blanche or Brick as a trauma survivor by early trauma theory we would find evidence of a repeated, undesirable intrusion. This intrusion would lead to a cascade of other effects that the survivor may not be aware had occurred. Although Freud, Janet and later Lacan noted their traumatic neurosis endemic to trauma patients, the vernacular to specifically identify the onset and ensuing set of symptoms did not come into existence until decades later.

In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) officially diagnosed and provided nomenclature for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The diagnosis includes symptoms of what had been previously been called combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis (Caruth, *Trauma* 1). The definition expounded upon early trauma theory. As Caruth, a well-known scientist in current trauma theory, describes as: “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event(s), which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event, along with *numbing* that may have begun during or after the experience, and possible *increased arousal to* (and *avoidance of*) stimuli recalling the event” (4; emphasis mine). Information is used differently by those suffering with PTSD: compulsive exposure to situations reminiscent of the trauma, active attempts to avoid triggers, the lost ability to modulate physiological responses to stress, problems with attention, distractibility, and stimulus discrimination, and finally alterations in their psychological defense mechanisms and personal identity (Van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress* 9).

Because the experience of trauma creates an absence of integrated self-story, the sufferer is unable to weave the experience into their collective history to make a seamless view of self from past to present. Viewing trauma as an unresolved experience, constructive psychology examines the impact of trauma on personal narrative framework creation and impediments to story one’s life (Sewell and Williams 205). Methods for psychological healing affirm patient experiences as credible, as building blocks to recovery. A current therapy for PTSD includes re-integrating the detached memories into the cohesive whole of the patient’s personal

narrative. This “story-ing”<sup>1</sup> requires a social component to at least witness and possibly affirm the story. However, traumatic memory does not necessarily require another’s presence to story. As we have seen, traumatic memory will arise unrequested, and at times other aspects (flashbacks, avoidance, numbing, response to stimuli, etc.) will follow automatically (Van der Kolk, *Trauma* 160,163). Due to the detached narrative, inability to re-tell a seamless history, survivors are met with skepticism towards the reality of the traumatic occurrence and even the reality of themselves, including circumstances of death and loss.

Traumatic memorial metaconstruction, the experience of living with an unresolved traumatic remembrance, [creates] discontinuity, a person’s ability to story his or her experience in a coherent way is compromised... The traumatized person cannot tell a believable (to herself) story of who he or she will become. (Sewell and Williams 209)

Thus both *narrative memory*, the telling of an integrated experience, and *traumatic memory* become suspect, especially when combined with the proclivity of the survivor to engage in disassociative fantasy to avoid any reminders of the trauma.

Scientific theory on hysteria drifted from credible testimony to suspicious recall; casting doubt on whether personal history “story-ing” could be relied upon as fact due to the evolving understanding of the effects of trauma on memory.

Throughout the history of the field, dispute has raged over whether patients with post-traumatic conditions are entitled to care and respect or deserving of contempt, whether they are genuinely suffering or malingering, whether their histories are true or false, and if false, whether imagined or maliciously fabricated. (Herman 8)

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<sup>1</sup> “Story-ing” is a term used in current trauma literature, scholars and health professionals. It describes the active narration of events as remembered and expressed by the patient.

Women in particular were assigned suspicion that their symptoms were due to other disorders, rather than trauma. Early work on hysteria created a division between women and men. Women were “prone” to emotional unbalance and “uncontrollable irrationality” as a biological part of their gender. The enabled comparison of women as “the other” while men were within the normative standard perpetuated the exclusionary status attached to either gender. Trauma research, exclusive to military combat through the 1900s, furthered this gender disparity.<sup>2</sup> Current leaders in traumatic theory; Herman, Caruth and Van der Kolk, affirm that women were initially excluded from this trauma patient subset, since patients of PTSD were primarily war veterans, who were also primarily male. After applying the same PTSD diagnostic criteria to females and patients who were not in combat, it became apparent that women were demonstrating the same symptoms as male patients. This discovery of gender disparity required a re-engineering of the understanding in trauma studies as late as the 1970s. Over time, the scientific community abandoned hysteria in women as self-induced masochism, agreeing that PTSD includes many after effects, sometimes disguising itself in anxiety and panic disorders, for example.

Trauma survivors experiencing PTSD become caught between oscillating extremes of feeling and numbing, action and inaction that cause an amplified “sense of unpredictability and helplessness” (Herman 47, 49). This helplessness is a

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<sup>2</sup> Ulman and Brothers’s comprehensive work on traumatic meaning further elucidate this disparity by historical reference to the impact of Freud’s “de-emphasis of the ‘material reality’ of sexual trauma... from real occurrences to unconscious fantasy and conflict.” Thus trauma study became inequitably separated by gender: *anxiety neurosis* was formed by female hysterics in fantasy and delusion, and *traumatic neurosis*, found in male combat veterans, was formed by unquestioned real events (117, 155, 297).



hallmark of PTSD effects. “Central to the experience of traumatic stress are the dimensions of helplessness, powerlessness, and threat to one’s life. Trauma attacks the individual’s sense of self and predictability of the world” (McFarlane 136). Trauma survivors have difficulty envisioning one’s future, or see it as an opportunity for more trauma (Sewell and Williams 216). Further indicators to trauma are heightened sensitivity to stimulus, avoidance, anxiety and aggressiveness stemming from triggers that recall the trauma. As we will examine further in this thesis, both Blanche and Brick demonstrate PTSD response:

People with PTSD tend to move immediately from stimulus to response without often realizing what makes them so upset. They tend to experience intense negative emotions (fear, anxiety, anger, panic) in response to even minor stimuli; as a result, they either overreact and threaten others, or shut down and freeze... continue to react to certain physical and emotional stimuli as if there were a continuing threat of annihilation... . (Van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress* 13)

PTSD survivors will engage in escapism and avoidance to find some temporary relief from unwanted recurrently intrusive thoughts, sounds and images. Due to the intrusiveness of PTSD, “avoidance may take many different forms, such as keeping away from reminders, ingesting drugs or alcohol in order to numb awareness of distressing emotional states, or utilizing dissociation to keep unpleasant experiences from conscious awareness” (Van der Kolk, *Traumatic Stress* 12).

The initial trauma separates the survivor from her/himself, and its overwhelming nature prevents processing the traumatogenic event(s). The survivor may find her/himself emotionally frozen at the stage of development in which that significant trauma occurred. Unable to develop fully, survivors are left with

capabilities at the time of trauma, which may become replayed in recurrent, unbidden thoughts, images, sounds or smells. Healing PTSD involves a dialogue with the traumatic event so that the survivor is able to integrate the trauma-event narrative into the narrative of experiences over a lifetime, as well as understanding how trauma initially occurred and how it developed into a disorder. If the survivor is unable to integrate the trauma narrative, she/he continues to exist in separateness.

#### Actors: Places!

As a writer, Williams uses vivid and colorful language effectively and well. His work excels when placed in its intended experiential setting, the stage. As a playwright, he uses the medium of the stage to fully depict the inner landscape of the characters and the multi-layered context of their environment. Williams often uses symbolism and metaphor in his works, as well as uses music and lighting to a great degree in *Streetcar*. The recurrent, unbidden polka theme that Blanche heard while she witnessed her husband's suicide, which only the audience and Blanche hear, offers an auditory hallmark of PTSD. The distorted images that appear in the play reflect the confusion, disorientation and terror created when those PTSD symptoms are triggered by circumstances in the play. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams uses fireworks to punctuate a declaratory remark, and the smack of the croquet mallet in ominous device.

Blanche continually seeks pathways to wholeness, and uses interpersonal escapism through sexual gratification with multiple partners. Regardless of the

number of partners, she doesn't address the underlying root that causes her to seek escape through sex. Thus, she continues to experience PTSD symptoms. Brick rejects pathways to healing, such as refusing sexual activity or intimacy with Maggie. Understandably, one could argue that he has no interest in physical intimacy, because of his unresolved acceptance of his sexuality, whatever it may be. It is important to consider the widely held critique that Brick is in midst of homosexual panic during the actions of the play. Scholars Douglas Arrell and George Crandell have respectively attributed Brick's rage as hallmarks of "homosexual panic," which challenges his narcissistic disorder. While those theories find merit in the text, it does not preclude in any way the added complexity of PTSD once traumatic circumstances are beyond his ability to cope. Notably, concurrent disease processes, such as alcoholism, are not mutually exclusive to PTSD. Both Blanche and Brick may be PTSD survivors as well as alcoholics.

Blanche and Brick display avoidance, using alcoholism and sexual activity as mechanisms of avoidance. Both are alcoholics, whose heavy drinking began after their respective initial traumas. The steps that lead to alcoholism add some complexity to these characters, but this thesis focuses on the initial onset, or the reason they began drinking. Within this perspective, they are both escaping their circumstance. Blanche engages in avoidance through non-sequitur conversation by politely changing the subject, seemingly on a whim. She may not even realize why she floats through conversations. PTSD symptoms do not need to be consciously chosen to be expressed by the survivor. Brick expresses clear avoidance through his abrupt gruffness, curmudgeonly behavior and use of his aloof charm. He uses

avoidance to seal himself away from people who wish to help him. Blanche appears to keep conversation light and engaging so that she is able to retain helpful relationships that could lead to healing PTSD.

Neither Blanche nor Brick succeed in healing as Brick rejects integration and Blanche is not afforded opportunity to do so. There is a stark dichotomy between Blanche and Brick. Brick, as a male, is continually brought into the social circles to encourage healing while Blanche, as a female, is excluded. Brick is treated with compassion, but Blanche is judged the “n’eer do well outsider.” Blanche is emotionally frozen as a young woman due to significant trauma, and Brick experiences his most significant traumatic event as a post-collegiate adult. As Bessel van der Kolk states, “Trauma has to be understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as a discrete happening, from a *persistent condition* as well as from an acute event” (*Trauma* 185). After taking a brief examination of trauma within theatrical productions and a few of Williams’s plays that involve his characters relationship to trauma, this thesis will fully explore Blanche and Brick as PTSD survivors, inclusive of the response by their community.

## Chapter II

### Theatre and the Human Condition

Since its earliest forms, the theatre has presented questions of man's relationship to her/himself within physical and trans-material worlds. Theatre answers these "big picture" questions through the language of dramatic works. Modern actors, directors and affiliated staff utilize available finite assets (such as production budget and personnel) and important, intangible resources such as theatrical theory systems, styles and methods.

#### Theory Systems

Theory systems allow dramatic presentations to be grounded in certain modalities through which the human condition is explored. Psychoanalysis provides tools with which to view characters, motives and action in theatrical literature and productions. It offers insights to inward cognition, which is expressed outwardly through dialogue and action. The "intimate geography of the self concerns interior private experience... attempt[s] to get outside of the ongoing process of this interior living in order to see and understand how it happens constitutes metatheatrics of everyday life" (Reinelt 396). By applying the language of psychoanalysis one's reading and/or staged production benefits from extra-dimensional observation and subtext as: "a comprehensive theory of the theatre experience... in its insights into the workings of the psyche... [and its] fundamental reflection of unconscious

psychical mechanisms of reception and response” (Rozik 161). As a tool, psychoanalysis is complementary to other theatre theory systems, such as semiotics and phenomenology. These complimentary theory systems can serve to highlight and underpin the character’s inner landscape as it moves outward in the development of the work.

### Semiotics

Tennessee Williams is known to include a high degree of symbolism in his works.<sup>3</sup> Semiotics or semiology examines the objects and signs (as well as social behavior) humans use to communicate meaning. Important to this thesis, Marvin Carlson in his “Semiotics and its Heritage” notes that this system addresses cultural placement, “the imprint of ideology upon signification, the realization that theatrical signs produced meaning according to values, beliefs... [the] cultural encoding of a sign” (20). He calls to mind that within a patriarchal system women may not have the “cultural mechanisms” with which to participate equally. The term “male gaze” describes the way in which women were required to be subject to descriptions by male authors, theorists, scholars using language and methods (assumptions and bias) within patriarchal institutions. Rather than being given personal agency, “Patriarchal cultural visions reduce women to stereotypes (virgin, whore, Madonna, bitch)... the ‘male gaze’ oppresses, silences and distorts female realities” (Fortier 111).

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<sup>3</sup> See Judith Thompson, “Symbol, Myth, and Ritual in *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Orpheus Descending*” to explore characters and symbolism as an archetypal structure. Mary Ann Corrigan gives an interesting discussion to lighting and sound in, “Beyond Verisimilitude: Echoes of Expressionism in Williams’ Plays.”

As this thesis will briefly explore in chapter three, Blanche is heralded by these monikers, both in the play by the men around her, and by the reviews and analysis of her character. Feminist semiology then works to understand the “representation and subjectivity... as gendered fictions and opportunities rather than natural or inevitable realities... as well as ideologies [that] have limited women’s ways of becoming subjects or agents” (Fortier 111). When Blanche is reduced to the imprint of an ideological cultural norm (Southern Belle, woman of the Lost Era) she is viewed diminutively through language found in patriarchal systems. Interestingly, while Blanche is criticized for the “Lost Culture of the Plantation,” I have not found evidence that critical writers treat Big Daddy, another character in Williams’s play, with the same vehemence, even though he is a plantation owner wishing to pass on his legacy.<sup>4</sup>

In the theory system of semiotics, the signs and symbols that Williams writes (the sounds and images) of Blanche’s mind become meta-symbolic when partnered with psychoanalysis. They are fleshed into form by additional subtext that the “psychoanalysis toolkit” provides. In chapter three, I will explore the manners in which Blanche experiences and displays symptoms of PTSD. Her family and community are not aware of these symbols. In some cases Blanche has to testify to them, such as the sounds of polka music. The psyche and symbols intertwine to produce a richly complex character.

