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“A Little Unwell”:
Madness in the World of Tennessee Williams

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By Sarah Dickey

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion

Of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English

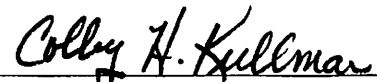
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Approved:



Advisor: Dr. Colby Kullman



Reader: Dr. Natalie Schroeder



Reader: Dr. Kathryn McKee

Abstract

Tennessee Williams is a prolific playwright and an American literary icon. He is second only to Shakespeare in the amount of scholarly analyses of his work. Although I am writing my thesis in a crowded field, I am pursuing a fresh topic by studying madness in Williams' works, specifically the subcategories of Eccentrics/Acutes and Chronics – a construct put forth in the novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey. By applying Cuckoo's Nest and other texts involving madness to Tennessee Williams' plays, I will explore the character of the mad individual, the impact of society upon the mad individual, and the mad individual's impact upon society.

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*Well I'm not crazy, I'm just a little unwell
I know, right now you can't tell
But stay awhile and maybe then you'll see
A different side of me*
- "Unwell" by Matchbox Twenty

Introduction: The Eccentric and Society

To fully understand madness in the world of Tennessee Williams, one must first understand madness in general. The terms "madness" and "insanity" encompass a broad spectrum of mental disorders – from the legally insane to schizophrenics to people who function normally but "seem a bit off." The objective of this introduction is to better understand this third category of madness – the eccentrics. In society, diagnosable mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia or depression and anxiety, are treated with medications and therapy, and the legally insane are housed in mental hospitals or treatment centers. But what place is right for the eccentric? Through an analysis of Dr. David Rosenhan's psychological study "On Being Sane in Insane Places" and Ken Kesey's novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, the figure of the eccentric and his role in society will be explored.

"On Being Sane in Insane Places" is a psychological study conducted in 1973 in which eight sane people were admitted into psychiatric hospitals under the assumption that they were insane. The eight sane people, or "pseudopatients," made appointments with psychiatric hospitals, complaining of hearing voices. The pseudopatients were then admitted to the different hospitals with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Immediately after being admitted to the hospital, the pseudopatients stopped all pretenses of being insane. They acted as they normally would; however, their sanity was not detected by the staff. The pseudopatients' sane behavior was thought to be simply because they were "in

remission” for schizophrenia. One of the pseudopatients was hospitalized for fifty-two days, while the average pseudopatient was hospitalized for nineteen days. Interestingly, while the staff at the psychiatric hospitals could not detect the fraudulent pseudopatients, some of the actual psychiatric patients could. Approximately 30% of the psychiatric patients voiced suspicions about the pseudopatients and even told a few that they “weren’t crazy” and thought that they must be there “checking up on the hospital.”

Dr. Rosenhan’s study brings up important observations, most notably that the normal are not detectably sane. Normality and abnormality are not universal; what is seen as normal in one culture may be seen as unusual in another. Notions of normality and abnormality are not concrete. Rosenhan makes clear that some behaviors are deviant, however:

To raise questions regarding normality and abnormality is in no way to question the fact that some behaviors are deviant or odd. Murder is deviant. So, too, are hallucinations. Nor does raising such questions deny the existence of the personal anguish that is often associated with ‘mental illness.’ Anxiety and depression exist. Psychological suffering exists. But normality and abnormality, sanity and insanity, and the diagnoses that flow from them may be less substantive than many believe them to be. (1)

Rosenhan's study also brings up the impact that labeling has on the mentally ill. When the pseudopatients were discharged, they were discharged with the diagnosis of "schizophrenic in remission" not as someone who had been cured after treatment. Rosenhan says that "once a person has been designated abnormal, all of his other behaviors and characteristics are colored by that label. That label is so powerful that many of the pseudopatients' normal behaviors were overlooked entirely or profoundly misinterpreted" (4). The sane are not sane all of the time; everyone is subject to moments of rage or unaccountable behavior or feelings. In the same vein, the insane are not insane all of the time. Dr. Rosenhan's study shows how easy it is for doctors to misdiagnose mental illness. There are eccentric people in the world who may exhibit odd behavior and have no type of mental disorder whatsoever, but in the interest of public safety and the safety of the individual in question, doctors can diagnose people as mentally ill too quickly. It is better to err on the side of caution rather than to allow someone with severe mental problems to be a danger to himself and society; however the label of being "mentally ill" is a stigma that will follow a person for the rest of his or her life, whether or not it is true.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a tale of the trials and tribulations of a mental institution told from the point of view of Chief Bromden, a Native American who pretends to be deaf and dumb. The hospital is run by Nurse Ratched, a former army nurse who runs the hospital by barking out orders as if it were a military base. All of the patients cower in fear of Nurse Ratched and always follow her orders, but this changes when a new patient, McMurphy, arrives. McMurphy is committed to the hospital for fighting and gambling at the work farm where he was imprisoned, and one gets the sense

that he is merely feigning mental illness to escape the drudgery of the work farm.

McMurphy begins his tenure in the hospital as a con man, but he becomes a martyr in his quest to improve conditions in the hospital for the other patients. McMurphy questions authority and bucks the system that Nurse Ratched has so carefully put into place, and most of the novel concentrates on the war between nurse and patient. Woven throughout the plot are important observations about the treatment of the mentally ill - from a medical standpoint and also by society.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest creates a distinction between the types of mentally ill patients – the “Chronics” and the “Acutes.” The Chronics are mostly older men who have been institutionalized for many years and likely will be for the rest of their lives. They have severe mental disorders, are mostly confined to wheelchairs and wear catheters because most cannot control their bodily functions. With the exception of Chief Bromden, who is considered a Chronic because everyone believes him to be deaf and dumb, the Chronics do belong in a long-term mental hospital for care and treatment. They are not aware of their surroundings and would not re-integrate well into society. The institution, with its routines and the constant monitor and care of medical professionals, is the right place for the Chronics.

Most of the Acutes, however, have no reason to be in a long-term care facility. The Acutes are all young men with mild to moderate problems: epilepsy, stuttering, etc. A few of the Acutes suffer from paranoia and delusions and will likely become Chronics, but the novel focuses on the Acutes who have the mildest problems. The Acutes are, for the most part, “eccentrics” or those who march to the beat of their own drum, which in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest classifies one as delusional: “He Who Marches Out Of

Step Hears Another Drum” (146). McMurphy, an Acute himself, questions why the Acutes are in the hospital after finding out that most of the men are voluntarily committed: “You gripe, you bitch for *weeks* on end about how you can’t stand this place, can’t stand the nurse or anything about her, and all the time you ain’t committed. I can understand it with some of those old guys on the ward. They’re *nuts*. But you, you’re not exactly the everyday man on the street, but you’re not *nuts*” (184). Therein lies the problem. As McMurphy puts it, the Acutes are “not the everyday man on the street” which gives them the stigma of being “crazy” every though they have no identifiable mental disorder. Most of the “Acutes” are simply eccentrics, hiding out in the hospital, afraid of the rejection of society. Billy Bibbitt, an Acute patient with a stuttering problem, sums up the Acutes’ position best when telling McMurphy why he voluntarily stays in the hospital:

Sure I could go outside today if I had the guts... You think I wuh-wuh-wuh-want to stay in here? You think I wouldn’t like a con-convertible and a guh-guh-girlfriend? But did you ever have people laughing at you? No, because you’re so b-big and so *tough*! Well, I’m not big and tough. Neither is Harding. Neither is F-Fredrickson. Neither is Suh-Sefelt. Oh-oh you t-talk like we stayed in here because we liked it! (184)

The hospital makes a distinction between the Acutes and the Chronics by calling them by those names, but there is no difference in treatment for the two groups. The two groups of patients could not be more different in their needs. The Acutes need group therapy and camaraderie to build up their self-esteem, while the Chronics are not enough

aware of their surroundings to participate in any kind of group therapy and need medication to control their psychotic episodes. However, both the Acutes and the Chronics are medicated daily and are forced to participate in group therapy together, as one group. McMurphy attempts to make the hospital recognize the differences between the Acutes and the Chronics during his stay. Soothing music is piped into the dayroom that the Chronics and Acutes share at a high decibel so that the Chronics can have something to listen to, as most of them cannot communicate at all or even watch television. This music, while beneficial to the Chronics, is detrimental to the Acutes, as it hinders the men from talking amongst themselves and playing games. Before McMurphy comes, each man is a lonely island in the dayroom, listening to the music. During one of the group therapy sessions, McMurphy raises this point and the Acutes are given an alternative dayroom for their own devices, much to the dismay of Nurse Ratched who does not encourage patient-initiated reform. By treating the Chronics and Acutes exactly the same, the hospital staff shows that they view the Chronics and the Acutes in the same manner. Although the Acutes have no quantifiable mental illnesses, they are still treated the same as those who do, a mistake that is not made only in the hospital.