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<sup>4</sup> Felicia Londré, in her encompassing critical analysis of *Streetcar*, indirectly notes an association between Stanley and Big Daddy. I find both males use their profane power and gender privilege through familial deference to patriarchal oligarchy.

## Phenomenology

In *Critical Theory and Performance*, Bert O. States discusses phenomenology as, “the mode of thought and expression the mind naturally adopts when questions relating to our awareness of being and appearance arise. ... an intuition about what it *is* and what it is *doing* before our eyes... a transaction between consciousness and the thickness of existence... [where] perception and object become synonymous” (States 35). This theory may speak to the creation of awareness and witness through the “contextualization of performance” (Carlson 18). As I will shortly discuss, the ability for theatre to “speak for” or give “testimony to” places the audience in a position of witness. Moreover, it also places the actor in an intersection of feeling and finding truth in the moment as a progenitor and receiver, both the testifier and witness. Allowing the actor (in character) to discover or rebuke highly singular personal reality, phenomenological theory foregrounds:

individual consciousness, conceived in part as autonomous of social forces and capable of insight and reflection. ...language is thought of more as an instrument for getting at truth... engagement in the lived experience between the individual consciousness and reality... as sensory and mental phenomena... [emphasizing] the presence or ‘unconcealing’ of the world for consciousness... (Fortier 40-41)<sup>5</sup>

Phenomenology and psychoanalysis provide robust resources to develop Brick as an enigmatic character. Brick consistently refutes any notion that his

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<sup>5</sup> Beyond the fictional worlds, whole productions are not immune to the way in which the consciousness and existence re-writes reality. When confronted with “complex presentation of homosocial relations between ‘buddies’ in Williams’s plays” there is inequal treatment of some of his works. For example, the “great American play” *Streetcar*, “celebrated the heterosexual brutality of Stanley... while Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* had its queer elements systematically and progressively removed as it went from manuscript to stage to film” (Fortier 126).



perception isn't reality. He rails against any remarks about romantic feelings, regardless of what his family members observe and report. He is emphatic about how the world *is* because of the way he experienced it in the past and present as his (the only) reality. The audience should find Brick to be hardly definable. The "unconcealing of the world" that the family attempts to place on Brick, and his repudiation of their reality onto his, produces a compelling effect when both the family and Brick are convinced of their "right reality." When examining this character as a person with PTSD, who isn't aware or refuses acknowledgement of his own dilemma, there are abundant opportunities for subtextual portrayal.

Psychoanalysis as a theatrical theory for staged work offers a "toolkit" resource for characters, "to combat the domination of their desire through regimes of forced identification" (Reinelt 401). Importantly, when presenting works that involve trauma, whether in on-stage action, off-stage action, or through action prior to the opening scene, it is important to be aware of its inherent complexities. By understanding trauma in the context of a psychic wounding, greater sensitivity and deeper cognition will augment the reading and the staging of theatrical literature.

### Theatrical Staging, Trauma

As we have explored earlier, significant trauma fragments the self, so that the traumatized person cannot self-story their experience as an unbroken narrative. It is split apart and remains in the present, while other experiences recede into the past. Per Amanda Fisher in "Bearing Witness," an examination of theatre makers and the telling of trauma, "survivors of trauma are indeed often seized by a

compulsion to speak- to testify to 'the rest' -to those who were not there." But trauma frustrates this process because, "the absence of the restitutive narrative categories of beginning, middle and end means that theatre must engage with that which is by definition incomplete and incomprehensible" (108-110). Performance of testimony intervenes historical, knowable, verifiable facts, because testimony performance relies on information beyond the knowable, which is the trauma. In Ann Pellegrini's work on "Staging Sexual Injury" through a close reading of *How I Learned to Drive*, by Paula Vogel, she notes that science both validates and removes agency from a survivor. Without being able to speak to trauma, the survivor becomes suspect and the story unverifiable, however by having a diagnosis, "science makes it real." The "diagnostic category PTSD simultaneously individualizes and normalizes or homogenizes" experience (417). Shortly, "material reality" will be touched upon by a close reading of Williams's *Period of Adjustment*.

Testimonial theatre demonstrates "capacity for healing through speaking, hearing and being heard. ... by confiding in its audience - it creates intimacy and accountability with the audience" (Yael Farber in Fisher 113). Theatre companies that use testimony as its primary vehicle for narrative, give valuable ownership to the survivor's "story-ing" and affirmation in self-narrative.<sup>6</sup> However this can be difficult in a linear-thought model, where the audience and fictional community of the on-stage character try to apply linear thought to dialogue and plot. "Testimony is not an ordered, coherent series of events, it is incomplete, fragmentary; revealing an encounter that lies beyond explanation and comprehension. ...the suffering of the

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<sup>6</sup> See the "Moving on Project" in Australia as an example. (Bundy, "The Performance of Trauma" 238).

victim becomes inexpressible precisely because of the enormity of the event” (Fisher 114). In *Streetcar*, Blanche attempts to testify to seek validation, assistance, credibility and support. In *Cat*, Brick’s family attempts to testify to Brick about their observation and conclusions, which he rejects as resoundingly as does Blanche’s community.

Patrick Duggan’s system called “trauma-tragedy,” highlights many critical points when considering the inclusion of trauma in theatrical works. He speaks directly to the importance of being aware of conflict/wound and witness.

Trauma-tragedy dramaturgically [addresses] the trauma... by trying to embody and bear witness to trauma in an immediate way. ... [It] is not about people being ground down by history, nor... recognition of fault, nor the destruction of society through the fate of a hero. ... It is both an academic discourse through which to consider the efficacy of trauma in representation and a practical framework by which one might produce that efficacy. (42, 43, 175)

Readings of works such as *Streetcar* and *Cat* may be refined through this type of system. It provides a foundation to inform and elucidate the effects of trauma on the survivor-sufferer and on the people around them. In a kineoaesthetic setting the theatrical experience brings in the audience and actor to witness and re-experience the trauma symptoms over and over, which “stimulates a cathected response... not possible in other forms of art” (173). Despite this co-creative process, the reader or audience may not understand the complexity of the trauma experience and symptoms representationally enacted on-stage. “The survivor-sufferer has no means of decoding this representation because its interruption in the psyche is both uninvited and is traumatic in its own right” (27). The symptoms are present in the immediacy of the moment, re-lived in “the now” even while the survivor-sufferer

relates historical information about the traumatic event(s) (24). In cases where the dramatic work is part of a therapeutic formula, curative “proper” witnessing through speaking, being heard and being validated allow the “story-ing” to move the present into the integrated past (93). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to exclusively use this system to evaluate the characters in *Streetcar* and *Cat*. However, it is important to note that trauma-tragedy opens a door for further introspection and reflection of dramatic texts.

#### Lineage from Greek dramatic works: Ajax and Medea

While the term/diagnosis of PTSD is relatively new, the concept of an overwhelming wound that separates itself within the psyche of the individual is not. Since the dramatic arts presents the human experience through performance, it is unsurprising that significant trauma would appear in drama’s earliest works. Sophocles’ *Ajax* examines the last days of a combat veteran. In an episode of manic rage, he slaughters livestock instead of the enemies he believes have ridiculed him and who thereby expunge his “war hero” identity. Unpacified, restless and distraught, ultimately Ajax commits suicide. Although Ajax is able to speak to his schism by acknowledging that Athena caused his inconsolable fury, it does nothing to assuage his ongoing immediate pain. Instead of avoidance through drugs (as our modern characters Blanche and Brick do) he attempts to transcend the pain through what he declares will be a noble, redemptory death. As a character in ancient drama, Ajax should not be treated as the same way one would for an Ibsen or Strindberg character. However, the depth of human connection to our frailties and aspirations

transcends thousands of years. In this commonality, Ajax is despondent at the loss of his ego: his identity through acclaimed military prowess. He is defeated through his vicious action while blinded by Athena, and re-visits all encompassing grief through the plaintive requests to phantom servicemen to aid him in his death.

In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea has already undergone some trauma through her exile from her homeland. However, *Medea* opens with the most significant impact to her, the faithlessness and forsaken marriage by her husband. She sees this as an irreparable wound of a lasting, significant injury. As with Ajax, her grief is inconsolable and through this grief she makes choices that seem to alleviate her suffering. By enacting her revenge, the murder of her children and Jason's new bride, she attempts to re-create in Jason the loss of security and legacy that she felt, thereby causing greater suffering to Jason.

#### PTSD: From the Background to Front Center Stage

Occurrence of an overwhelming traumatic event does not mean that the survivor will develop PTSD. If the survivor is able to integrate the trauma, there is far less likelihood to develop PTSD. Williams creates characters that undergo traumatic experience, but also appear to be able to integrate the trauma. In *The Rose Tattoo*, Serafina undergoes trauma from her husband's death and discovery of his infidelity, but she does not develop PTSD. She is disturbed, perhaps slightly unhinged, but she is able to function without the debilitating effects typical of unresolved trauma, PTSD.

In *Summer and Smoke*, another play by Williams, Alma is able to integrate trauma and moves forward in her life by the end of the play. Although she is using drugs to cope, she raises her hand in valedictory salute as the curtain falls. While it doesn't mean that she is happy or that society culturally condones her choices, she has incorporated the traumatic narrative to be able to proceed with self-directed choices. Interestingly, some critical analyses have commented on Alma and Blanche as traveling on the same continuum. "Alma, in effect, is Blanche DuBois at the beginning of the down-hill slide to degradation. Blanche is Alma at the end of the road" (Da Ponte 269). Perhaps Moon Lake Casino, a favorite literary establishment in Williams's works, is a gateway through which Alma and Blanche enter with generalized awareness (Blanche aware of Allan's homosexuality, and Alma aware of her drug habit and availability for companionship) and pass through significantly altered. Blanche cannot make self-directed choices; they are reactionary to the pain of the trauma. She is incessantly transient, flitting from alcohol to men to fantasy and back again. Although the end of *Summer and Smoke* gives no final moment in dialogue, it can be reasonably inferred that Alma's valedictory salute is a physicalized statement to show ownership of her personal agency. Perhaps drug dependence will cause future hardship, but Alma isn't wholly escaping from trauma. "Life is full of little mercies like that [sleeping tablets], not *big* mercies. And so we are able to keep going" (254). Even in a sleepy-haze, Alma is going towards, moving onwards, whereas Blanche in panic moves away from, to escape.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dianne Cafagna acknowledges the differences in these ladies. "Whereas Alma *gives up* her dreams of beauty to *become* a whore at a train station, Blanche *surrenders* entirely to dreams and their promised salvation *at the hands* of strangers" (128; emphasis mine).

Illusion is used a vehicle to define both women in their respective plays. However, Blanche remains in her fantasies, even while exiting just before the final curtain. Alma grows from, “a woman who lives in illusion of impossible aspirations and idealism into a woman who accepts reality and who actively seeks what she wants” (McGlenn 515). Unlike Williams’s earlier plays where women like Blanche sought relief from emotion crisis in illusion, many later plays of the 1950s, “portrays women able to face reality and enjoy healthier relationships” (517). Alma has different resources and sense of self-directed agency than Blanche.<sup>8</sup>

Williams also writes characters that have undergone trauma in military service. In *Period of Adjustment*, Ralph and George are returned from active service in World War II and the Korean War (137). The adjustment (in broad terms) is the adjustment to civilian life as well as to marriage. There are several remarks over the course of the play to define the identity of a person when removed from the context and circumstance that had granted them that agency and identity. “Who remembers two wars? Or even one after some years. There’s a great public amnesia about a former war hero” (194). George and Ralph’s recovery from battlefield-combat trauma may be implicit by the reader/audience. Even though there wasn’t a diagnosed term at the time of the play, PTSD existed relative to battlefield trauma patients long before it was expanded to other populations. As Isabel describes to Ralph her history of their meeting her husband, George, some classic symptoms of PTSD are inferred:

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<sup>8</sup> Corrigan offers an expounded theming to illusion as it relates to Alma and Blanche. Alma’s conflict is a part of an off-stage interpersonal abstraction, and Blanche’s conflict is a part of an on-stage interpersonal conflict (“Realism,” 394-395).

ISABEL. George Haverstick is a very sick man, Mr. Bates. He was a patient in neurological at Barnes Hospital... *He shakes!* Sometimes it's just barely noticeable, just a constant, slight tremor...

RALPH. Aw. That old tremor has come back on him, huh? He had that thing in Korea.

ISABEL. How bad did he have it in Korea, Mr. Bates?

RALPH. You know- like a heavy drinker- except he didn't drink heavy.

ISABEL. It's like he had Parkinson's disease but he doesn't have it.

(137)

Isabel goes on to explain there has not been any diagnosis, and without diagnosis there is no illness for which to pay for physical disability compensation. However, all of the banter and "revealing" discussion early in the play was simply a smoke screen. Isabel admits her thoughts in defense of her husband, as if a heavy camouflage curtain was pulled back. "[George] has a distinguished war record and a nervous disability that was a result of 72 flying missions in Korea and, and – more than twice that many in- [the prior war]" (221). According to Isabel, when psychiatry is suggested, George "blew the roof off [as if] they'd accused him of beating up his grandmother!" (139) To allow himself to be treated by a psychiatrist would suggest a weakness in his fortitude as a man. But George, a male combat veteran, isn't the only one with "the shakes." Ralph's wife also displayed similar symptoms, "She would shake violently every time she came within touching distance of a possible boyfriend" (145). Ralph also dismisses psychiatry, and believes he cures her of her "psychological frigidity almost overnight" (146). In his mind, she didn't need anything that he (an able-bodied male) couldn't provide.