During the scene in which McMurphy and the doctor take Chief Bromden and the Acutes on a fishing trip, the novel shows how, like the hospital, society does not differentiate between the mentally ill and the eccentrics. Stopping to get gas, the doctor is hassled by the service station attendants for carrying two car loads of mentally ill patients out into the public world. The attendants attempted to take advantage of the situation, charging the doctor more for gas while subtly implying that they have the right to do so because the men are crazy, which puts them in danger. The doctor, however,

assures the attendants that the Acutes are not “crazy” mental patients but a hospital work crew, which hurts the Acutes’ feelings: “The doctor’s lying made us feel worse than ever – not because of the lie so much, but because of the truth” (223). By lying to protect the men from public scorn, the doctor shows the Acutes that he is ashamed of them and their condition. McMurphy changes that, however. He confronts the service station attendants head on and uses their fear of the mentally ill to his advantage by intimidating the attendants through making the men seem more “crazy” and dangerous than the attendants thought they were: “Don’t you see that was just a kindly precaution to keep from startlin’ you folks with the truth? The doc wouldn’t lie like that about just *any* patients, but we ain’t ordinary nuts; we’re every bloody one of us hot off the criminal-insane ward, on our way to San Quentin where they got better facilities to handle us” (224). By confronting the issue of the men’s sanity, McMurphy makes the Acutes feel better about themselves and stops the gas station attendants from taking advantage of them. The Acutes are forced to wear their hospital-issue green scrubs on the trip that identify them to the world as mental patients, but McMurphy cleverly uses the way people do not distinguish between the psychotic and the eccentric to the patients’ advantage in this case. After McMurphy and the attendants’ confrontation, the Acutes spend the rest of the trip embracing their identities. McMurphy made the men feel brave: “He’d shown us what a little bravado and courage could accomplish, and we thought he’d taught us how to use it. All the way to the coast we had fun pretending to be brave” (227), which helped the men enjoy their trip.

Because of the way the men have been treated by society, Chief Bromden thinks of society as a machine called “the Combine.” The Combine creates strict societal roles

for its members. If one does not fit into one of these roles, then they must be crazy and should be “fixed” immediately. Chief Bromden believes that to be the hospital’s purpose:

The [hospital ward] is a factory for the Combine. It’s for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new, *better* than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse’s heart; something that came in all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold...He’s adjusted to his surroundings finally. (38)

The eccentrics are those who do not fulfill a traditional place in society. Their off-beat personalities and characteristics are a loose cog in the machine, which society deems must be fixed before the machine can function properly.

During a conversation between McMurphy and Harold (one of the Acutes), Kesey takes the opportunity to describe the methods that the Combine uses to “fix” the patients: ““Jesus, didn’t they think it [electroshock therapy] might do some damage? Didn’t the public raise Cain about it?” ‘I don’t think you fully understand the public, my friend; in this country, when something is out of order, the quickest way to get it fixed is the best way” (179). Some of the ways that the hospital uses to “fix” the patients are illegal today because they are inhumane. When the novel was written, however, such practices as lobotomy and electroshock therapy were allowed because they were a quick fix, as

Harold points out. Later in the same conversation, McMurphy likens electroshock therapy to murder: “‘Hoo-wee! Electricity through the head. Man, that’s like electrocuting a guy for murder.’ ‘The reasons for both atrocities are more closely related than you might think; they are both cures’” (179). Electroshock therapy, described in the novel as a bolt of electricity to the head, is designed to calm an agitated patient. It renders them incapacitated for a few days, and the patient is never exactly the same again. A lobotomy is even worse, as the nerves connecting the prefrontal lobe of the brain to the thalamus are severed to reduce emotional outbursts from the patient. After most lobotomies, the patient becomes at worst a vegetable, and at the very least is a shadow of his former self. Both of these cruel practices are used on McMurphy, at Nurse Ratched’s command.

Nurse Ratched is the clear antagonist of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. She allows personal feelings to cloud her professional judgment and develops a vendetta against McMurphy because he is the only patient that she cannot control. She ultimately destroys McMurphy through the electroshock therapy and a lobotomy, under the guise of protecting society from McMurphy’s derangement, but the reader can see that she uses such drastic measures only to win her personal war against McMurphy. The use of electroshock therapy and lobotomies, as well as other harsh practices in the field of mental health, in other patients does not stem from Nurse Ratched’s private wrath, though. The hospital is designed to protect society from those who cannot function in it, and the Acutes also use it to protect themselves from society. Nurse Ratched is not the only antagonist in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, although Chief Bromden and McMurphy are the only patients who realize this: “McMurphy doesn’t know it yet, but

he's on to what I realized a long time back, that it's not just the Big Nurse by herself, but it's the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that's the really big force, and the nurse is just a high-ranking official" (181). Who allows such practices as lobotomies and electroshock therapy to be used, especially on men who do not have any form of mental illness, but are just simply not "normal"? Society. Society is to blame for allowing inhumane treatment methods to be practiced because they are a quick fix. The machine of society is the real antagonist of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest for dictating societal norms and not accepting anything outside of the normal realm.

In the end, Nurse Ratched and "the Combine" triumph over McMurphy, but McMurphy lives on through the Acutes. When McMurphy came to the hospital, the Acutes thought of themselves as rabbits, rather than men:

All of us here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping through our Walt Disney world. Oh, don't misunderstand me, we're not in here because we're rabbits – we'd be rabbits wherever we were – we're all in here because we can't *adjust* to our rabbit-hood. We *need* a good strong wolf like the nurse to teach us our place. (62)

But after watching McMurphy defy the nurse and after McMurphy's repeated efforts to buoy the Acute's self-esteem, the Acutes thought of themselves as men: "They've still got their problems, just like all of us. They're still sick men in lots of ways. But at least there's that; they're sick *men* now. No more rabbits, Mack. Maybe they can be well men some day. I can't say" (294).

The Acutes are eccentric. They know that they are shunned by society because they do not fit in. So they hide in the mental hospital, watching the world pass them by, until they do not fit in there either. Within the mental hospital exists its own societal hierarchy. The Chronics are the norm in this society. The Chronics do as they are told and never question authority; they are model patients. The Acutes were also model patients, until McMurphy entered the hospital. Once McMurphy shows the Acutes how to stand up for themselves, they no longer fit in with the society of the mental hospital either. Instead of being scared little rabbits, the Acutes start to defy Nurse Ratched on their own. The Acutes become “eccentrics” in the hospital, as they are no longer cowed, docile patients, and Nurse Ratched does not know what to do with them except to threaten them with her electroshock therapy.

The Acutes no longer fit into the machine-like framework of the hospital, and at the end of the novel, most of the Acutes ask to leave the hospital and end their voluntary commitment, making McMurphy’s sacrifice worth it. The novel ends on a positive note with the Acutes triumphing over the oppressive hospital, but will the ending really be happy? The eccentric Acutes are now going to face society with the added stigma of having been institutionalized, and Dr. Rosenthal’s study shows the reader what an effect that type of label can have. Even after McMurphy’s sacrifice, the Acutes may end up in a worse situation than before.

The figures of the eccentric/Acute, the Chronic, and the “Combine” of society have been constructed in this introduction to ultimately explore madness in Tennessee Williams’ plays: Suddenly Last Summer, A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie, and The Eccentricities of a Nightingale. Each of the listed plays will be

examined with a critical eye toward developing the ideas that have been put forth in the introduction. The universal theme of madness will be narrowed down to focus on the eccentricities of small-town Southern life in the world that Tennessee Williams creates.

*The lunatic is in my head
The lunatic is in my head
You raise the blade, you make the change
You re-arrange me 'til I'm sane
You lock the door
And throw away the key
There's someone in my head, but it's not me.
- "Brain Damage" by Pink Floyd*

Chapter One: Suddenly Last Summer

In the play Suddenly Last Summer, Williams creates a family drama, mostly told through memory. Memories can be faulty and often play tricks on people. People regard memories as even less credible when one is mad, as Catharine, the heroine of the play, is considered to be. In the play, Tennessee Williams delves into a painful world of truths and illusions. Through an analysis of Suddenly Last Summer, the eccentricities of the two main characters will be explored and the prejudices and treatment of the mentally ill will be examined.

Violet Venable is an upper-class matriarch who has recently lost her son Sebastian under mysterious circumstances. Sebastian's cousin Catharine is the only person who knows what happened to him, as she was with him when he died. The story that Catharine tells, though, is so fantastic that Violet will not accept it. She has Catharine committed to a mental institution and contacts Doctor Sugar, who performs lobotomies for the state hospital, to deal with Catharine. The play revolves around Violet's attempts to discredit and silence Catharine, so that her story will no longer be an embarrassment to Violet.

Violet Venable harbors serious delusions about herself and her son. Sebastian was approximately forty years old: "*Forty*, maybe. We really didn't count birthdays"

(110) when he died, which would make Violet in her late fifties to early sixties, at the very least. Violet, however, believes that she and Sebastian stayed young:

Both of us were young and stayed young, Doctor...It takes character to refuse to grow old, Doctor, - successfully refuse to. It calls for discipline, abstention. One cocktail before dinner, not two, four, six – a single lean chop and lime juice on a salad in restaurants famed for rich dishes. (109)

Even though she lives a health-conscious life in an effort to keep herself young, Violet suffered a stroke in the summer before Sebastian died. Violet's stroke, which she calls "NOT A STROKE" but a "slight aneurism...A little vascular convulsion! Not a hemorrhage, just a little convulsion of a blood-vessel...It gave me a little temporary – muscular – contraction. – To one side of my face..." (128), kept her from accompanying her son on their annual summer trip. Violet also believes that she is the only person who could help Sebastian: "We had an agreement between us, a sort of contract or covenant between us which he broke last summer when he broke away from me and took her with him, not me!...He was *mine*! I knew how to help him, I *could*! You didn't, you couldn't!" (138), which is why she blames Catharine for Sebastian's death.

Violet's obsession with her son borders on madness; she honestly believes that she and her son were an inseparable couple:

We were a famous couple. People didn't speak of Sebastian and his mother or Mrs. Venable and her son, they said 'Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian are staying at the Lido, they're at the Ritz

in Madrid...’ and every appearance, every time we
appeared, attentions were centered on *us!* – *everyone*
else! Eclipsed! (111)

Catharine shatters Violet’s delusions, though, when she tells Violet that her “chaste son” (110) was using her beauty to attract conquests for himself, and that when Violet’s youth and beauty ran out, he decided to use Catharine to “procure” (140) for him instead. Violet does not want to be disillusioned about her son, nor does she want to believe that he was killed by cannibal children in Cabeza de Lobo, as Catharine intimates, so she decides to silence Catharine by first committing her to a mental institution and then offering to pay for a lobotomy. Violet’s obsession with her son and her fanatical desire to silence Catharine make her seem like the “crazy” one. In the beginning of the play, Violet’s penchant for deluding herself would likely have classified her as an “eccentric” or “Acute” patient in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. By the end of the play, however, the truths that she has learned push her over the edge into “Chronic” territory. When Violet makes the decision to silence Catherine rather than believe her, there is no hope for Violet. Over the course of the play she evolves as a Chronic character, but Violet is not institutionalized because she is the most powerful character in Suddenly Last Summer, as she holds the purse strings.

Catharine’s mother and brother are dependant upon Violet for financial support, which she holds over their heads in exchange for acquiescence in the matter of Catharine’s lobotomy:

Catharine: *Do you want to bore a hole in my skull and turn
a knife in my brain?... You’d have to have my mother’s*

permission for that. Violet: I'm paying to keep you in a private asylum. Catharine: You're not my legal guardian. Violet: You're mother's dependent on me. All of you are!
– Financially... (127)

Violet also tries to manipulate Doctor Sugar by offering to donate money to Lion's View to fund his experimental operations, if he will agree to give Catharine a lobotomy. When Doctor Sugar asks Violet if she would still be interested in donating to Lion's View if he did not think Catharine was a good candidate for lobotomy, Violet replies: "Aren't we always more interested in a thing that concerns us personally, Doctor?" (114), showing that she is trying to use money to coerce Doctor Sugar. Luckily, Doctor Sugar is a man of principle and listens to Catharine's story with an unprejudiced air, as at the end of the play he remarks that he thinks they "ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true" (148). With the exception of Doctor Sugar, however, Violet's madness is overlooked because of her money.

Catharine begins the play on a temporary leave from St. Mary's, a private mental institution. She has been committed to St. Mary's because of the story she tells about the way her cousin Sebastian died:

She *babbles!* They couldn't shut her up in Cabeza de Lobo or at the clinic in Paris – she babbled, babbled!
– smashing my son's reputation. – On the Berengaria bringing her back to the States she broke out of the stateroom and babbled, babbled; even at the airport when she was flown down here, she babbled a bit of

her story before they could whisk her into an ambulance
to St. Mary's. (112)

Violet considers Catharine's story about Sebastian's cannibalistic death at the hands of starving beggar children to be an embarrassment and an affront to Sebastian's character. Violet cannot fathom that Catharine's story could, in fact, be true. Catharine is at a slight disadvantage in being a credible witness, though, as she has had mental distress in the past. Her past eccentric actions give her the label of "crazy," which colors her actions in the future, as previously evidenced by Dr. Rosenhan's study.

At a ball during the debutante season before Sebastian's death, Catharine was raped by a married man. The man, a pillar of society, left the ball with her, took her to a shady spot in the woods of the Duelling Oaks neighborhood to have sex with her, then took her home and told her to "forget it because my wife's expecting a child" (132). Catharine then went back to the ball to confront the man, and made a scene in the process, which is where her trouble begins. Making a public scene gives Violet and her family an excuse to call her "mad" because arguing in a ballroom is not the societal norm:

Violet: And halfway through the season, she was dropped from the party lists, yes, dropped off the lists in spite of my position. Why? Because she'd lost her head over some young married man, made a scandalous scene at a Mardi Gras ball, in the middle of the ballroom. Then everybody dropped her like a hot rock. (128)

After the ball, Catharine also begins writing her journal in third-person:

Catharine: [T]he next morning , I started writing my diary in the third person, singular, such as ‘She’s still living this morning.’ meaning that *I* was...‘WHAT’S NEXT FOR HER? GOD ONLY KNOWS!’ - If you don’t believe me, read my journal of Paris! – ‘She woke up at daybreak this morning...took a brief walk’ Doctor: *Who* did? Catharine: *She* did. *I* did...‘Where did she think she was going? Back to the Duelling Oaks?’” (132, 133)

Catharine’s journal writing is an act of escapism. She is trying to distance herself from the girl who was raped by writing everything in third-person. As a narrator or an observer, it is as if Catharine is not really living her life at all, which she admits while talking to Doctor Sugar: “Catharine: Doctor, my feelings are the sort of feelings that you have in a dream...Doctor: Your life doesn’t seem real to you? Catharine: Suddenly last winter I began to write my journal in the third person” (131).

Catharine’s escapism triggered by the trauma of the rape would likely classify her as an Acute, from One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. If given the chance, she will get over the temporary problems caused by the ordeal of the rape. Her temporary problems, however, make Catharine seem like a less credible witness in the eyes of society. Her “babbling” about Sebastian’s death is seen as a symptom of a psychological disorder, when likely the “babbling” is her way of trying to communicate and cleanse herself of the tragedy she has seen. If Catharine had been viewed as “sane” before Sebastian’s death, she would not have as hard of a time convincing Violet and everyone else that her story is true. Her brother, George, knows that Catharine is not actually mad: “George: She isn’t

crazy. Mama, she's no more crazy than I am, she's just, just – PERVERSE!" (123), but he believes that she must be perverse to continue telling her story when the family inheritance is at stake. The only people who would believe Catharine refuse to for the sake of money. Violet wants to make sure that no one will ever believe Catharine, though, by giving her a lobotomy: "[A]fter the operation, who would *believe* her, Doctor?" (114). Catharine's weakened mental state and eccentric behavior after the rape makes her story seem impossible, and thereby jeopardize her future, as a lobotomy seems eminent at the beginning of the play.

Catharine has a unique way of looking at the world. In a conversation with Doctor Sugar, Catharine makes insightful observations about the insanity of hatred. Catharine's views are perfectly logical when she explains them, but are not the way the "normal" person sees things. Catharine defines hate as not being able to use someone: "Yes, we all use each other and that's what we think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what's – hate..." (131). Catharine's family illustrates her point well. Her mother and brother are dependent upon Violet for their income, and by agreeing with Aunt Violet that Catharine belongs in an institution, they can stay on Violet's good side. They act like they love Catharine when they can use her condition to stay in Violet's good graces, but when Catharine begins telling her story to Violet, her mother and brother start to hate her, as they can no longer use her: "George: Oh, then you are going to tell it. Mama, she *IS* going to tell it! Right to Aunt Vi, and lose us a hundred thousand! – Cathie? You are a BITCH!" (123).