Ralph suggests that prior war-combat leads both of them to violent disposition. When they are out of active service, this disposition transfers to other arenas of civil combat, such as the bedroom. Re-visiting that aggression triggers



symptoms such as the shakes. “Sexual violence, that’s what gives you the shakes, that’s what makes you unstable” (211). Both men struggle with their condition in the hopes of building future business endeavors together. They dream of mounting a frontal assault together against joblessness: the lack of self-purpose. Yet, their future appears bleak as they both might as equally resign themselves to despondency, not unlike Ajax in his despair from loss of military usefulness and identity. “We both of us died in two wars, repeatedly died in two wars and were buried in suburbs named High Point...” (232). It’s interesting that Blanche exhibits a wider variety of PTSD symptoms than these men. Despite the *mélange* of presented symptoms, neither she nor her community are able to understand the nature of her condition. Notably, if these men are able to successfully pass through their period of adjustment, to be able to speak to the nature of their “shakes,” then the trauma they experienced may be integrated in the context of their whole experience. Thus, unlike Ajax, Medea or Blanche, they will be more likely to leave High Point before the cavern (of their respective traumas) swallows them.

### Chapter III

#### On the Rails: Blanche's "Streetcar" to/from Trauma

This year, *A Streetcar Named Desire* enjoys the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its debut in December 1947. Critical analysis about the wounded-self and trauma within the play have enhanced character subtext. By acting and reacting in a way consistent with trauma theory and post-traumatic stress disorder, Blanche's voice and circumstance resound in the theatre of trauma studies.

#### Echoes of Trauma:

Blanche engages in avoidant behavior, experiences great anxiety and confusion, and disproportionally responds to the situation. At times she feels trapped causing her terror and numbing paralysis. She suffers from undesired repetitive intrusions. Blanche seeks safety, but is unable to find it because she continually looks for it in "the other:" lovers, family, mate, distractions and fantasy. Her sense of impending doom follows her, culminating in perpetual dependency, which she asserts while she is escorted to be institutionalized as a "mad destitute." In consideration of PTSD, Blanche needs to integrate the traumatic wounds within, and bring her estranged, fractured self to wholeness. No one can do this for her. Without this healing, Blanche will find it necessary to rely on the "other" as she has always done. As a PTSD survivor, Blanche DuBois is not simply a desirous harlot, privileged madonna, patriarchal victim, or devious manipulator. She is a complex

woman, made more complicated by early laurels and mortifications granted her. In this chapter I will explore Blanche's maladaptation to trauma, the perniciousness of her PTSD through her particular symptoms and community response to her. I will then examine how Blanche as a PTSD survivor is situated among critical authors.

### Avoidance

By the opening of their respective plays, Blanche and Brick are already alcoholics. Avoidance is one of the tactics Blanche employs to distract herself; throughout the play she drinks hard liquor. While she says that she is only having "a little," she continues to imbibe several "littles." While one may argue it is because she suffers from alcoholism, there is more to the need for the drink than the chemistry of the substance. However, alcoholism has its own disease process. An avoidant pre-disposition leads a person to use alcohol as an escapist drug. If the mind and body are disassociated then the painful reminders and triggers are less effectual. According to the stage directions Blanche's drinking is an avoidance of the "Varsouviana" music that only she hears in her mind (139). It is an unbidden recurring intrusion of her PTSD. I will return to the repetitive musical intrusion later in this chapter. Notably, Blanche's excessively protracted baths while at Stella's in New Orleans are used as an avoidance-space to find relief from perceived present danger of being judged, attacked or thrown out on the street.

Her insistence to be viewed in liminal light is another example of avoidance. "I was never hard or self-sufficient enough. ...soft people have to shimmer and glow... It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft *and* attractive" (92). The half-light or

indirect light allows for opacity of beauty. While this might be also an illusory effect, it isn't just for the sake of illusion. Half-light serves to abate painful ordeals from dispossessed fantasy. Blanche seems physically hurt when confronted with Mitch's intent to take her out of fantasy to 'reality' by exposing her to full light. "I don't want realism. I want magic! I try to give that to people... I tell what ought to be truth. (*Mitch turns on light and she cries out, covering her face*)" (144-145). While Blanche wants to give magic to others, she needs disassociation and avoidance to (barely) manage her PTSD. She wants fantasy to become truth, because the fantasy helps her to avoid dysphoria.

#### Anxiety/Confusion

When Blanche reveals her inability to cope, it isn't just that past events that lead her to desperately need others. The helplessness and unconscious dysphoria batters her unremittingly, thwarting her ability to plan for adequate self-care.<sup>9</sup> Judith Herman points out, "The normal regulation of emotional states is similarly disrupted by traumatic experiences... that coalesce in a dreadful feeling 'dysphoria' ... it is a state of confusion, agitation, emptiness and utter aloneness" (108). Unable to cope, Blanche seeks refuge. Because she cannot find it in herself, she attempts to find reliability and safety elsewhere. When Blanche opens up to Stella revealing difficulties at home in Laurel, she's also revealing the depth to which she needs assistance. But Blanche is only tolerated for a short time before she is removed from her sister's apartment and her responsibility.

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<sup>9</sup> Blanche replies to Stella that after seeing through her familial obligation by paying for the family burials, "Money just goes- it goes places" (79).

I wasn't so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers.... I was exhausted by all I'd been through my- nerves broke. I was on the verge of- lunacy, almost! I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can't be alone! Because- I'm- not very well. (*Her voice drops and look is frightened.*) (91, 14, 17)

Blanche discloses her dependency on others to rescue her from peril as she says to Mitch, "There's so much confusion in the world... Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now." She doesn't consciously ascribe the 'confusion' to PTSD, her focus is on finding safety from it.<sup>10</sup> Success is imperative; she needs to find a way to lessen the anxiety caused by PTSD. She states her need to Stella, "I want to rest! I want to breathe quietly again!" (93-95) She wants reliable security through marriage. It is unfortunate however, even if she were to become married, there is no affirmation that her panic or other problems would resolve.

When Blanche tells Mitch the story of her husband's suicide, we note she is in control of the story-telling, but not in control of other aspects. For example, she is able to choose the words to relate the history, but is unable to do so without hearing the polka music played at the time of her husband's suicide. Blanche demonstrates "traumatic reliving," or "trauma-related memorial construction" while still experiencing involuntary flashbacks. "Reliving is an intentional, narrative process... speaking from within the experience, giving voice to the traumatic story with all its associated pain, confusion, fear, and shame" (Sewell and Williams 214). Thus, while one may argue that she has integrated the experience because she is able to describe with some reflection to past and present, she still suffers from the involuntary

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<sup>10</sup> She chooses to play the Southern Belle to conform to Mitch's 'prim and proper' vision (95). While Blanche may become a manipulator, I maintain (unconscious) allaying of PTSD symptoms is the motive for her change in personal identity.

hallmarks of unresolved trauma. There is confusion, pain and shame as Blanche tells Mitch: “I was unlucky. Deluded... [My husband] came to me for help. I didn’t know that... I knew I’d failed him in some mysterious way... I didn’t know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself” (114). Blanche knows she needs help and consciously seeks it out, but without understanding the underlying root of her trauma and developed PTSD, she flits from one helpmate to another:

After the death of Allan- intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with... I think it was panic... that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection- here and there... even, at last, in a 17 yr old boy... True? Yes, I suppose- unfit [for teaching position] Somehow- anyway... so I came here [to Stella’s]. (146)

While Blanche may be able to speak of the trauma, and of the impact from the deaths in her family, she is unable to live with that knowledge and live within culturally acceptable means. For example, it may be that Blanche does not recognize her sexual advances on young men as unacceptable. These young boys may have been a similar age to her husband when he died. Consciously, she may be attempting to have her physical beauty affirmed by the admiration of young men, as she does with the young man collecting for the *Evening Star*.<sup>11</sup> However, unconsciously Blanche seeks to reinstate the conditions surrounding her trauma, which is consistent with PTSD symptoms (Caruth, *Trauma* 4).

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<sup>11</sup> George Hovis remarks that she kisses the paperboy, puts on the gown and tiara, gives herself to soldiers to, “reenact the sexual attraction she felt for her husband” (179). Bert Cardullo asserts, “in turning to a boy [for intimacy], she was attempting to return to her youth when, with Allan, she “made the discovery- love” (Birth/Death 176).

## Disproportional Response

Further indicators of trauma are a heightened sensitivity to stimulus, anxiety and aggressiveness stemming from triggers that recall the trauma. Blanche gives an aggressive, exaggerated reaction when Stanley touches her husband's love letters. She declares, "I'll burn them. [They are] poems a dead boy wrote. I hurt him the way that you would like to hurt me, but you can't! I'm not young and vulnerable anymore. But my husband was... I'm sorry, I must have lost my head for a moment. Everyone has something he won't let others touch because of their- intimate nature" (42). Blanche winces at each bold, aggressive, and violent move Stanley uses when he comes back from bowling. He is "forceful," "bangs things around," "treats inanimate objects with such fury" (37-38). It startles and panics Blanche. Her reaction in this following scene demonstrates the exaggerated-startle response:

*(Blanche laughs shrilly, but her hand shakes so it almost slips from her grasp. Stella pours the Coke into the glass. It foams over and spills.*

*Blanche gives a piercing cry.)*

STELLA. Why did you scream like that?

BLANCHE. I don't know why I screamed! *(She begins to talk rapidly and breathlessly.)* (93-95)

Blanche shows the physical, emotional and mental effects of PTSD without being able to name why it occurs.

## Aggression/ Paralysis

The oscillating experience of aggressiveness and shut down behavior is most evidenced in the scene when Stanley and Blanche have a direct confrontation while Stella is at the hospital giving birth. Although sex is inferred and never directly shown or spoken of by any of the characters, the commonly used term "rape scene"

automatically places Blanche in the role of victim/survivor in critical thought. Stanley states, "We've had this date from the beginning," inferring that Blanche had perhaps been seeking sexual contact. Early in play she acknowledges flirting with Stanley to Stella. "We [she and Stanley] thrashed it out. I feel a bit shakey, but I think I handled it nicely, I laughed and treated it all as a joke. I called him a little boy and laughed and flirted. Yes, I was flirting with your husband!" (45) It could be that her flirting was an avoidance tactic as a means to find a means of safety in an unfamiliar setting, or as a dissociation from the memory of the traumatic loss, since their discussion was about Belle Reve's fate. Blanche, already unable to cope with the past on her own terms, struggles to contend with another person challenging her memory. She attempts to retain dignity, credibility and safety, perhaps through prevaricative flirting. Although she reveals to Stella that flirting was not an authentic expression, Blanche infers that sex is a primal way of keeping the female species safely housed under male dominance. She acknowledges, however that subordination is not a means to self-preservation:

What such a man has to offer is animal force and he gave such a wonderful exhibition of that! But the only way to live with such a man is to- go to bed with him! And that's your [Stella's] job- not mine! ... He [Stanley] hates me. Or why would he insult me? The first time I laid eyes on him I thought to myself, that man is my executioner! That man will destroy me, unless—. (79, 111)

If Blanche realizes that she is in danger of being homeless or assaulted, or does not realize these dangers but continues to exist in a hyper-anxious state (as people who suffer from PTSD do), then why does she not fight more during confrontation? In the scene, she breaks the glass end of a bottle and slashes at Stanley then, "*She moans. The bottletop falls. She sinks to her knees. He picks up the*



*inert figure [Blanche] and carries her to bed*" (162). Trauma theory provides further insight to danger stimulus by fighting and freezing:

The adult traumatic state is initiated by recognition of inevitable danger, and the surrendering to it. Thereupon the affective stage changes from the signal of avoidable danger (anxiety) to a surrender pattern of 'freezing', 'playing possum', 'panic inaction'. With the surrender to what is perceived as inevitable, inescapable, immediate danger, and affective process is initiated... leading to automatic obedience. (Krystal 80)

Blanche could not have fought back due to early trauma and sufferance of PTSD.

This reinforces the general agreement that the encounter with Stanley was a rape; a person in a state of automatic obedience cannot give free-will consent. Most unfortunately, as Blanche's testimony was already suspicious, her later claims about rape are not believed in so far as they are not acted upon by any other character. Mitch and Stella, who would be Blanche's closest advocates at the time, demonstrate the lack of engagement to Blanche's well-being by their inaction.

#### The Click of the Track: Music as Motif

Music plays a substantial role in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. For the audience member, the story of the characters are told by the actors lines, as well as the mood and timbre of the music in the background. It underscores, sets the scene and narrates through rhythm, tone, and instrumentation. It's no surprise that this special interlocutor would have a co-starring role in Blanche's PTSD; certain sensory information, such as music, becomes imprinted at the time of the traumatic event. "Contemporary research has shown that dissociation of a traumatic experience occurs as the trauma is occurring" (Van Der Kolk, *Trauma* 168).

## The Polka

Since the suicide occurs during the polka, then that music is seared into Blanche's memory of the event. Trauma is expressed in the unbidden re-occurrences of certain flashbacks that may include sensory information, and it's clear that the polka tune is a recurring intrusion. As listed in the stage directions, "*The music is in her mind, she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her*" (139). She may refuse to consciously acknowledge the musical intrusion to herself or acknowledge hearing it to another character, or it may occur without her awareness. Unbidden music occurs throughout the play:

STANLEY. You were married once, weren't you?