By Catharine's definition of love and hate, it is also clear that Violet hates Catharine. Violet wants to use Catharine as a scapegoat, and blame her for Sebastian's

death, but Catharine's tale stops her from doing that. Even under a sedative that acts in effect like a "truth serum," Catharine sticks to her story of Sebastian's death at the hands of a band of cannibal children, which removes her from blame. Violet wants to believe that Catharine tried to steal Sebastian away from her, rather than face the truth that Sebastian chose Catharine as his summer companion over her. Even though Violet has had Catharine committed to a mental institution, Catharine does not seem to hate Violet. In fact, she tries to protect Violet by not wanting to tell the horrible story of Sebastian's death in front of her, but Violet insists upon hearing it. Catharine does not hate Violet because she views hatred as insanity: "I don't understand what hate is. How can you hate anybody and still be sane? You see, I still think I'm sane!...A ship struck an iceberg at sea – everyone sinking...[b]ut that's no reason for everyone drowning for hating everyone drowning!" (130). Catharine is not using anyone, and she tries to protect her aunt from the truth, even offering to go to Lion's View rather than tell the story in front of her. The abnormal way that Catharine views hatred makes her the most compassionate character in the play.

In addition to discussing Catharine and Violet's abnormal behaviors, Tennessee Williams describes the state of mental health centers during the 1950s in the play. Most of the methods for treating the mentally ill discussed in Suddenly Last Summer are inhumane, as in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. The play centers on whether or not Catharine should have a lobotomy, which as shown in Cuckoo's Nest, would likely "ease her distress" by turning her into a vegetable. In a conversation with Violet, Doctor Sugar allays the risk of lobotomies:

Well, it will be ten years before we can tell if the

immediate benefits of the operation will be lasting
or – passing or even if there'd still be – and this is
what haunts me about it! – any possibility afterwards,
of – reconstructing a – totally sound person. It may be
that the person will always be limited afterward, relieved
of acute disturbances, but *limited*, Mrs. Venable...” (113)

In an Acute or “eccentric” such as Catharine, a lobotomy would be devastating, and the destruction of her essence as a person. Before lobotomies were outlawed as a form of treatment, they were thought to help the “Chronics,” or people who presented symptoms of a severe psychological disorder, unlike Catharine. When the doctor speaks of his first lobotomy, it actually sounds like it helped the patient:

After the operation I stayed with the girl, as if I'd delivered
a child that might stop breathing...[T]he moment we wheeled
her outside, she whispered something, she whispered: ‘Oh,
how blue the sky is!’ – And I felt proud and relieved, because
up ‘til then her speech, everything that she'd babbled, was
a torrent of obscenities! (106, 107)

This patient's success after the lobotomy is likely because she was “regarded as hopeless” (106), unlike Catharine's mild condition. Even if Catharine's fantastic story is untrue, a lobotomy seems quite drastic for someone with Catharine's functioning capabilities.

It also seems that Catharine is overmedicated at St. Mary's. Catharine alludes to dropping a cigarette and burning a hole in her skirt because she was “half unconscious

under medication” (116). When Doctor Sugar gives Catharine a sedative injection after one of her “episodes.” Catharine says that she does not care what the injection is for, because she has “been stuck so often that if you connected me with a garden hose I’d make a good sprinkler” (133). The doctor’s quick use of a sedative on Catharine is also telling. When Catharine and Violet begin to bicker, the Doctor swiftly intercedes to offer Catharine a sedative because she seems distressed, but not Violet, who was baiting Catharine. The treatment at St. Mary’s sounds much like the hospital in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Catharine is so unhappy at Saint Mary’s that she tries to make signs to passing cars to get her out of the hospital. When Catharine tries to defy her nurse, Sister Felicity’s, orders by smoking a cigarette, the nurse’s threatening response is reminiscent of something Nurse Ratched would have said: “Give me that cigarette or I’ll make a report that’ll put you right back on violent ward, if you don’t” (116).

In keeping with Sister Felicity’s similarity to Nurse Ratched, the “Drum” at Lion’s View in Suddenly Last Summer can be compared to the “Combine” of Cuckoo’s Nest. The Drum is the name for the violent ward at Lion’s View, the sanitarium where Doctor Sugar works. The living conditions are described as looking “like the inside of a drum with very bright lights burning all day – So the attendants can see any change of expression or movement among the inmates in time to grab them if they are about to attack” (106). Even though the “lights are burning brightly,” the motivations behind the Drum make it a dark and sinister place. The patients in the Drum are candidates for Doctor Sugar’s experimental lobotomy program, whether they like it or not. The patients at Lion’s View are criminally insane: “But there’s also the matter of getting right patients, not just – criminal psychopaths that the State turns over to us for my operation!”

(113). The Drum at Lion's View holds the criminally insane – those who are a danger to and an outcast of society, and society wants them to be “fixed” quickly, without any thought of the damage it might do to them. Doctor Sugar understands the dangers and risks of lobotomies, but Violet Venable, like most of society, believes that the lobotomy will be helpful: “Oh, but what a blessing to them, Doctor, to be just peaceful, to be suddenly – peaceful...” (113). The harsh lights of the Drum cast a dark shadow over the intentions of the societal Combine.

In Suddenly Last Summer, as in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, society removes its “damaged machinery” into the Drum, or St. Mary's, for a quick fix so that the Combine can run smoothly, deluding themselves into thinking that it is for the patient's own good: “Mrs. Holly: Tell Aunt Violet how grateful you are for makin' it possible for you to rest an' recuperate at such a sweet, sweet place as St. Mary's! Catharine: No place for lunatics is a sweet, sweet place. Mrs. Holly: But the food's good there. Isn't the food good there?” (126). Under the reign of the societal Combine, eccentrics like Catharine are sentenced to “quick fixes,” while Violet, a Chronic with money, is free because of the power she wields. Tennessee Williams paints a frightening portrait of the treatment of the mentally ill in Suddenly Last Summer.

*'Cause I'd rather stay here
With all the madmen,
Than perish with the sadmen roaming free.
And I'd rather play here
With all the madmen,
For I'm quite content they're all as sane
As me.*

- "All the Madmen" by David Bowie

Chapter Two: A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams' play A Streetcar Named Desire is one of the most beloved and often performed plays in the history of American theater. Williams creates immortal and complex characters in the leads, Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski. The friction between these two characters is the driving force of the play, which takes the audience on a tour of madness in New Orleans. Blanche DuBois, the mad character of the play, is not merely an "Acute" or an eccentric, but she begins and ends the play as a "Chronic." In Madness in Literature, Lillian Feder states that "the madman, like other people, does not exist alone. He both reflects and influences those involved with him" (5). Through an analysis of A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche's reflection and influence upon society through her madness will be examined.

Stanley Kowalski and his wife Stella live in a two-room apartment in New Orleans. They are complete opposites, but their desire for each other holds them together. When Stella's sister Blanche arrives for an uninvited extended visit, however, paradise is almost lost. Blanche looks down upon Stanley for being common, coarse, and brutish, and she does her best to convince Stella to look down upon him as well. Blanche is not as perfect as she would like her family to believe, though; she has a past full of secrets which are divulged over the course of the play. Stanley sees through Blanche's

lies, and uses her past against her, shattering the alternate reality she creates for herself, in an effort to remove the blocking figure that is ruining his marriage. The play revolves around Stanley and Blanche baiting and taunting each other, which culminates in the climax of the play, when Stanley rapes Blanche. At the end of the play, Blanche is involuntarily committed to a state institution, ostensibly for her “lies” about the rape.

Blanche begins A Streetcar Named Desire as a “Chronic” by the One Flew Over the Cuckoo`s Nest definition. Her hold on reality is so fragile that it seems as though no one will ever be able to help her. Blanche compulsively lies throughout the play. She lies about her future plans, being fired from her teaching job for seducing a student, her sexual escapades, and much more. Her madness does not lie in her deceit, however, but rather because she seems to believe her lies. Blanche does not want reality:

I don't want realism...I'll tell you what I want.

Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people.

I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth,

I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful,

then let me be damned for it! (545)

Blanche also has manic mood swings. During just a few sentences in an interaction with Stella in Scene Five, Blanche alternates from an “embarrassing show” of gratitude, to a “hysterical” promise to leave, to “shrill laughter” that becomes a “piercing cry” when Stella spills coke on her skirt. (516) Blanche does seem sane and lucid at times which fools her sister, but this is likely because, as Dr. David Rosenhan says in “On Being Sane in Insane Places,” “the sane are not ‘sane’ all the time...similarly, the insane are not

insane all the time.” Blanche never fools Stanley, though, as he is always suspicious of her lies.

Through her lies, Blanche creates a world of shadows for herself in which she is on center stage and everyone else is her audience. She allows her sister to wait on her like a servant, which she has done since she was a child: “Stella: I like to wait on you, Blanche. It makes it seem more like home. Blanche: I have to admit I do love to be waited on...” (516). Blanche also will not let anyone see her under bright light, so that her real age cannot be discerned. Blanche refuses to see her suitor, Mitch, during daylight hours, and she places a paper lantern over the bare light bulb in Stanley and Stella’s bedroom so that the light will not be as harsh. Blanche’s fixation with not being seen in the light can be traced back to an early tragedy. Blanche describes the feeling of first love as “like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow” (527). But with the tragic death of her first love and husband, “the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again, and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this – kitchen – candle” (528). The death of Blanche’s husband made her lose her youth, as it was a “hard knock to her vanity” (517), and Blanche will not let anyone see her in the light after this, so that no one will know the toll his death took on her appearance. Blanche prefers to literally live in the shadows, but she ironically always brings herself into the spotlight by making herself the center of attention. Blanche wants the world to revolve around her and yet also tries to hide in the shadows, a paradox which further illustrates the depths of her madness.

In addition to her lies, Blanche has a colorful past of sexual misconduct, from sleeping with bevyies of unknown soldiers to seducing one of her seventeen year-old students. Blanche tells Mitch that she was not always this way, but Blanche's habit of lying makes her an unreliable narrator. When Stella describes the way Blanche used to be to Stanley, though, Blanche's story is validated. Stella says that Blanche "was always flighty...but when she was young, she had an experience that – killed her illusions!" (533). Blanche married a handsome young man when she was sixteen. However, Allan, her young husband, married her for reasons other than the traditional reasons of love and desire. Unbeknownst to Blanche, Allan was homosexual, which was taboo at the time and something that he struggled with:

He came to me for help. I didn't know that.
I didn't find out anything 'til after our marriage
when we'd run away and come back and all
I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious
way and wasn't able to give the help he needed
but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands
and clutching at me – but I wasn't holding him
out, I was slipping in with him! (527)

When Blanche found her husband in bed with a male friend of his, she was shocked and stunned into silence while pretending that nothing had happened. But later, while dancing the Varsouviana polka, Blanche told her husband that she knew about his affair: "I saw! I know! You disgust me!" (528), after which her husband killed himself.

The guilt of contributing to her husband's death haunts Blanche. Throughout the play, the audience can hear strains of the polka that are playing in Blanche's head:

(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." (543)

Blanche hears the polka music in times of stress: during her disastrous final meeting with Mitch, when Stanley gives her the "birthday present" of a bus ticket back to Laurel, and when she is taken away to the state hospital, to name a few. It seems that when Blanche finds herself in an unpleasant situation that shatters the false reality that she has built for herself, she reverts back to the original moment that "killed her illusions," as Stella said.

Blanche obsessively seeks protection from men, because in the wake of Allan's death, the only man she had truly trusted and relied on let her down:

Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with...I think it was panic, just panic that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection – here and there, in the most – unlikely of places – even, at last, in a seventeen year-old boy. (546)

Blanche's experience with Allan shows that she was not always a Chronic. As a repercussion of Allan's death, she became an eccentric, or an "Acute," in her promiscuous behavior, as her ability to function "properly" in society was impaired. However, one could argue that she became a Chronic when she became involved with her student, because at that point her deviant behavior made her a danger to others. Blanche herself admits that she was "unfit" (546) for her teaching job afterwards. Blanche's delicate mental condition does not stop her from both influencing and reflecting those around her, however.

From the moment Blanche arrives on the Kowalskis' doorstep, she begins a campaign to make Stella see Stanley in the same light that she does – as a lowly animal: "Stella: Blanche, you saw him at his worst last night. Blanche: On the contrary, I saw him at his best! What such a man has to offer is animal force and he gave a wonderful exhibition of that!" (508, 509). Ironically, Blanche also calls Stanley "a madman" (505) after his fight with Stella on poker night. Blanche tries to convince her sister to leave Stanley, but Stella refuses. At times, it seems that Blanche's campaign is working; Stella sometimes laughs along with Blanche or agrees when Blanche criticizes Stanley: "Blanche: Well – if you'll forgive me – he's *common*! Stella: Why, yes, I suppose he is" (510). Stanley overhears this particular remark, which triggers his actions to get rid of Blanche – the threat to his marriage. When Blanche comes to visit, she also ruins the most important part of Stella and Stanley's marriage:

Stell, it's gonna be all right after she goes and after
you've had the baby. It's gonna be all right again
between you and me the way it was...God, honey,

it's gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the
night the way that we used to and get the colored
lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains
to hear us! (538)

In addition to Blanche's attempts to influence Stella and the way her very presence influences the Kowalskis' romantic efforts, Blanche also influences Stanley. When Blanche first arrives, she teases Stanley and flirts with him: "*(She sprays herself with the atomizer; then playfully sprays him [Stanley] with it.)*... Stanley: If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you! Blanche: Such as what? Stanley: Don't play so dumb. You know what!" (489). Blanche even openly admits to Stella that she was flirting with Stanley: "I laughed and treated it all as a joke, called him a little boy and laughed – and flirted! Yes – I was flirting with your husband, Stella!" (491). Her contemptuous remarks also hurt Stanley's self-esteem, making Stanley feel the need to "prove himself" as a man, which he does by raping her. In today's world rape is not justified for any reason. However, when Williams wrote the play, some of the audience may have felt as Stanley does, that Blanche "had it coming" and that they have "had this date with each other from the beginning" (555). Whether justifiably so or not, Blanche's actions influenced Stanley's decision to rape her.

In her madness, Blanche not only influences Stanley and Stella, but she reflects them as well. Stanley and Stella's marriage is held together by their intense desire for each other. Stella is impervious to Blanche's efforts to make her leave Stanley because of this desire. This desire borders on madness because it blocks out rational thinking in Stella's case. Stella is willing to ignore when Stanley drunkenly hits her because "there

are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant” (509). Her desire even forces her not to believe Blanche, when she accuses Stanley of raping her: “Stella: I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley. Eunice: Don’t ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep on going” (556, 557).

Blanche reflects this desire in her relations with men. Blanche desires protection and a man to fill the void left by Allan. When Stella asks Blanche whether she has metaphorically “ridden on the streetcar named Desire” (509), Blanche claims that “it brought me here. – Where I’m not wanted and where I’m ashamed to be” (509), which is true. The repercussions of Blanche’s inappropriate desire for her student carried her all the way to New Orleans. The desire reflected in Blanche is like the reflection of a fun-house mirror, though. Whereas Stanley and Stella love and desire only each other, Blanche’s desire is distorted. Blanche desires protection, which she hopes to gain through sex, and any man will do: “I’ve run for protection, Stella, from one leaky roof to another leaky roof – because it was storm – all storm, and I was – caught in the center...People don’t see you – men don’t – don’t even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you’ve got to have your existence admitted by someone, if your going to have someone’s protection” (515).

To be fair to Stella, when she chooses not to believe Blanche’s story about the rape, she is driven by more than just her desire for Stanley. As is the case with Catherine in Suddenly Last Summer, Blanche’s madness makes her story hard to believe. Once Stanley tells Stella the truth about Blanche’s promiscuous past, Blanche becomes less credible in Stella’s eyes. This phenomenon can be explained by R.D. Laing in The

Divided Self: “The initial way we see a thing determines all our subsequent dealings with it” (20). At first, Stella is unwilling to believe Stanley’s “lies” about Blanche because Blanche is her sister. She wants to believe that Blanche would never do the things that Stanley’s sources describe:

I don’t believe all those stories and I think your
supply-man was mean and rotten to tell them.
It’s possible that some of the things he said are
partly true. There are things about my sister I
don’t approve of – things that caused sorrow back
home. She was always – flighty!...But when she
was young, very young, she had an experience that
– killed her illusions! (533)

Stella is at first hindered in her ability to see Blanche because Blanche is her sister and she does not want to think badly of her. When Stanley finally convinces her of Blanche’s nature, however, Stella cannot see Blanche as anything but a liar, which is why she is able to ignore the accusation of rape – a further illustration of Dr. Rosenhan’s argument against labeling in “On Being Sane in Insane Places.” All of a person’s actions become tainted if that person is considered to be mad.