*(The music of a polka rises up, faint in the distance)*

BLANCHE. Yes, when I was quite young.

STANLEY. What happened?

BLANCHE. The boy- the boy died. I'm afraid I'm- going to be sick. (28)

When Stanley gives Blanche the ticket back to Laurel, "[She] wretches in the bathroom, and 'Varsouviana' plays" (136). There is a clear somatic response to any discussion or idea that calls back to her past, especially any evocation of her husband. When Blanche is attempting to entice Mitch again as a suitor we are assured that the music is involuntary, and that she has heard it for many years. It constantly replays. She knows how it ends, and yet appears unable to change the ending:

*(She touches her forehead vaguely. The polka tune starts up again.)*

BLANCHE. That music again.

MITCH. What music?

BLANCHE. The 'Varsouviana.' The polka tune they were playing when Allan- Wait! *(A distant revolver shot is heard. Blanche seems relieved.)* There now, the shot! It always stops after that. *(The polka music dies out again.)* Yes, now it's stopped. (141)

Because Blanche continually hears the music since the traumatic event, but is unable to change the ending we may draw the parallel to Freud's early analysis and current PTSD theories that aural intrusion(s) will come unbidden, re-play itself fully, with or without another person present. It may occur without control of the flashback or as in this case auditory hallucination.

As an unconscious manifestation and indicator of Blanche's thoughts, the polka music relates and responds to the depiction of Blanche's discovery of her husband's homosexual encounter. As a narrative voice to Blanche's trauma, it demonstrates the separation between what is consciously expressed through dialogue, and what is unconsciously recurring in the present. While she tells Mitch the story of when she accompanied her husband and his lover to the Moon Lake Casino, the Polka is in minor key, as if to describe a forlorn loss of marriage intimacy, the lost trust and security between her and her husband, and the failure that all would proceed in the future, "as if nothing had happened." Her denial is indicative of a pre-disposition to trauma: the inability to fully grasp and integrate current events into the full acknowledgement within the conscious psyche.<sup>12</sup> The Polka music in minor key stops after the gunshot, then resumes in major key and becomes louder when Mitch approaches to comfort Blanche, subsiding only when he tends to her (115-116). The change from minor to major key suggests that in

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<sup>12</sup> Cafagna offers that this traumatic memory is replayed at will. "Blanche has shunted her damaged spirit into a secret place. ...her mind ritualistically replays the Varsouviana during moments of crisis and high reality that explode with her husband's gunshot" (125). Similar to other critical analyses of Blanche that include at least a small nod towards the possibility that trauma influences Blanche's experience and actions, they do not go far enough to fully explore how trauma, specifically trauma in PTSD is expressed. Blanche cannot will the music into being in a ritualistic way, it arises spontaneously as a recurrent intrusion.

Blanche's mind the worst of the experience is the discovery of her husband with another man as well as Allan's suicide. The whole of the trauma continues from the (minor key) storied past into the (major key) present, manifested as concern for safety and security. When Mitch offers shelter, providing Blanche relief for her anxiety, the musical signal decrescendos.<sup>13</sup>

#### The "Blue Piano" and Noise-Racket

The "blue piano" music heard by the characters, according to stage directions, comes from the neighborhood bars. It often opens and closes scenes, as punctuation to the characters actions and reactions.<sup>14</sup> Notably, certain events in Blanche's past do not seem associated to the trauma of suicide in her mind. When Blanche tells Stella about Belle Reve being lost, Blue Piano music becomes louder (21). The piano music turns to a 'hectic breakdown' when Stella learns of Blanche's recent past in Laurel and Blanche realizes that her sister knows the events preceding Blanche's arrival to New Orleans (128). When Blanche tells what "ought to be truth," she doesn't realize that her life has been a spectrum of PTSD survival. Faced with the responsibility of caring for the dying, Blanche struggles to find peace.

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<sup>13</sup> Further evidence of the music responding to Blanche's thoughts include: when Blanche is feeling trapped due to the discovery of her past, a forced imminent return to Laurel, loss of Mitch as a potential mate (offering financial and emotional security) and her sister giving birth at the hospital; the polka music is played rapid and feverish, as if her mind is racing and unable to find safety.

<sup>14</sup> "Blue piano music" opens the play, opens scene two as the women go to Galatoire's and the men play poker. Trumpets and drums are percussive exclamation points to Stella's embrace of Stanley after "Don't hang back with the Brutes" monologue (114), and when Stanley carries Blanche to the bedroom (161). It plays when Blanches covers herself in gossamer scarf and calls to Young Man collecting for the *Evening Star* (99).

The pain she experiences is quite visceral; it is immediate and present. While she tells Stella the blue piano music plays in the background:

I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths!  
The long parade to the graveyard!... Funerals are quiet, but  
deaths – not always... Unless you were there at the bed when  
they cried out, 'hold me!' you'd never suspect there was struggle  
for breath and bleeding... but I saw! Saw! Saw! And now you sit  
there telling me with your eyes that I let the place go! (21-22)

Blanche is hyper-sensitive to this stress. Underneath her words are the subtexts of feeling alone, ill-equipped to cope with death. This is a submerged thread of PTSD. While the deaths are certainly painful and contributive to her affective state, her inability to talk about the deaths without being in extreme emotional state, her need to be affirmed, and her eventual discredit are exacerbated by PTSD. Caruth's perspective tells us that trauma becomes, "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not readily available... This truth cannot be linked only to what is known, but also what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). The "blue piano music" remains, and the polka does not begin, indicating that in Blanche's mind the experience of dying family members, losing Belle Reve, and her sexual indiscretions are deeply troubling and disconcerting, but aren't associated with her husband's death. Regardless, she cannot stitch together the quilt of traumatic experiences that began at Allan's suicide and continued with her from Laurel to New Orleans.

People with PTSD have reported hypersensitivity and disorientation towards anything that would serve as a reminder of the traumatic experience due to a high state of anxiety. Blanche displays this hypersensitivity as she recounts finding her

husband with a male lover, "*Locomotive sounds heard. Headlight of the train glares into room. Blanche clasps hands to ears and crouches over. The noise recedes and she recovers and continues*"<sup>15</sup> (114). The height of Blanche's confusion is represented by the wild sounds and distorted figures that occur when Blanche is in a state of extreme anxiety, feeling trapped and in immediate danger. It appears that only Blanche sees these figures and hears the sounds, as Stanley does not comment on it while in or out of the bathroom. Described in the stage directions, "*The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form... lurid reflections move sinuously as flames along the wall spaces. The night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle*" (159). As the panic increases, she becomes over-whelmed. Her mind summons abstract images and sounds not present, to voice her disassociation from reality. A scrim reveals a dramatic chase involving prostitute, drunkard and policeman. It may be that this vision is a remembered trauma, suddenly appearing as a mini-play in the same way the Polka music spontaneously occurs. Or it may be a fear of the inevitable danger that Blanche will be homeless, pursued by aggressors and the law. Regardless of the representation, Blanche demonstrates extreme panic and impending annihilation; her inner world is a confusing, terrifying place.

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<sup>15</sup> The locomotive is used often in the play. It precedes and concludes Blanche's "don't hang back with the brutes" monologue. It is present when she and Stanley are in physical confrontation. Certainly there is interesting analysis to be done on the allusion of steam and steel locomotive with male and female truth-telling, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

### Ushered Out- Communal Reaction within *Streetcar*

The distinguishment of narrative memory and traumatic memory is a key component to the adverse reactions by Blanche's network of family and acquaintances. Moreover, Blanche's gender informs their reactions and attitudes towards her mental health. As referenced in chapter one, this behavior evidenced in early trauma theory and even through the latter part of the twentieth century. Stanley is consistently suspicious of Blanche's description of her history, feelings, experiences and circumstance. Her proclivity towards fantasy-reality on the surface excuse his doubts, but trauma survivors, especially women cast as hysterics, have historically been treated with great suspicion. Proof is demanded from external sources, which Stanley provides in order to defend his case against her.

Mitch hears Blanche's confession of her self-relegated culpability in her husband's suicide. At first he is gentle and warm towards Blanche, but after hearing about her history in Laurel (through Stanley) he treats her as if she had little personal worth. He tries to take her in an embrace, but lacking all the tenderness and consideration of before Stanley's divulsion. When she refuses his advances, he derides that she's not "clean enough to bring in the house with my mother" (150).

Stella attempts to assist Blanche, since she offers her home as a place for Blanche to stay. She is aware of Blanche's history at Belle Reve or at least can corroborate Blanche's most significant traumatic event. She asserts to Stanley that Blanche has always been fanciful, but that her illusions were killed by her beautiful, poetic and degenerate husband. She tries to get Stanley to empathize, to be aware that recent history from the supply-man wouldn't have known this important

information, but he discards it, as he discards any credibility to Blanche's accounts of herself and her needs. Stella submits in deference to Stanley, and his vision of Blanche's history remains intact and supreme.

Hosting Blanche becomes too difficult, taking up resources of space and subsistence. The addition of a baby, with its own needs and noises, compounds the problem. Stella accepts the decision to remove Blanche from the household, instead of helping Blanche to find her own resources. She realizes that sending Blanche to the institution was a foisting-off, instead of compassionate assistance. Yet, she still allows the doctor and nurse to proceed to take her sister away: "Oh my God, Eunice help me! Don't let them hurt her! ... Oh, God, what have I done to my sister?" (176) When Stella questions whether Blanche could have been speaking the truth about the rape by Stanley, Eunice enables Stella's delusion so that life (specifically the community of men, as well as Eunice and Stella) can go on unfettered. It doesn't appear that Stella wholly buys into this delusion as she sobs with abandon, and becomes mollified through Stanley's sensual touch while the "blue note" music rises and the curtain falls. Despite all the lamentation by Mitch and Stella, there is no catharsis- no change. The community has removed Blanche to regain its equilibrium. Life "keeps on being lived" and the seven cards are dealt again.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> There are seven principal characters in Stella and Stanley's community: Stella, Stanley, Mitch, Eunice, Steve, Pablo and Blanche. When the baby is born, there are eight. Once Blanche is removed, the community regains its balance. On the last line, the curtain falls, "This game is seven card stud" (179).



## Critical Thought on *Streetcar*

In the seventy years since *Streetcar* was published, the play has continued to inspire conversation and criticism. Blanche is the focal point for many of these conversations. She is at the center of a hub; characterizations of her radiate outward. Each spoke tugs at her, names her, defines her through ideology, institutions, romanticism, debauchery, guilt and trauma.

### *The tracks on the neutral ground*

Despite the depth of published critical thought, there is a dearth of studies that examine the origination of the mental/emotional state at the opening of *Streetcar*. The variety of opinion on Blanche and *Streetcar* is fascinating. Perhaps none so polemic as Bert Cardullo's excoriation against reducing characters to, "sociological or political tract... social symbols or gender representatives." He contends that by doing so, critics ignore the humanity and "substitute their own visions for those of the artwork." He exalts his method of connecting to the work itself, "[by] thoroughness, not from ideological conviction"<sup>17</sup> (Birth/Death 169-170). I can appreciate the sentiment that subsuming a character into an ideological framework could be problematic. Moreover, when that ideology is "of its time" the remarks may become more of a museum piece reflective of an era than sempiternal analysis.

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<sup>17</sup> This is my favorite reproach of his to overly-fervent theorists: "I unabashedly declare that... the only theory that resides in my interpretation of *Streetcar* is that the play's the thing, not the theory: that the playwright is king, not the critic; that art and the artist are meant to be served not supplanted" (170). I regard analysis in the way therapist would, by attempting to understand the subject's relationship to herself through her subjective frame of reference (Ulman and Brothers 217).

*Runs on an old "line" – Cultural Aspersions*

Some of the analyses demure a line of thinking "of its time," such as Robert Jones who shares that women such as Blanche are, "relics of the moribund tradition of gentility... who are unable to accept the twentieth century and who prefer living in... the mythically cavalier Old South. They are social fossils in an age of commercialism and tawdriness. ... They are too weak, passive and neurotic to be tragic" (37-44). George Hovis uses an old-fashioned Southern gentility argument to assert that a woman's primary desire ("the role of the belle") is financial patronage rather than financial independence. He corsets Blanche into strict assignment of a Southern belle while juxtaposing her lasciviousness.<sup>18</sup> "Because she is both 'whore' and belle, she occupies a liminal space... transgressing Southern decorum and mocking the chauvinistic gender dynamics of her culture that deny women sexual initiative and forgive men their excesses" (180-181). Cash's 1941 guidebook on Southern culture, "Mind of the South," is often quoted to support an argument that an obsolete way of life ruins Blanche. Frequently, Blanche is used as a surrogate archetype for Southern Institutionalism. "Mr. Williams treats us... [to] a study of the collapse of a whole system of ideals, of an entire way of life – an allegory, perhaps, of the South, its ruin and debasement, its decline and fall" (Da Ponte 269). The bias towards Blanche as Southern woman of (former) means, labeled as one who clings to privileged tradition based on fantasy through the servitude and expense of others, also ascribes its bias to Blanche as a participant, proponent and protector of

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<sup>18</sup> See also Riddel. "She is in every sense the sum of an exhausted tradition... a living division of two warring principles, desire and decorum... excess of the self and the restraints of society... and the victim of civilization's attempt to reconcile the two" (25).

distasteful Southern gentility. These critical analyses serve to judge Blanche on her ancestry and actions, based on implicit assumptions that “Southern-ness” is inherently flawed.

There is merit to consider Institutional Privilege based on race, gender, economic class within Williams’s plays. C.W.E. Bigsby frames Williams’s division between rich and poor as emblematic in the division between, “brutality and compassion, sterility and vitality. ... Thus the rich are frequently pictured as being eaten away from within...” (42). Hovis contends that Blanche represents, “Williams’s interest as a gay man who is ostracized and judged by mainstream America” (182). Although Williams often writes in symbolism and allegory, *Streetcar* is a play based in realism.<sup>19</sup> Placing on one character the weight of representing an entire institution or ideology seems closer to Cardullo’s critique that the analysis serves to superimpose upon or appropriate the character in the name of literary criticism. When considering these broad-sweeping associations of the Old South and sociopolitical commentary, it is important to note that this is far too broad to be credible to Blanche as a character. As an allegorical symbol perhaps, but then that wouldn’t be Williams’s play set in Naturalism. It would be a play of the critics devising. As a character, Blanche is certainly informed by her Southern cultural norms, however the significant impacts by losing the *nurture* of her family, her

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<sup>19</sup> Symbolism and Allegory are indeed rich in his works. Some critiques draw interesting parallels, such as the impressive work by Quirino, but fly into abstract ether. My devised example: Stanley was in the Engineer Corps, an entity that oversees flood control and levees. His astrological sign is Capricorn, a piscine-goat animal who spans earth and sea. While Blanche’s sign is Virgo, an earth sign, she is often associated with water and the sea. Her sign is “fixed” in between two earth signs: Taurus, the sensual bull and Capricorn. The symbolism is that Stanley’s nature and training will always obstruct Blanche’s access to her wants and needs.

home, and losing her husband through suicide contributes much more to her desperate circumstance than the *nature* of her heritage.

### *To Desire – Concupiscent Womanhood*

Other mechanisms used to judge Blanche as a “ne’er do well” in critical analyses include her sexual and emotional identities as well as intimacy difficulty.<sup>20</sup> Tabasum et al, simplifies Blanche by purporting that women are sexual beings pursuing only the culmination and achievement of desire. Jones states that, “through her sexual and concomitant mental idiosyncracies, she has lost all contact with reality and is ripe for a mental institution” (39). Louise Blackwell and WEI Fang offer a “root of liberation” theory by exploring rebellion and desire fulfillment as unhealthy patterns. Blanche is similar to, “women who have learned to be maladjusted through adjustment to abnormal family relationships and who strive to break through their bondage in order to find a mate” (Blackwell 1). However, Blanche’s history shows that her unhealthy patterns are not based on attempted liberation from hardship, but are formed in the fountainhead of traumatic experience and her unsuccessful attempts throughout her life for recovery. Fang concedes the suicide caused, “a forever-existing wound in [Blanche’s] heart,” and is a “catalyst of breaking the fetters of ethics... She cannot conceal her strong sexual desire, because ‘desire’ is deep-rooted as a part of her nature... And the final result is destruction” (105). It is most unfortunate that a feminist perspective would remark

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<sup>20</sup> Beyond the scope of this thesis are reviews of the play and film. However, it is worth noting McConachie’s research of early reviews that called Blanche, “sexually voracious, prostitute, nymphomaniac, town trollop, notorious tramp” (187). Current essays include similar phrasing in a more “academically congenial” way.

on Blanche's early trauma, yet lay blame on her sexual desire as a self-directed liberation. By following this line of thought, it infers self-inflicted rape with Stanley. I maintain that trauma was not liberating but imprisoning. Her "rebellion" could not release her, because it was a symptom of traumatic expression, not a cure from it. One of the most egregious critical remarks on desire complicity (victim-blaming) comes from Verna Foster, "[Her] self-destructive game-playing with Stanley that *leads him to finally* rape her. ... her own *complicity in bringing it about* produces the tragic inevitability of her downfall..." (117, 113; emphasis mine). In this analysis, Blanche has become the willing participant in her own rape. As discussed earlier, due to PTSD symptoms (freezing and automatic obedience) Blanche could not have mindfully participated, chose or been complicit in the rape.

"American dramatists of the later 1940s and '50s cling to... the belief in intimate relationships... as paramount among life's pursuits" (Berkman 251- 252). It's unsurprising that Leonard Berkman would remark on the significance of intimacy. Many writers touch on this aspect of the human condition as presented in *Streetcar*.<sup>21</sup> Berkman promotes an interesting view that intimacy, responsibility and truth are intertwined. Blanche confesses her perceived responsibility in Allan's death in hopes that this truth will lead to some gentle, authentic closeness with Mitch. As I will examine shortly, Brick adamantly disavows this responsibility and forgoes intimacy. For Blanche seeking authentic intimacy causes her to be reviled in the "whore-image from which, through truth, she struggles to escape. ... just as she feared, it is the act of sex itself that denies intimacy to her thereafter" (255).

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<sup>21</sup> Cardullo, "Drama of Intimacy and Tragedy of Incomprehension" for a useful essay.

Certainly Blanche is inextricably Southern and sexual, and scholarly work examining these attributes is commendable. Nevertheless, none of these above analyses delve deeply enough to discover that financial and cultural dependency, sexual desire and rebellion, intimacy and truth are secondary attributes that arose from primary unresolved trauma.

### *Where the Gossamer'd Fly – Illusion and Reality*

Scholars often take note of Blanche's attraction to illusory affect. I will take a brief moment to alight on this topic. In my readings, I find that the "meaning" of Blanche's illusion most often follows the scholarly premise. For example, if Blanche is longing for a by-gone era, then her fantasy-illusions are means to attain that "lost era" in her reality, even if her reality isn't shared by others around her. The diversity of critical thought on Blanche expands her illusory-reality to vast dimensions. Following these shimmering ideas would draw this thesis away from its own premise, however a short comment should be sufficient without coming too close to a distracting flame. In his discussion of *Streetcar* as Nietzschean-psychological conflict, Riddel uses illusion as a vehicle for her stunted capacity. "Blanche, in her psychologically ingrown virginity, is driven further into herself and her dream, not released, and is handed over to Williams's modern priest, the psychoanalyst for care" (Riddel 29). Often Blanche's illusion is spoken of as a demarcation between her inner-world reality and the world of "the other" such as her family, town or community. Therein exists a dichotomy between the self and the other, her needs within fantasy and the needs of the community to agree on reality, which largely

excludes and denies validation. "... she paints illusion upon the reality of her broken world, she must paradoxically escape farther into the recess of a lonely isolation that makes it more and more impossible for her to survive, or to know kindness, the great cherished gesture of illusion" (Cafagna 122- 123).

#### *And the Cemeteries Sing* – Trauma and Community Response

Some critical readers of *Streetcar* offer deeper analyses of guilt and trauma as well as community response through character behavior. Notably, Daniel Thomières shows Blanche as a societal scapegoat through communal and individual response. I find this analysis intriguing, because the play's other characters mirror society's shunning of an individual with a misunderstood diagnosis such as PTSD. Individuals may respond differently in one-on-one interaction, such as in Mitch's interaction with Blanche, but in a group setting, such as in the poker games, their response is defaulted to communal culture. Bernadette Clemens problematically maintains that loneliness causes Blanche's fragmentation, and attributes the decline of her family's plantation to her ruin (74). Accepting Blanche's attestations would miss the reveal in what has specifically not been articulated by Blanche: that her ruin was pre-disposed due to the trauma of her husband's suicide, and her inability to address its ensuing effects.<sup>22</sup>

There are some scholarly works that associate Blanche's difficulties with the discovery of her husband's homosexuality and her self-assigned culpability in his

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<sup>22</sup> "It is the memory of those who died, leaving her alone that twists her mind into fragmentation" (Clemens 78). Due to traumatic memorial memory, the unresolved trauma fragments the mind by compartmentalizing the moment.

suicide. Britton Harwood covers intriguing concepts regarding guilt. “Blanche had reacted to Allan’s death self-destructively, internalizing each new death...” (114). Guilt is the active sense of responsibility and remorse, and Blanche is remorseful as she confesses to Mitch. The process of internalized guilt only tells part of the story; it doesn’t continue through the traumatic process. The traumatic fragmentation that occurred when she witnessed the suicide makes her family’s subsequent deaths a trigger while she is in a frozen emotional state. Therefore, she acts out of traumatic response, not out of internalized guilt. Using an unrefined treatment of guilt, depression and hysteria Calvin Bedient remarks that Blanche is, “infested with guilty hallucinations” (52). Although melancholic, she is resistant to depression because of hysteria, “that makes her cast about nervously for new, satisfying fictions” (55). This exemplifies the confused approach that mistreats the character by ill-usage of terms that have specific definitions and precise applications. Thomières offers a more sophisticated treatment of hysteria as it relates to Blanche. He grounds his remarks in a reading of Freud and Lacan. “Her mind had been paralyzed by a traumatic vision, something too strong for it, so only her body could act...” (381).

Cardullo in his candid critique agrees that Blanche’s primary struggle is with herself more than other characters, and that the “inevitability of her doom” arises from the rejection of her husband at Moon Lake Casino. He cites Leonard Berkman, who addresses the death of Allan as a traumatic point, but both maintain that Blanche is not a victim of neuroses. Her trauma stems from rejecting her husband in a cruel way; her kindness was withheld leading to suicide, which leads to “the



inevitability of her doom” (Drama of Intimacy 138, 140). There doesn’t need to be a binary function related to guilt and trauma. Blanche can be severely traumatized witnessing the suicide, while feeling deep guilt over her perceived responsibility for Allan’s action. These authors cast Blanche not simply as a victim of desire, gentility, dependency or loneliness, but as a person who experienced a particular set of circumstance, which set up further distressful circumstances that occurred just before the start of the action in the play.

Fred Ribkoff and Paul Tyndall’s analysis, “On the Dialectics of Trauma in Williams’ *Streetcar*” offers compelling affirmation to my research, “[Blanche’s] deliberate and self-conscious working through the traumatic losses of the past... to mourn and thus integrate the traumatic losses... into her fragile conception of self” (326). I also eschew analyses of Blanche as a lunatic, because scholars, “do not fully recognize her struggle to come to terms with trauma...” (325). I maintain that our commonalities stem from our mutual source: Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, whose ground-breaking work was highly influential in trauma theory. I disagree, however, with Ribkoff and Tyndall that the “rhythms of the Quarter” subdue Blanche to the “brutal forces of desire” (334). As previously discussed, trauma survivors are prone to becoming inert when in a position where they feel cornered, without escape. Ribkoff and Tyndall’s focus on desire obscures the experience of PTSD, and problematically justifies Blanche’s complicity in a tragic downfall. I resist applying this complicity-in-desire as some invisible scene partner for Blanche. If she is subdued, it is because of the disorder that removes or renders inoperable tools of personal agency, not because of wanton sexual gratification. While Ribkoff and

Tydall produce singular investigation of Blanche as a PTSD survivor, Riddel also makes substantial note to her fragmentation, but attributes it to a Nietzschean conflict. "Her schizoid personality is a drama of a man's irreconcilable split between animal reality and moral appearance" (25). Riddel offers unique insights through this philosophic lens, however as in other scholarly contributions, the insights are incomplete. When viewing Blanche within the entirety of the play: her actions, her words, her inner-landscape played on scrims and through loud-speakers, there is much more at work than just guilt, psychological stress or moral frustration. These are psychosomatic symptoms that constitute the comprehensive psychosis of PTSD.

#### The Termination of Desire's Streetcar

While Stanley is telling Stella his discoveries about Blanche, Blanche is singing a song, "Only a Paper Moon." The interplay of Blanche's song with Stanley's reveal may be a comment about her struggle with trauma as a reference to her pattern of denial and her investment in personal fantasy. It could also signal the need for interactive collaboration, in which the social environment around the trauma survivor validates her fantasy and denial. Constructing a new self-narrative in this denial would allow escape from dysphoria and potential recovery. External validation by others would transmit the self-narrative, thus creating a new reality based on the new mutually agreed-upon story. Although opportunity arises for Mitch, for Stella, for Eunice and for Stanley to do so, Blanche doesn't receive that external validation. Each of them reject her for their own reasons: to avoid unseemliness, to regain balance at home, to go on living, to retain power. All of them

become complicit with one another in that non-support. Blanche is vilified and repulsed from familial security and sanctuary.

One of the most well known lines in theatre and highly poignant moment in this play is Blanche's final line, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (178). As Anca Vlasopolos describes, the power of unanimity *decides for and stories for* others not within its normative group. "The power of [*Streetcar*] rests in our experiencing the ability of that authority to redact history and therefore determine the future. The force of this 'problem' play is to disquiet us so that perhaps we might hear, if not speak for, those whom history has silenced" (338). In this context, her assessment of the final scene shows the powerlessness that Blanche experiences when compared to the empowerment (and enabling) offered to Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Williams, through the action in the play, turns Blanche over to psychiatry, "the supreme authority in charge of language, interpreting the past and predicting the future... the scientific judgment of the soundness of the soul" (325). Thus Blanche is ushered out, in similar fashion as her arrival, without personal agency for self-directed choice. She is removed so that her surrounding community enables itself to keep on living.

Although Williams would have heard the Desire streetcar in New Orleans rattling by while he wrote at 632 St. Peter Street, the line ended its run in May 1948, prior to the film's exterior shots. Many streetcar lines were converted to bus routes, paving the way for more modern conveniences. If Blanche were a historical figure, perhaps there would be some kinship of understanding when watching so many lines terminate because of conversion to diesel bus. Lines such as Magazine, Tulane,

Freret and St. Claude were paved over, and in some cases the tracks remained embedded in the pavement, as an echo of the discarded past. However, owing to conservation of energy use, there is resurgence towards restoring more streetcar lines. The St. Claude line has just returned as the N. Rampart/ St. Claude in 2016. It crosses the Cemeteries line, also recently restored to service a few years ago. Perhaps similarly, the passage of time will allow for comprehensive analysis to see Blanche return from her shut-away institutionalized house and gracefully restored as a multi-faceted woman worthy of complex consideration.