In addition to shedding light on the intricacies of the mind of the mentally ill, once again Tennessee Williams subtly offers commentary on the treatment of the mentally ill. Blanche, a Chronic, has had mental problems for quite some time when she arrives in New Orleans. Through Stanley’s sources in Laurel, Blanche’s hometown, it is revealed that Blanche was kicked out of town:

And as time went by she became a town character.
Regarded as not just different but downright loco –
nuts...That`s why she`s here this summer, visiting
royalty. putting on all this act – because she`s
practically told by the mayor to get out of town!...
Yep, it was practickly a town ordinance passed
against her! (531-532)

Through Stanley`s story it is clear that the people of Laurel knew what kind of problems Blanche was having, but rather than deal with her problems, they foisted her off on the state of Louisiana by “kicking her out of town.” Blanche needed commitment to a mental institution after the incident with her student, but instead she was turned away. When Blanche is finally committed to an institution after the rape, she is committed involuntarily. Today involuntary commitment requires that a person be a danger to himself and/or others and a court order is necessary for a hospital stay longer than 72 hours. This was not the case when the play was written, however. Blanche is not even told where she is going when she leaves the house. Stella tells her that she is just going “to rest in the country” (556), so Blanche has no idea of what is in store for her. Even Stanley`s friends can see that this is wrong: “Pablo: This is a very bad thing. Steve: This is no way to do it. She should`ve been told. Pablo: *Madre de Dios! Costa mala muy, muy mala!*” (562, 563). Blanche only agrees to leave with the doctor from the institution when she believes that he is a new suitor for her. The doctor offers her his arm, and Blanche leans on him for support, while delivering her famous line: “Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (563). She evidently hopes that the

doctor will be the next person to offer her protection. Even in the deluded state that Blanche is in, as Pablo and Steve intimated, it is still wrong to not tell Blanche where she is going. Blanche believes that she is going on a vacation, and her illusions will be shattered once again when she reaches the state hospital, with its “unmistakable aura of cynical detachment” (559).

Williams again makes use of the societal “Combine” theme by having Blanche committed in the wake of the rape – one of the few things that Blanche actually tells the truth about. Blanche is allowed to roam free in her deluded state until she tries to infringe upon her sister’s marriage by “telling lies” about Stanley raping her. When Stanley rapes Blanche, it is clear that there are issues that need to be addressed in his and Stella’s marriage. Stella embodies society’s tendency to want a “quick fix” by having Blanche committed, rather than face the truth about her marriage. Because the truth that Blanche tells is unpleasant and against societal norms, Blanche is easily institutionalized – a frightening concept. Williams shows that if the truth is aberrant to the societal Combine, society will “fix” you, unless you conform to their ways.

In A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams intricately explores the psyche of a mad woman and society’s treatment of the mentally ill. He also shows what an impact Blanche has on the people surrounding her, because as Lillian Feder says, “the madman does not exist alone” (5).

*If I could, I would shrink myself,
Sink through your skin to your blood cells
And remove whatever makes you hurt,
But I am too weak to be your cure.*

- Brand New

Chapter Three: The Glass Menagerie

Tennessee Williams' semi-autobiographical play The Glass Menagerie is a play of dreams and illusions. In Madness and Literature, Lillian Feder links madness with illusions: "Madness is also familiar, a fascinating and repellent exposure of the structures of dream and fantasy, of irrational fears and bizarre desires ordinarily hidden from the world and the conscious self" (4). In The Glass Menagerie, each character exists in his or her own dimension of reality which shows their varying levels of madness. Through an analysis of the shattered illusions in The Glass Menagerie, the character of the "Eccentric" and its role in society will be examined.

The Glass Menagerie features a small cast. Amanda Wingfield is the single mother of two grown children, Tom and Laura. Tom is a budding poet, who provides for his mother and sister by working at a warehouse, which stifles his creativity. Laura is in danger of becoming an "old maid," as she leads a reclusive life inside the Wingfield apartment. The play revolves around the conflict between Amanda's desire to provide for Laura's future and Tom's struggles to create a life for himself, apart from his obligation to his mother and sister. Amanda and Tom hope that a "gentleman caller" for Laura will be the answer to their problems, but all the gentleman caller manages to do is shatter their illusions.

The "gentleman caller" who appears in Scenes VI and VII is an important character who looms largely throughout the whole play: "Like some archetype of the

universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment...” (411). The gentleman caller embodies different secret dreams for each character. To Amanda, the gentleman caller means security for herself and Laura, but it also means a chance to recapture her youth. Amanda regales her children with many stories about the beaux and parties of her glory days in Blue Mountain: “One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received – *seventeen!* – gentleman callers! Why sometimes there weren’t chairs enough to accommodate them all” (402, 403). Tom invites Jim, the gentleman caller, over to visit Laura at his mother’s request, but at times Amanda treats Jim as if he were her own gentleman caller, as she wears a “girlish” frock and coquettes with him. When the gentleman caller comes, Williams says in the stage directions that “*the legend of her youth is nearly revived*” (434). Since her husband left her, Amanda is lonely: “Why, Mr. O’Connor, nobody’s given me this much entertainment in years – as you have” (446), and the gentleman caller allows her to try to alleviate her loneliness by re-capturing her youth through her daughter’s experience.

For Laura, spending an evening with Jim is a dream come true: “*In playing this scene it should be stressed that while the incident is apparently unimportant, it is to Laura the climax of her secret life*” (447). Unbeknownst to Tom, who works with Jim at the warehouse, Laura not only knew Jim in high school, but he is the only man whom she has ever had feelings for. Laura fell in love with Jim in high school because while he was the center of attention, he still managed to pay attention to her. Laura “sort of stuck to herself” (450) in high school, but Jim spoke to Laura in the halls, creating a casual acquaintance that she secretly cherished. When Tom brings Jim home from the

warehouse as the chosen “gentleman caller,” Laura’s secret hopes are brought into the light as her high school dream of spending time with Jim comes to fruition.

To Tom, the gentleman caller represents an escape. Amanda tells Tom that if he can find a gentleman caller – someone to provide for Laura – then Tom can leave the job he hates at the warehouse and do something that makes him happy. Tom dreams of leaving the Wingfield house and striking out on his own. He feels that he is rotting in the warehouse, working a dead-end job to provide for his mother and sister, not a wife and children. Tom goes to the movies nightly to provide himself with adventure and an escape from reality, as his life does not provide him with much adventure. To him, the gentleman caller is a ticket to freedom.

While the gentleman caller represents many different things to the Wingfield family, there is no way that Jim can meet their secret expectations: “But since I have a poet’s weakness for symbols, I am also using this character as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for” (401). Amanda, Tom, and Laura each harbor hidden desires that they need the gentleman caller to fulfill, but Jim cannot do so. After kissing Laura, Jim reveals to her and the rest of the family that he is engaged, after which “*the sky falls*” (462). The gentleman caller – he whom the Wingfields have been living for and pinning all their hopes upon – has let them down, crushing their dreams and shattering their illusions. The gentleman caller cannot be blamed for this, however, as he is “an emissary from a world of reality that we [the Wingfields] were somehow set apart from” (401). Jim is “the most realistic character in the play” (401) and does not understand the extent to which his engagement hurts the Wingfields. The Wingfields’ reality is as fragile as Laura’s glass collection. While

dancing with Laura. Jim breaks one of the tiny glass figurines, and with the announcement of his engagement. Jim crushes the dreams of the Wingfield family. In reality, the “long delayed but always expected something that we live for” can never live up to one’s expectations.

Amanda, Tom, and Laura all live in the world of illusions; however, Amanda and Tom do not let their dreams and illusions hinder them from leading what society deems to be a “normal” life. Tom holds down a job at the warehouse and supports his mother and sister. Amanda sells magazine subscriptions in her effort to boost the family finances and has raised two children. Laura, however, allows her illusions to impair her functionality in society, and she is the “Eccentric” whose character will be explored.

Laura is not the typical twenty-four year-old woman. She dropped out of high school and business college because of her crippling shyness: “‘I wonder,’ she [the teacher] said, ‘if you could be talking about that terribly shy little girl who dropped out of school after only a few days attendance?’” (407). Laura became so nervous on the first day of school that during a speed test for typing, she “broke down completely – was sick at the stomach and almost had to be carried to the wash-room!” (407), an event which caused her never to return to business school. Rather than tell her mother that she could not bear going back to school, she spends her days alone in the park or at the movies or museums. At home, she plays old phonograph records and polishes her extensive glass collection. Laura “just drifts along doing nothing” (422), which worries her mother and puts a burden on her mother and brother. Laura must be provided for, as she cannot and will not provide for herself.