## Chapter IV

### A case of aloof affect – Brick from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

As previously examined, trauma is an over-whelming physical and/or mental wound, and an unresolved trauma has a great likelihood of developing into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The definitive initial over-whelming wound experienced by Brick is more opaque than for Blanche. Blanche demonstrates clear symptoms from a defined period of time, whereas Brick continues to mask his difficulties, even to himself. The dearth of evidentiary behavior is grounded in the way Brick is written. Williams states that his intent for the audience/reader is to be concerned with the interplay of humans dealing with difficult circumstance, not any specific “disorder” itself. Of the play Williams writes, “... this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people that cloudy, flickering, evanescent - fiercely charged- interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis” (*Cat* stage directions 75). Although, we are reminded that when this play was written the American Psychiatric Association (APA) labeled homosexuality as a mental disorder,<sup>23</sup> it is not sufficient to simply categorize Brick as the mourning alcoholic, repressed narcissist or phobic homosexual. Brick is compelling because he is complex, juggling the intersection of his private-internal past with his public-interpersonal past- all the while never explicitly elucidating either. In our search for

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<sup>23</sup> It wasn't until the early 1970s that the APA finally removed homosexuality from its list of pathological illnesses.

meaning, Brick remains aloof, which causes the audience to further invest themselves into the problem-identification and problem-solving challenges of his character's journey.

Williams, through stage directions, states that Brick was crowned early in life as a "fairy" in the pejorative sense. The undercurrent of self-assigned deprecation likely informed Brick's experiences through his life. This underlying tension becomes volcanic when any talk regarding homosexuality arises in his conversations with his wife, Maggie and his father, Big Daddy Pollitt. His behavior demonstrates his unresolved anger and difficulty in the present. Big Daddy attempts to maintain privilege found in patriarchal plantation culture, by helping Brick to resolve his drinking problem before it ruins him. As discussed in this chapter, George Crandell gives an excellent examination of the narcissistic personality disorder, which forces Brick into displaying many of the associated socially unacceptable behaviors. Authors Douglas Arrell, Dean Shackleford and John Bak have remarked upon Brick in the midst of a deep struggle, a type of panic associated with confounded sexual identity. It is important to note that an acceptance of a personality disorder (narcissism) or attempt to assign homosexual panic to Brick does not exclude the presence of PTSD. There doesn't need to be an "either/or," especially with this character where "and" is far more likely and interesting to the reader and audience.

Brick could be viewed as an unreliable narrator; indeed most characters in this play could enjoy that claim. So it is with some skepticism that his testimony is incorporated to this thesis. More objectively "truthful" are the expulsions and

violent outbursts that summon Brick forcibly out of his aloof-stupor. Brick claims that his last conversation with his bosom friend Skipper was on a phone call where Skipper drunkenly confessed his sexuality. Brick then abruptly cuts off the phone call. I maintain that Brick's action, his unspoken rejection of Skipper, is likely to have been the creation of a "precipice" alongside the pre-existing wound of Brick's sexual self-identity. When Brick receives news of Skipper's death, he drops from the "precipice" into over-whelming trauma. Unable to recover, Brick develops PTSD compounded by guilt, shame and grief as well as potential pre-existing struggles with narcissistic personality disorder and sexual identity.

#### Patriarchy and the Plantation's son

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens with a great deal of historical information and revealed exposition over the course of the play. Brick's family continually attempts to assist his return to socially normative behavior. They offer many insights, excuses, enabling remarks and actions. Brick's father, Big Daddy, from the age of ten worked for two men who lived with one another for several decades; in the same house that the Pollitt family now resides. Because of these past experiences, and because he wants to pass on the plantation to Brick, Big Daddy helps in his way to ensure Brick's survival by addressing the alcoholism. "Son, you know you got a real liquor problem? ... A man that drinks is throwing his life away. Don't do it, hold onto your life. ... [Liquor] that's not living, that's dodging away from life" (58, 72). Yet, in the conversation Brick finds ways to slink around his drinking. Big Daddy, thinking he has escaped his own health scare, wants Brick to escape the likely fatal course of

his alcohol disease. He forcefully confronts Brick about his drinking problem. However, Big Daddy cannot plainly speak to what Brick has been trying to escape, and puts the disease in somewhat simplistic terms. "You better think why you drink or give up drinking!" (70) Despite admonishment against drinking, he easily capitulates to Brick's demand for his metaphorical crutch. "If I give you a drink, will you tell me what it is you're disgusted with, Brick?" (71) Big Daddy continues to enable the status quo, instead of empowering change. Big Daddy offers some glimpses of awareness into the depth of Brick's trauma, while enabling alcoholism:

BRICK. Skipper is dead. I have not quit eating!

BIG DADDY. No, but you started drinking. ... You started drinkin' when your friend Skipper died. ... Gooper an' Mae suggested that there was something not... exactly normal in your friendship... (77, 75)

In an outburst, Brick reveals that in a phone call Skipper confessed his feelings to Brick, and Brick abruptly cut-off the call. It was his last conversation with Skipper. Big Daddy seizes on this revelation to help Brick acknowledge how his unresolved grief had developed into illness: "We have tracked down the lie with which you're disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself. You! – dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it! – before you'd face truth with him!" (81) Despite these repeated attempts to help Brick through his alcoholism and trauma, Brick continually rejects Big Daddy's support.

As a brief contrast, I recall Blanche's family and community reaction. As we have seen, Blanche is shunned and ostracized from the social group. Her illness contributes to her "pariah" social status. There aren't repeated attempts on her behalf to integrate her, to help her through her alcoholism, to address the



underlying formative reasons for her drinking, or to offer long-term assistance for lodging and well-being as we see in Brick's case. She seeks wholeness, but is ultimately rejected while Brick continually rejects assistance from his immediate family.

Brick's father repeatedly attempts to reassure him that he will be tolerant of his son's sexuality by asserting that his past experiences and status give him the authority to be tolerant. "I knocked around in my time. ... [I've] slept in hobo jungles and railroad Y's and flop-houses in all cities ... I seen all things and understood a lot of them, till 1910. ... Jack Straw an' Peter Ochello took me in. ... When Jack Straw died - why old Peter Ochello quit eatin' ... I'm just sayin' I understand..." (76-77). Like Brick, the audience isn't given clear indication of Big Daddy's sexual identity. Through his history managing the plantation, it appears that Big Daddy may have at least accepted the possibility of a homosexual relationship on the premises. Brick suggests that lying to others and most notably to oneself, mendacity, is the source of his disgust and difficulties, although as is typical for Brick, he only partially speaks to this. Big Daddy offers support in the form of fatherly tough-love. "Think of all the lies I got to put up with! ... Having to pretend stuff you don't think or feel or have any idea of? Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama! ... I've lived with mendacity! - Why can't you live with it?" (72) Big Daddy's attestation of tolerance isn't the same as acceptance, but it isn't rejection either. It is clear that Big Daddy favors his "ne'er do well" son, Brick. He curiously rejects his younger son, Gooper, despite Gooper's demonstrated financial and familial fecundity as a successful lawyer, as an agreeable husband and father to several children. Like Brick, Big

Daddy doesn't speak directly, but offers ephemeral hints to sexual identity, "Why should I turn over twenty-eight thousand acres... to not my kind?" (73)

Brick is supported by the patriarchy, but does not explicitly accept it. Instead, he implicitly accepts support by continuing to live in the house, availing himself of the physical resources and house-staff. Michael Bibler offers interesting insights to the patriarchal support, "Big Daddy's empire of tolerance is built on... intolerance at any deviation from the hierarchy of plantation identities. White male authority on the plantation is created through the subordination and control of racial, class and gender identities" (392-3). Bibler's assertion is that the patriarchy, specifically Southern plantation culture, privileges the sustainment of its culture and economic institution by overlooking other identities that may be threatening to maintain the plantation's high social position. Further, Big Daddy espouses his close relationship to the prior male co-owners, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello: "a pair of old bachelors who shared all of their lives together" (Production Notes). This is why Brick's sexual identity is allowed to remain ambiguous within the household, and in a certain way accepted in order to preserve white male status. I find Bibler's informed remarks to be intriguing when considering that this privilege also enables Brick to not address his unresolved trauma. Like other topics out of polite conversation, Brick is allowed to avoid any further resolution towards wellness. His insistence to keep living within his trauma remains unobstructed while he continues to remain present within the plantation institution.

## A Woman's Place

Brick's mother, Big Mama, continually attempts to coax him into family affairs, and out of a motherly love chides him for drinking. She appeals for assistance: "Brick is Big Daddy's boy, but he drinks too much and it worries me and Big Daddy, and Margaret, .... Because it will break Big Daddy's heart if Brick don't pull himself together and take hold of things [the plantation]" (95). Although the family makes a fuss of pleasing her, she is treated as an ancillary necessity. She orbits around the action, but is never given enough agency by the family to drive the action.

Maggie finds ways to support her husband Brick, however there is little altruism in that support. Maggie's reason to help Brick is to help herself stay in a profitable relationship. She sums up her objective in the first act, "What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof?... Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can" (26). Staying above the fray, muck and mire are tied to social and economic wealth. "You can be young without money but you can't be old without it. You've got to be old with money," she sagely advises (40). Her ability to speak more plainly creates a sculptural relief against Brick's evasiveness that makes him appear to the audience as being more aloof. She makes deft decisions to create opportunities that will benefit her and his position.

She demonstrates support by her description of how she assisted Brick in his (potentially homosexual) relationship with Skipper. "Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along to chaperone you!- to make a good public impression-" (42). Her relationship to men becomes indirectly defined through Brick's relationship to men.

She and Gladys choose to put their preference for male closeness “on the sideline bench” in deference to Brick and Skipper’s relationship. Arrell discusses this further in his examination of Eve Sedgwick’s work on homosexual panic. “This exploitive use of women as props in a male game of self deception is a graphic illustration of Sedgwick’s theory... on the oppressive effect of male homosexual panic” (Arrell 65). In a way, Maggie gives up exclusive intimacy in order to support Brick, but also to preserve her social and economic status with the son of a plantation owner. Maggie’s way of confronting Brick about his alcoholism and melancholia is more calculated and direct than Brick’s family. Her enabling is a type of strategy: she restricts or eliminates access to alcohol unless Brick provides her a useful favor (104). She risks being alienated by continuing in her confrontations, however she knows that she needs to preserve her status to remain on top of the economic roof. Maggie uses negotiation to get what she wants, while preserving Brick’s position as eventual Head of Household. Blanche’s sister and brother-in-law, use rules and intimidation in a less sophisticated, but more effective way. Blanche is subjugated in order for them to get what they want; to stay on that tin roof and live without hindrance. Her socioeconomic status is worthless to them. Even though Blanche looks to them for support, they return her supplication with dominance.

Like Brick’s family, Maggie enables viewpoints that maintain social status. She reaffirms Brick’s perspective of “pure friendship” by utilizing the paradigm created by Brick to describe an acceptable male relationship, “it was only Skipper that harbored even any unconscious desire for anything not perfectly pure between you two!” (43) She understands, to some degree, that when trauma is able to be

placed in context, into a restructuring of the personal narrative, there is an open door to healing the unresolved wound. "It's got to be told... that's what made it so awful, because it was love that never could be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly. ... life has got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life is -all- over" (42). Even as Brick attempts to silence her, Williams uses Maggie as an open window from which the audience gains another view of normative values and denigrating effects that lead to unhealthy patterns. In Brick's case, his methods to resist acknowledging the traumatogenic events have led to trauma remaining unresolved. The persistent unresolved nature develops as PTSD, which Maggie describes eloquently but ultimately ineffectually:

When something is festering in your memory or your imagination, laws of silence don't work, it's just like shutting a door and locking it on a house on fire in hope of forgetting that the house is burning. But not facing a fire doesn't put it out. Silence about a thing just magnifies it. It grows and festers in silence, becomes malignant. (26-27)

Brick is so entrenched in avoidance that he cannot see his metaphorical house burning down. At first he chooses silence, in part due to pejorative labels and hetero-normative values. He chooses silence by not naming his identity aloud, perhaps even to himself. Silence becomes a pattern for Brick. Once he rejects Skipper and learns of Skipper's death, he retreats into that behavior pattern, reinforcing it like a steel curtain, which only serves to develop into "malignant" PTSD.

Maggie uses her past history in sharp detail to display how intimacy, in whatever way Brick wants to define it, is allowable and importantly, forgivable.

"Brick I tell you, you got to believe me, Brick. I *do* understand all about it! I- I think it

was- *noble*! Can't you tell I'm sincere when I say I respect it?" (42) However, her history also illustrates that a named truth can have disastrous consequence. "I said, 'Skipper! Stop lovin' my husband or tell him he's got to let you admit it to him! – one way or another! ... In this way I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told him could not be told" (43-44). She concludes with a cautionary tale- a path that led Skipper to his death and one that Brick is currently on: "From them on Skipper was nothing at all but a receptacle for liquor and drugs" (44). Despite this admonishment, Brick continues to reject her attempts throughout the play to assist him and thereby help her own circumstance.