Laura's shy and self-conscious nature impairs her ability to function in society, which classifies her as an "Acute" by the One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest standards. Like many of the Acute patients in Cuckoo's Nest, Laura has no actual psychological disorder. She simply allows her fear to hold her back just as the Acute patients do, a sentiment which Billy Bibbitt, the Cuckoo's Nest patient with a stutter captures nicely:

Sure I could go outside today if I had the guts... You think I wuh-wuh-wuh-want to stay in here? You think I wouldn't like a con-convertible and a guh-guh-girlfriend? But did you ever have people laughing at you? No, because you're so b-big and so *tough*! Well, I'm not big and tough... Oh-oh you t-talk like we stayed in here because we liked it! (184)

Laura's shyness makes her seem peculiar to Tom and Amanda. Laura's mother and brother see her eccentricities in a negative light because they believe that others do:

Tom: Laura seems all those things to you and me because she's ours and we love her. We don't even notice she's crippled any more... In the eyes of others – strangers – she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house. Amanda: Don't say peculiar. Tom: Face the facts, she is. (430, 431)

Tom and Amanda think that others see Laura in a negative light, but Jim, the "most realistic character in the play" (401), finds Laura's eccentricity attractive. Jim says that Laura is "pretty... in a very different way from anyone else. And all the nicer because of

the difference, too” (457). Jim believes that Laura’s eccentric ways are unique, which is a positive attribute in his eyes:

The different people are not like other people, but being
different is nothing to be ashamed of. Because other
people are not such wonderful people. They’re one
hundred times one thousand. You’re one times one!
They walk all over the earth. You just stay here. They’re
common as – weeds, but you – well, you’re – *Blue*
Roses! (457)

By creating in Jim a character who views the eccentric as special, Tennessee Williams gives hope to society’s view of the eccentric. If Jim, an “emissary from the world of reality” does not find Laura to be peculiar, then other people might not either. One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Williams’ other plays showcase the negative stigma attached to eccentricity. The Glass Menagerie, however, has a hopeful tone in this respect. Williams shows that perhaps some of the stigma attached to madness and eccentricity is only in the mind of the eccentric and those surrounding him or her.

Laura’s eccentricities and extreme shyness hinder her from living in any other world but that of her glass menagerie. Her perception of the way people see her makes her limit herself to the world of glass inside the Wingfield apartment. Jim says that Laura needs to gain confidence in herself. She needs someone like McMurphy in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, to build up her confidence by putting her eccentricities in a positive light, not trying to hide them. Jim is almost this person for Laura. He tells her how special she is, and her “*shyness dissolves in his warmth*” (451). When Jim delivers

the crushing blow of his engagement, however, the progress that Laura has made is negated. Whatever confidence Laura has built up, the inner light that has begun to glow is snuffed out after Jim's announcement. Jim awakens passion and desire in Laura when he kisses her. He starts a small fire within her that will eventually suffocate her, as she will likely never have another "gentleman caller." Jim cannot be Laura's "McMurphy" as his engagement is a bigger blow to her confidence level than his compliments were a confidence boost. Laura's mother cannot be her "McMurphy" either. Amanda wants to distract from Laura's eccentricities with "gay deceivers," a rose colored lampshade, attractive new clothes, and the like. She wants to turn Laura into a "pretty trap" (434), so that the gentleman caller will not notice Laura's peculiarity because he is distracted by her looks and charm. Tom offers no confidence in his sister, as he believes that his mother "musn't expect too much of Laura" (430) when the gentleman caller arrives, meaning that he cannot be the confidence boost that Laura needs either. Laura is an "Acute," and she needs a "McMurphy" in her corner. She does not have a champion like McMurphy, though, and she will consequently stay forever locked in her self-imposed glass prison of illusions and unfulfilled dreams.

Laura is highly self-conscious, which contributes to her shyness. Laura walks with a slight limp, that others barely notice, but which she magnifies into a crippling defect. She imagines that she is different and so it is so, because Laura's self-consciousness causes her to impair herself from normal activities, thus making her different through her limitations. Laura blossoms in Jim's presence, however, because as R.D. Laing says in The Divided Self, "those people who cannot sustain from within themselves the sense of their own identity...may feel that they are real live persons only

when they are experienced as such by another” (119). Amanda and Tom see Laura in the same light that she views herself: “Tom: She lives in a world of her own – a world of – little glass ornaments. Mother...she plays old phonograph records and – that’s about all” (431), but Jim sees her as a “real live person” and applauds her eccentricity rather than being off-put by it. Laing also contends that “the need to be perceived is not, of course, a purely visual affair. It extends to the general need to have one’s presence endorsed or confirmed by the other; the need, in fact, to be loved” (119). Laura loves Jim and for a short time believes that he has similar feelings for her, which causes her to gain confidence and stop being so self-conscious because her presence has been validated by what she believes is love. Toward the end of the evening, shy Laura actually flirts and jokes with Jim. Jim, of course, does not love Laura as he is engaged to someone else, and Laura’s brief bout of confidence is over as quickly as it began. As Laing says, the self-conscious individual is looking for validation through love; Laura’s family loves her, but they do not see her in the positive light that Jim does. Jim sees Laura as a real person, but he cannot offer her love, creating a paradox that leaves Laura without a validating presence in her life.

In addition to showcasing the plight of the eccentric, The Glass Menagerie highlights the burden that the eccentric puts upon his or her family. The Glass Menagerie is a memory play with Tom as the narrator. Through Tom’s narrative voice the audience is made aware that Tom did leave the Wingfield home as he had dreamed of, even though the “gentleman caller” dashed his hopes of leaving Laura and Amanda in a state of security. As the narrator, Tom is haunted by the guilt he feels in leaving:

It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether

by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass...Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes...Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! (465)

Tom feels guilty for leaving Amanda and Laura to fend for themselves, but the reader will find it difficult to fault Tom. While living with Amanda and Laura, Tom has no life of his own. He is forced to work at a job that he hates for the sole purpose of taking care of his dependents, when all he wants to do is travel and “find in motion what was lost in space” (465). Tom did not ask to be burdened with a single mother and an eccentric sister. Tom tries his best to provide for Amanda and Laura, but he is, in the words of Brand New, “too weak to be their cure.” He takes care of them as long as possible, until his life is no longer his own, and he must leave Amanda and Laura in order to save himself.

The burden on Tom can be translated into the burden that the eccentric can be on society. Williams often highlights the negative aspects of the societal Combine, but in The Glass Menagerie he shows the plight of the Combine as well. Who will take care of the Acutes/Eccentrics and the Chronics if their families do not or cannot? Society. The burden of the mentally ill is often shouldered by society, which lends the “quick fix” mentality of the Combine some credence. Through The Glass Menagerie, Williams gives the Combine more depth. The Combine is not a heartless machine of conformity for no reason.

In The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams shows that the eccentric can be seen in a positive light by society. Williams also illuminates the burden that caring for the eccentric places on those around them. Williams creates a compelling drama of madness in the Wingfield family by exposing “the structures of dream and fantasy, of irrational fears and bizarre desires ordinarily hidden from the world and the conscious self” (Feder, 4).

*Where can the horizon lie
When a nation hides
Its organic minds
In a cellar...dark and grim
They must be very dim*
- "All the Madmen" by David Bowie

Chapter Four: The Eccentricities of a Nightingale

The Eccentricities of a Nightingale is Tennessee Williams' re-written version of his play Summer and Smoke. The two plays feature essentially the same cast and story line, but are written in very different manners. Both plays feature an eccentric main character who evolves dramatically over the course of the play. Williams prefers The Eccentricities of a Nightingale because it is "less conventional and melodramatic"(432). Since Williams feels that it "is a better work than the play from which it derived" (432), The Eccentricities of a Nightingale will be used for an examination of the eccentric in society rather than its predecessor, Summer and Smoke.

In The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, Williams depicts the pressures of small town conformity and creates a "mad" female character in Miss Alma Winemiller. Miss Alma is the daughter of the Rev. Winemiller and Mrs. Winemiller, a woman who lives in an "*interior world that falls under light and shadow*" (441). Miss Alma works as a singing teacher and sings at various town functions, but she sings with too much enthusiasm and the townspeople mock her gestures and inflections. Miss Alma also feeds the birds in the town square and is said to look "demented" while doing so, all of which earn her the reputation of being an "eccentric" in her small town. Miss Alma is also in love with her next-door neighbor Dr. John Buchanan, a romance that is failed from the start as Dr. John respects but does not love her, and Dr. John's mother regards Miss Alma as too peculiar for her son.