There is a parallel to Maggie and Blanche that is striking. Both women confront men that they are extremely close to, in order to name and speak aloud about intimacies shared by the same sex. Maggie appears to be aware that this "outing" had destroyed Skipper, but she did not develop symptoms of an overwhelming trauma, or become stuck in one traumatic narrative. She went onward to allow life to be lived. As we have seen, the consequences of Blanche's "outing" of her husband at the party was the witnessed suicide. This was an overwhelming wound that re-occurs as she is stuck in that traumatic narrative. For Blanche, she is unable to allow life to be lived. She is frozen in an emotional state since that moment; life happens *to* her. She tries to negotiate her pathway in that trapped state, and finds little agency of her own. Her community and family shuns her. She has already fallen off the "hot tin roof," and is unable to regain balance.

## Narcissism's Wellspring

Brick becomes trapped within a personality disorder prior to his trauma and subsequent PTSD. It complicates his circumstances, and works in an illusory manner to compound his aloof charm. The APA gave criteria to determine narcissistic personality disorder. Some of these include 1) a grandiose sense of self-importance, 2) pre-occupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance or ideal love, 3) desire for constant attention and admiration 4) feelings of rage, shame or humiliation when criticized and 5) a lack of empathy to recognize and experience how others feel. Crandell deftly illustrates how Brick expresses this narcissism in his life and during action in the play. Brick wants to be well-liked so he is especially adept at being charming in his youth. Moreover, this admiration and adulation serves to shroud his inner-contempt from himself. Alcoholism is used as an escapist tool to mask difficulties, but as we see in Blanche, it serves to become a block to wellness. Brick's narcissism is enmeshed in his personal identity and complicates his trauma:

Brick is unable to see that his current state of melancholy stems... from his rejection of Skipper's friendship and love. Brick's narcissistic symptoms take on their pathological aspect prior to Skipper's death and immediately following the telephone conversation in which Skipper confesses his love to Brick. ... Brick suffers not from grief, which dissipates with time, but from a more serious disorder of the self... . (Crandell 436)

I maintain that his grief cannot dissipate over time, because Skipper's death created a traumatic wound that Brick is unable to close or repair. He frustrates any attempts to do so. Perhaps in some respects the choice to reject help comes unconsciously because of narcissism, which would prevent him from seeing himself as someone

that needs assistance. His alcoholism appears to have progressed to a point where his body needs to be sustained by alcohol, so he cannot simply quit altogether. These are underlying reasons to resist appeals for wellness, however they are not the trauma that needs to be resolved. In order to overcome or abate PTSD, Brick would need to face his overwhelming grief, shame, rage, and other feelings. He would need to at least acknowledge the initial shock and over-whelming trauma of the circumstance surrounding Skipper's death.

#### Homogeneity and its Labels

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to ascertain Brick's sexual identity. I am most focused on the effects from the underlying tensions in his formative years. Perhaps owing to reflections of or questioning about his possible sexual identity, these nascent denigrations may contribute to illnesses such as alcoholism and PTSD. It is important to note that scholarly work around homosexual panic as it may relate to Brick helps the reader to parse his reactivity. While I will place Brick's reactions in the context of his PTSD, this does not obviate other ongoing issues such as gay panic. Some critical essays such as those by Shackelford and Bak make note that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was written in a cold war era where "being homosexual was associated with subversive, un-American behavior, as it had been during World War II" (Shackelford 103). At a time when masculinity was strictly defined and non-conformance was immediately suspect, Williams spoke more openly about Brick during subsequent interviews in 1955:

[Brick] feels that the collapse and premature death of his great friend Skipper... have been caused by unjust attacks against his moral



character made by outsiders, including Margaret. It is his bitterness at Skipper's tragedy that has caused Brick to turn against his wife and find solace in drink, rather than any personal involvement, although I do suggest that, at least at some time in his life, there have been unrealized abnormal tendencies. ... But Brick's overt sexual adjustment was, and must always remain, a heterosexual one. (Williams in Waters 72-73)

Brick reacts strongly to any discussion regarding moral fortitude, masculine correctness and accusations of sexual identity. He resolutely rejects any aspersion to character fitness. Contemporaneous to the time of the play, this concern would resonate in the post-war and McCarthy era cold war climate. Based on Williams's remarks on the inner-landscape and nature of Brick's sexuality, it might be easy to consider that both the author and the character were careful to avoid appearing suspicious or subversive. However, Williams shares in his essay that he writes to the truth of the character and not to evade simply for a character to be elusive (Williams, Essay 71). This thesis will resist attributing the author's intent to Brick, and will remark on the character as he appears in the play. However, there is an interesting morsel to ponder in Williams's remarks.

There is a sentiment that lies and truth (and the telling of both) have disastrous consequence for Williams's characters, Blanche and Brick. Both are left with the after-effects of a certain "truth-telling." Blanche speaks about Allan's relationship, and Allan commits suicide. Skipper speaks to Brick about his relationship, and Skipper also dies. Blanche becomes fixated on the moment of the suicide, as discussed earlier. As Williams mentioned, Brick becomes fixated on the lies that surround himself and Skipper. Brick's trauma is intertwined with the inability to speak truth or to be believed in that truth-telling. His trauma develops

into PTSD once he loses Skipper. Brick cannot abide any admission or forgiveness to himself, even though Maggie offers absolution: "I'm naming [your friendship with Skipper] so damn clean that it killed poor Skipper! – You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes! – and death was the only icebox where you could keep it" (43). For Brick, that truth-telling moment of the last phone call and eventual death becomes the over-whelming, recurrent trauma. I will examine this recurrent wound experience shortly, as part of the symptoms expressed in PTSD by Brick.

Bak delivers an impressive analysis surrounding the topic of masculinity and homosexual identity within the contexts of the cold war, feminism and sexuality/gender studies. He examines the premises by Kinsey and Sedgwick that men may separate a homosexual *identity* from a homosexual *act* as an avoidance tactic. Brick is able to speak as if and believe that he isn't gay because he and Skipper never did anything more than hold hands. Big Daddy's history may disclose a manner to "seamlessly integrate a homosexual act with a hetero-masculine identity," but to do this, as Bak maintains, Brick would need to admit the responsibility of rejecting Skipper and his own identity. Regardless of Brick's sexual identity, Bak sums up one of the most important points about the reliance and appropriation created by a social value of homogeneity. "It is Williams's distaste for a society which first determines someone's private identity and then systematically marginalizes those who do not fit its model of normalized sociosexual behavior that mostly drives the play's sociocritical engines" (Bak 242- 244). Brick's strong reaction against any defamation can be seen as an indirect response from a lifetime

of being labeled and defined by others, which may cause Brick to feel increasingly marginalized by each self-perceived denigration. By adulthood, he is primed to be extremely sensitive to these types of criticisms. In a way, these continual insults to his character are mini-traumas, from which he is able to cope over time. He becomes unable to handle them after rejecting Skipper's confession and learning of his death. Brick turns to drinking as an escape and as an avoidance tactic. However, drug use doesn't ease the recurrent pain; it serves to make him more "stuck" in the traumatic wound. By the time the play opens, he continues to use evasion to avoid addressing the severe alcoholism, PTSD and other family issues in his life.

#### Brick's Responses as PTSD survivor/victim

As explored earlier, survivors of PTSD are prone to exaggerated responses to stimuli. Recurrent thoughts, images, sounds and experience at the time of the originating trauma continually replay unbidden. Blanche's recurrent experiences are through sounds of the polka; it is a clear call-back to the witnessed suicide. For Brick, evidence of his recurrent image, thought, or sound is more opaque.

#### The Click

Throughout the play, Brick continually searches for his "click."<sup>24</sup> It is important because it's one of the very few clear objectives he seeks, and he states it repeatedly. In terms of alcoholism, the "click" could be a point at which he is

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<sup>24</sup> Brick: A click I get in my head that makes me peaceful. ... I got to drink till I get it. It's just a mechanical thing, something like a... switch clicking off in my head, turning the hot light off and cool night on and- all of a sudden there's - peace! (66)

completely numb. It might correspond to his explanation of serenity or peace, but that bliss comes from drunken complacency by being completely detached, not enlightened nirvana. In terms of a literary device, the click could be the sound of the croquet mallet. The croquet is heard being played just outside as Maggie and Brick prepare for the day with family. The sound is used as a type of literary “acting beat” much like the “blue note” music or “locomotive sounds” were used in *Streetcar*. The sound is an impending thunderstrike about to happen to the characters. For Brick and Maggie, they are about to discuss Skipper a few lines after the click of the croquet game. Brick becomes agitated, and he snaps to Maggie:

BRICK. *(like sudden lightning)* I don't want to lean on your shoulder, I want my crutch! ...

MARGARET. ...that's the first time I've heard you raise your voice in a long time, Brick. A crack in the wall? – Of Composure?" (27)

Over the course of the play, Brick's “crack in the wall” widens, threatening collapse of the plantation and preferred heir. However, this isn't the first time Brick and croquet are introduced to audiences.

In 1952, Williams wrote a short story in the *New Yorker* that features Brick Pollitt as described by a 14 year old narrator. In it the boy says, “I cannot think of croquet without hearing a sound like a faraway booming of a cannon fired to announce a white ship coming into harbor” (Williams, “Game” 27). In this story, “Three Players of a Summer Game,” the click of the croquet mallet indicates that Brick is able to control himself and his circumstance, especially with respect to his drinking: “It takes a sober man to play a game of precision... for a man with a liquor problem croquet may seem a little sissy, but let me tell you it's a game of precision” (31). By the time Williams reintroduces Brick in *Cat*, that croquet mallet click

indicates that he is far beyond any ability to master precision. He has given up the ability to play the game.

Through an examination of that short story and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Charles May offers the croquet mallet click as a metaphorical sound, which Brick strives to recurrently hear as a call-back to a pastime activity that held meaning.<sup>25</sup> “What Brick hoped to achieve in his games with Skipper is the same thing he aspired to in his croquet game with Isabel and Mary Louise, [but] human needs always interfere with purely ideal aspirations” (290). As May describes, Brick yearns to achieve that state of precision and mastery, where ideal aspirations are nobly lived, are publically affirmed, and aren’t sullied by social mores enjoined to their actions. This state of ideal being isn’t possible, and he quits physically playing croquet. However, the game changes; the objective of the metaphorical croquet game is to become as detached as possible. “Brick’s game of detachment is as destructive and exploitative as his [game in “Three Players”]. ... He intuits that love of another human being is not only is insufficient to fulfill the ideal demands of the human spirit; by its very nature such a love negates the possibility of such fulfillment” (290- 291). In this regard, if the click is a metaphorical tool used by Brick, then I agree that the click that Brick drinks to win is a three-fold award of 1) achieving pure detachment, 2) self-affirmation (or self-delusion) that fulfillment comes from detachment and 3) self-affirmation (or self-delusion) that an ideal state of love is impossible to achieve.

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<sup>25</sup> Brick describes the “click” as “turning the hot light off and cool night on.” In “Summer Game” coming out of the house to play croquet is described as, “running together out of something unbearably hot and bright into something obscure and cool” (29). If these worlds co-exist, then Brick may be drawing a parallelism to the summer at the Greys and the coolness of silence after the click.

While the click may be a physical state of drunkenness, or an achieved state of self-delusion, I maintain that it can also concurrently serve as a surreptitious click of the telephone receiver at the end of the last phone conversation with Skipper. It is interesting that Brick returns to the phrase “waiting for the click.” There are a number of other analogies in parlance of the era to describe being more-than-blissfully-tipsy or turning “off” emotions through drugs. Yet, Brick uses “click” to describe this recurrent sound/state. Unconsciously perhaps, that click serves as an aural-representation of Skipper’s death. Brick was responsible for that click, for that abrupt end, and thereafter there was silence.<sup>26</sup> The silence of complete detachment from the other person he clearly cared for, whether it was filial or romantic. In PTSD, the survivor experiences unbidden recurrences. Even though Brick drinks to achieve a certain state, the “click” seems to come on its own accord. Brick cannot will it into existence, it simply comes unexpectedly when associated with a high amount of alcohol. Interestingly, Blanche describes the polka music suddenly stopping just after the revolver shot. For both Blanche and Brick, punctuated noise (gunshot and click) is the gateway through which silence carries pronounced relief.

Brick may also be attempting to re-write his trauma by assigning a different reason underlying the clicking sound. If “Three Players of a Summer Game” and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are meant to co-exist, then Brick may have re-engineered a

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<sup>26</sup> Brick even remarks on his preference for silence. However, this is in the context that his father is talking at length about personal matters. Being silent also means that personal matters aren’t discussed. “You know what I like to hear most? ... Solid quiet. Perfect unbroken quiet....Because it’s more peaceful” (62).

circumstance similar to Skipper's death.<sup>27</sup> By using Dr. Grey as a substitute and by controlling death, death isn't being unable to abide liminal truth/lies. Brick is able to give the wife and himself control over liminal truth/lie that this death was merciful, necessary and thus without mendacity. The "click" that Brick seeks may simultaneously be the phone call click of the initial trauma leading to Skipper's death and the "click" of the croquet mallet, which is a recall to the attempted re-write of trauma through Dr. Grey's assisted death. In this way, the intentional searching for the "click" is more similar to trauma reliving than a flashback that is out of the survivors control. "Reliving is an intentional, effortfull, narrative process... [it] involves speaking from within the experience, giving voice to the traumatic story with all its associated pain, confusion, fear and shame" (Sewell and Williams 214). The meaning of the click might be on a continuum. Much like Brick's attributes, *and* is far more likely than *or*. Brick seeks peace: before the click there is tumult, noise and heart-ache, after the click there is abject apathy and silence.

### The Crutch

"Give me my crutch" is a phrase Brick uses often as he tries to obtain alcohol. Of course there is a physical crutch, since his ankle is broken, plastered and bound.

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<sup>27</sup> "Big Mama: They gave [Skipper] a big, big dose of that sodium amytal stuff at his home... and give him another big, big dose of it at the hospital... and all of the alcohol in his system... just proved too much for his heart... I think more people have been needled out this world-" (*Cat* 88). The narrator in "Summer Game" tells the story how Brick participated in assisted suicide, in an effort to help his widow from seeing her husband decline further from the brain tumor/aneurism. "Brick Pollitt came and sat with Isabel Grey by her dying husband's bed... filled the hypodermic needle for her and pumped its contents fiercely into her husband's hard young arm" (28). Brick controls the reason for death and attempts re-write his own experience of losing his dearest friend.

It's unsurprising that the dual nature of "the crutch" works so well with this character: he physically needs it to stand, and at this point in his alcoholism (when *Cat* begins) he physically needs alcohol to survive. He depends on this double-crutch to the exclusion of other methods of support. Brick refuses Maggie's help:

BRICK. I've dropped my crutch.

MARGARET. Lean on me.

BRICK. No, just give me my crutch.

MARGARET. Lean on my shoulder.

BRICK. I don't want your shoulder, I want my crutch! Are you going to give me my crutch or do I have to get down on my knees on the floor and- (27)

Brick attempts to give himself agency to get what he wants. Big Daddy appears blithely ignorant when giving Brick his requested crutch: "Hand me over that crutch so I can get up. ... I'm taking a little short trip to Echo Spring. .. Liquor cabinet. (*He hands Brick the crutch.*) Later Big Daddy "discovers" his son is an alcoholic, and throws the crutch across the room. Brick responds: "I can hop on one foot, and if I fall I can crawl!" (67) The two men use the crutch as a chess piece to determine who will win control of the discussion and Echo Springs. He uses the crutch as a weapon against further conversation of the past, and of finding wholeness in the present:

BRICK. Maggie, you want me to hit you with this crutch? Don't you know I could kill you with this crutch? [ensuing dialogue regarding Skipper and confessing his feelings about Brick]

MARGARET. When I came to his room that night... he made that pitiful, ineffectual little attempt to prove that what I had said wasn't true. (*Brick strikes at her with crutch, a blow that shatters the gemlike lamp on the table.*) (42-43)

In the scene, Brick continues to go after Maggie with the crutch as a weapon, missing her and finally "hurls the crutch across the bed where she took refuge behind" (44).



As a PTSD survivor Brick uses alcohol as a crutch to escape the pain of the unresolved, over-whelming trauma. Richard Ulman and Doris Brothers, in their extensive study on trauma, remark on the substance abuse as, “inanimate selfobjects” and “uncontrolled self-medication for the dissociative symptom (reexperiencing and numbing) of PTSD” (301, 299). Brick appears to have some small self-awareness that he is making poor choices in the manner of escape.<sup>28</sup> He attempts to use his crutch through self-agency to make his choices and determine his future. He uses anger and rage to fuel action. Blanche cannot do this. Her PTSD traps her into a position of helplessness, she constantly defers to others. Her peers do not give her agency, neither does she self-assume it. Blanche appeals to the kindness of others as a crutch, and ultimately that deferral seals her future.

### The Rage

When Big Daddy announces to Brick that the cause of his drinking was losing Skipper, Brick begins to react in a flight/fight response. He’s startled and hobbles away from his father on his crutch. As Big Daddy reveals family discussions about Skipper’s and Brick’s “not exactly normal” friendship, Brick’s heart is accelerated; his forehead sweat-beaded; his breath becomes more rapid and his voice hoarse (75). Brick is having a somatic response to speaking aloud those aspects of “abnormalcy”

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<sup>28</sup> Brick to Big Daddy after revealing Big Daddy’s cancer report: “Mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out an’ death’s the other. ... In some ways I’m worse [than others] because I’m less alive. Maybe it’s being alive that makes them lie, and being almost not alive makes me sort of accidentally truthful... And being friends is telling each other the truth...” (83). This “truth-telling” might also faintly call-back to Dr. Grey’s death as a truth-telling to Isabel and release from the mendacity of her husband’s poor health state.

that had been mini-traumas all his life. When placed in context of Skipper's death and Brick's alcoholism, the somatic response is a trigger for PTSD symptoms. He begins to exhibit elements of an oncoming panic attack. But Brick doesn't lose himself in a PTSD flashback, as Blanche sometimes does when triggered. He pointedly asks, "who else's suggestion, is it?" (76) Brick, as he has been for years, is extremely sensitive to the outward perception people have of him. Narcissism would drive this concern, but it's the trauma and PTSD that cause the immediate somatic response during the conversation.

Brick expresses rage when his possible homosexuality is discussed or implied. It becomes most extreme when his father tries to reassure him that being a man, a socially acceptable masculine man, can exist on a spectrum, in myriad ways. "*(Brick wheels on his crutch and hurls his glass across the room shouting... Brick is transformed, as if a quiet mountain blew suddenly up in volcanic flame.)* You think so, too? You think me an' Skipper did, did, did! – *sodomy!* Together? ... You think we did dirty things between us..." (77). His rage could come from a number of potential reasons. I've explored personality disorders and gay panic, however I will focus on reasons that relate to PTSD. Symptoms of PTSD can include a startled response that lead into oscillation of "freezing" or extreme reactionary behavior. For Brick, it is usually the latter. He rages, and when it subsides, the fight response transitions to recovery from panic, then finally he speaks to his fear. "*(Brick loses his balance and pitches to his knees without noticing the pain. He grabs the bed and drags himself up.)* Big Daddy:... Grab my hand!...*(He draws him up, keeps an arm about him with concern and affection.)* You're broken out in a sweat! You're panting like you'd run a race-

(78). Brick describes how a pledge at his fraternity attempted “an unnatural thing,” and was run off campus. Despite Big Daddy’s appeals of acceptance and respect (especially in light of his privilege<sup>29</sup>), Brick remains fixed on proving the untouchable, unassailable purity of his filial friendship. He assigns Skipper’s death to being unable to live in a liminal space where truth and lies intersect. “He, poor Skipper, went to bed to prove [his homosexuality] wasn’t true, and when it didn’t work out, he thought it was true! – Skipper broke in two like a rotten stick- nobody ever turned so fast to a lush – or died of it so quick” (81). Outwardly, Brick blames mendacity, however there is a similarity with the prior owners, Straw and Ochello: neither survived very long without the other. His anger in grief, in being left behind, and in fear of being ousted like the collegiate-pledge are entangled in his anger at mendacity. Overwhelmed, he is unable to deal with the loss, and sort these complex emotions. Any attempt to find healing through personal reliance fails.<sup>30</sup> He remains stuck in in the stress disorder, seeking peaceful silence through baneful means.

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<sup>29</sup> “Big Daddy: ...lived with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton!- is tolerance!- I grown it” (78).

<sup>30</sup> In “Summer Game” Skipper dies two years into Brick’s marriage. After this, “Brick seemed to be throwing his life away, as if it were something disgusting that he had suddenly found in his hands. This self-disgust came upon him with the abruptness and violence of a crash on a highway” (27). In this story, Brick is able for a short time to, “pull himself together for awhile and take command of the young widow’s affairs” (29). The revulsion as we have explored is a tangle of shame, guilt, rage, fear and grief stemming from living around and within lies. He tries to re-write the traumatic narrative, and attempts to help a family going through loss. He is unable to maintain any balance, and surrenders to symptoms of PTSD, and the consequences of apathetic deference.

## Last swish of the tail

Without finding a way to resolve the broken narrative of unresolved trauma, Brick will continue to socially devolve. His expressed PTSD symptoms such as explosive aggression, escapism and avoidance are exacerbated by alcoholism, narcissism and possible gay panic. These co-morbidly cause Brick to continue to reject his acknowledgement of needed healing. His story isn't necessarily one of explanation; readers, actors and audiences benefit by fully exploring the comprehensive set of experiences rooted in the past and "played out" onstage in the present.

*Cat*, in the original ending, closes with the same dialogue that Big Mama and Big Daddy use earlier in the play.<sup>31</sup> For them, fireworks punctuate an important mark, publically viewable to the family. Their truth is in the open to be seen, as is the futility of their relationship. The interplay with Maggie and Brick ends in the closing darkness of their bedroom. She attempts to restore respect,<sup>32</sup> and to offer hope for restoration through external affirmation. Brick, as he has throughout the play, rejects this notion of grace. Aloof charm plays on his lips as he surrenders to his default stance, acknowledging the utter futility of such attempts. The play closes on this acknowledgement; mendacity spirits away another victim.

MARGARET. Oh you weak people, you weak beautiful people!- who

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<sup>31</sup> Big Mama: *In all these years you never believed that I loved you?? And I did, I did so much, I did love you!* I even loved your hate and your hardness, Big Daddy!  
Big Daddy: *(to himself)* Wouldn't it be funny if that were true... *(A pause is followed by a burst of light in the sky from the fireworks)* (55).

<sup>32</sup> In *Summer Game* Williams (as Brick) speaks to externally granted/revoked respect, "most precious thing that a woman can give to a man- his lost respect for himself- and the meanest thing one human being can do to another human being is take his respect for himself away from him. I had it took away from me" (30).

give up- what you want is someone to- (*She turns out the rose-silk lamp*) take hold of you- Gently, gently with love! And (*The curtain slowly falls*) I do love you Brick, I do!

BRICK. (*Smiling with charming sadness*) Wouldn't it be funny if that were true?...(*Curtain down*) (105)

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

Reviewing the evidence, as it is presented in the text, greatly benefits an examination of PTSD in Tennessee Williams's plays. This methodology is similar to PTSD therapeutic methods, which allows the patient to speak, to testify, to reveal their self-story. It is worth briefly mentioning some nuanced nomenclature that narrowly adjusts the external lens (of critical thought) for those patients affected by PTSD. This thesis has cited the original classifications by scholars, which include: victim, survivor and survivor-sufferer. By labeling Brick a *victim* of PTSD, it is as if his conscious will is held against the effects of PTSD. He submits himself to its tidal impulses, rage, avoidance, and recurring trauma compounded by alcoholism. Unable to affect change, he chooses avoidance through his formative behavior pattern, which causes his PTSD to exacerbate this symptom beyond self-help.

If a victim is one who loses agency, then perhaps a survivor is one who chooses to regain agency. A survivor struggles onward in the face of the challenge, with or without success. In this regard, both Blanche and Brick are survivors and victims. Neither is able to face their over-whelming traumatic event. Both suffer under the effects of an unresolved traumatic event, unable to integrate the event within the context of the whole. Instead, the trauma-wound replays itself, eating away at the ability to stabilize, to realize the ongoing and increasing damage stemming from that overwhelming moment onward. Blanche strives to become

whole, but none of her attempts (through sex, relationships, fashion, sociability) address her inability to forgive herself for Allan's death, nor take away the shock and horror of witnessing his suicide. She tries to live in a world that continually pushes her away. She is a survivor, yet by the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she becomes a victim of ostracization. By the end of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick appears to submit to Maggie's plan. He is given many opportunities to effect his own change, instead he surrenders to Maggie, and she acts to preserve her own interests through him.

Future examinations of PTSD with respect to particular trauma theories would provide deeper analysis of Blanche and Brick. For example, the role of narcissistic trauma, the conflict between self-representation as "pathogenic childhood fantasy and a nontraumatic self-representation" and breakdown of ego functions, may offer interesting results to further remark on PTSD and formative dissociative states. (Ulman and Brothers 52-54) The intersection of trauma studies and the recovery from PTSD with respect to returning combat veterans may open discussion on the play *Period of Adjustment*. Through future exploration of Shatan's "post-Vietnam syndrome" and the "perceptual dissonance" of flashbacks and syndromes (Ulman and Brothers 176-177) a question arises: What does it take for a retired veteran to find a firm foundation in midst of PTSD recovery?

This thesis has not used reviews of particular staged or film productions, because there are several variances when considering the director's role in a production. Notably, Elia Kazan was deeply influential in Williams's plays to the degree that Williams revised the third act of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. For the purposes

of this investigation, both ending versions were consulted. However, the original text was privileged over the revised Broadway version. Future analyses may find fruitful exploration of the film and Broadway adaptations of both plays.

Through research and discussion, this thesis draws the following conclusions: First, Blanche and Brick are survivors of trauma and exhibit symptoms of PTSD. Although critical analyses have been limited to observations that Blanche and Brick have undergone trauma, there hasn't been sufficient investigation into the etiology of the trauma. Incomplete analysis serves to simplify characters *rather than reveal their complexity*. This thesis has yielded encompassing insights to PTSD and its expression in (and reaction to) Blanche and Brick. Secondly, psychoanalysis empowers comprehensive exploration that is reflective of the entire spectrum of an individual. For example, delving deeper into the onset of alcoholism elucidates the importance of unresolved trauma leading to PTSD, the ensuing self-medication that progresses into alcoholism. This thesis has explored Blanche and Brick as PTSD survivors, whose behavior disorders exacerbate their PTSD.

Lastly, insights provided by psychoanalysis include nuanced objectives to portray the subtext of a life-long story arc from an initial trauma that occurred distantly in the past, as well as the subsequent manifestations of PTSD, which occur prior to the start of each play and recurrently manifest during the action on stage. While dramatic works offer troves of text for meaningful discussion, at heart its media is experiential performance. Therefore, discoveries found within texts are best-served by observing this research through a performance in the dramatic arts.



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