At the beginning of the play, Miss Alma has no idea that people ridicule her. She exhibits eccentric behavior, but she does not know that the people of Glorious Hill make fun of her behind her back. She becomes an Acute, however, when her father tells her the public's opinion of her. Like the Acute patients in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, nothing is quantifiably wrong with Miss Alma, but once she knows that people make fun of her, she does not want to be a part of society anymore. The speech that her father intends as a warning to Alma, to inspire her to act "normally" causes Alma to want to withdraw from society: "No, I'd rather not sing...I'll, I'll just give up my – social efforts, Father – all of them!" (446). When Miss Alma becomes aware of the way she is perceived by society, a change begins in her. In Madness and Literature, Lillian Feder defines madness as "a struggle for liberation from false attitudes and values, an encounter with primary feelings and impulses which constitutes a possibility for the rebirth of the 'true self'" (281). During the scene in which Alma's father crushes her illusions of high public opinion, Alma's inner struggle with madness begins. In the beginning of the play, Miss Alma is sweet and pure, the perfect minister's daughter who serves the church in many ways; however, she is ridiculed because of her eccentric behavior. At the end of the play, Miss Alma has lost the morals of her religious upbringing, as she willingly goes to an hourly hotel with a traveling salesman without qualm. Which version of Miss Alma is her "true self," though? Through textual evidence, it is clear that the person Miss Alma is at the end of the play is her "true self" and the play itself is the story of her inner "struggle for liberation from false attitudes."

Over the course of the play, Miss Alma becomes better at expressing her feelings. At first she can barely talk to Dr. John without simpering and giggling, but she develops

into a person who can honestly share her feelings. During a conversation with Dr. John, Alma explains the changes that are going on inside of her: “Alma: On the surface I’m still the Episcopal minister’s daughter but there’s something else that’s...frantic!...A – *doppelgänger*! John: Fighting for its life in the prison of a little conventional world full of walls” (471). A *doppelgänger* is a person’s double, traditionally thought to be an omen of death if glimpsed. It can be argued that Miss Alma’s *doppelgänger* is actually her “true self” trying to escape from the inner prison that Dr. John describes. When Miss Alma bitterly tells Dr. John that he will marry a woman without eccentricities, Dr. John praises her because “it’s surprising how few people there are that dare in this world to say what is in their hearts” (471). Miss Alma is aghast by her candor, however, claiming that she has “exposed her self” (471). Through this statement, it seems that Alma believes her *doppelgänger* to be her “true self,” but she tries to hide it. At the end of the play, though, Miss Alma embraces the *doppelgänger* version of herself because:

Alma: Well, I may be eccentric but not so eccentric
that I don’t have the ordinary human need for love.
I have that need, and I must satisfy it, in whatever
way my good or bad fortune will make possible for
me. (477)

Alma is an eccentric who craves love. The version of Miss Alma from the beginning of the play is not capable of finding love; Miss Alma has tried dating before and found that “with each one there was a desert between us” (476). When her true self takes over, however, Miss Alma finds that she is capable of having at least fleeting human companionship, first with Dr. John and later with a traveling salesman. Miss Alma gets

out from under “the shadow of the church” (474) with her honest, direct, and uninhibited true self and is able to momentarily bridge the gaps of her loneliness.

At the end of the play, Miss Alma’s *doppelgänger* is out. She has liberated her self from the false attitudes and values of her upbringing, and her “true self” has been unleashed. Miss Alma’s “struggle for liberation” has ended, but has her madness ended? By Feder’s definition, yes, but by society’s definition the answer is no. At the end of the play, Miss Alma is not just an eccentric outcast, but is considered a social pariah for her loose morals: “Alma: I used to teach singing here...I used to sing at public occasions like this. I don’t any more. Salesman: Why don’t you any more? Alma: I’m not asked anymore. Salesman: Why’s that? (*Alma shrugs slightly and unfolds her fan. The salesman coughs a little*)” (485). Her ability to function in society is impeded by the townspeople’s view of her, as she is not asked to sing in public or teach singing anymore.

The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, perhaps more so than any of Williams’ other plays, deals with the theme of the machine of society or the “Combine” from One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Miss Alma’s father and John Buchanan’s mother are the two main agents of the Combine. Rev. Winemiller and Mrs. Buchanan both allude to mockery from the townspeople at Miss Alma’s expense, but they are the only characters in the play who are visibly bothered by her eccentricity. Rev. Winemiller tells Alma that her mannerisms make people see her as peculiar, and she is in danger of becoming an eccentric:

Little things like that, an accumulation of them, Alma,
little habits, little, little mannerisms, little – peculiarities
of behavior – they are what get people known, eventually,

as – *eccentrics!* And eccentric people are not happy, they
are not happy people, Alma. (446)

Rev. Winemiller brings up an interesting point: eccentrics are not happy people. The reason for this does not lie in their eccentricity, as Rev. Winemiller supposes, but rather in the fact that the machine of society makes them unhappy through exclusion and ridicule. Rev. Winemiller is not anxious for Alma to curb her eccentricity because the social stigma will make her unhappy; however, he is worried about the impression that people will have of him. Rev. Winemiller needs Alma to be “normal” so that she can perform the duties of a minister’s wife, as Alma’s mother’s delusions hinder her from doing so: “Alma, I’ve had one heavy cross to bear. (*He nods toward Mrs. Winemiller.*) A minister isn’t complete without a family, he needs his wife and his family to make a – social bond – with the parish!” (443). Rev. Winemiller believes that Alma can control her eccentric behavior:

I wouldn’t mention these things if I didn’t know
that they were just mannerisms, things that you
could control, that you can correct! Otherwise I
wouldn’t mention them to you. Because I can see
that you are upset, but you can correct them. All
you have to do is *concentrate*. (445, 446)

Rev. Winemiller may very well be correct in his assumption that Alma can change her behavior. Her eccentricity stems from behaviors that other people perceive as peculiar; if she were to concentrate on curbing her wild gesticulations and not “guild the lily” as her father puts it, Alma would be seen as a “normal” member of society. Why should she

have to do this, though? Alma's behavior does not hurt anyone; she acts strangely, but her actions do not cause anyone harm. The only harm that is caused is to her reputation, and consequently her father's. This harm does not stem from the actions, but rather from the repercussions of her eccentric actions, inflicted by the Combine of society. Alma's father asks her to change herself to conform to the rigid standards of the societal machine. He does this out of a selfish desire, so that his daughter will not embarrass him or tarnish his image as a minister. When Rev. Winemiller acts as an agent of the Combine by asking Alma to change, though, he tarnishes his image in the eyes of the audience. Through Rev. Winemiller's plea for normalcy from his daughter, the audience can see that Rev. Winemiller is selfishly motivated by his desire to please the Combine.

Dr. John's mother, Mrs. Buchanan, is another agent of the Combine. She does not want to change Alma's eccentricity like Rev. Winemiller, though; Mrs. Buchanan merely wants to point out Alma's eccentricities to her son, in the hopes of making him see Miss Alma in a negative light. Mrs. Buchanan is almost fanatical in her quest to point out Alma's flaws because she does not want Dr. John to marry Alma. Mrs. Buchanan tries to discourage John from even casually associating with Alma: "Admire her for her good qualities, and I am sure she must have some, but *do not get involved!*" (460) because as she admits, "every mother's a tiger when her son's future happiness is threatened!" (460). Mrs. Buchanan believes that Miss Alma is not good enough for her son; she fears the differences that she sees in Alma and attempts to make her son see Alma's peculiar ways in the negative light that she does. John respects Miss Alma because "she isn't like all the other girls in Glorious Hill" (457), but Mrs. Buchanan does her best to prove to John that Alma is not unique: "There's always at least one like her in

every Southern town” (457). Mrs. Buchanan cautions John that there is proper protocol in dealing with girls like Miss Alma: “People feel sorry for them, they’re kind to them, but, darling, they keep at a distance, they don’t get involved with them. Especially not in a sentimental way” (457). Although Dr. John does not love Miss Alma, he does respect her and treats her in the same manner that he treats other people, which goes against the proper etiquette of dealing with the eccentric in Mrs. Buchanan’s book. She mistakes his respect for Miss Alma for love, and she does everything in her power to break up the imagined union. Like Rev. Winemiller, Mrs. Buchanan’s motivation is selfish. Mrs. Buchanan wants to appear successful in the eyes of the Combine, and her son is her means of doing so. Mrs. Buchanan wants a “healthy! Normal! Pretty!” (458) daughter-in-law who will produce “healthy, normal...adorable little grandchildren” (459). When discussing her future grandchildren, Mrs. Buchanan sees them as a symbol of prestige along with all the other trappings of success:

I see them...my adorable little grandchildren...
A nursery full of their funny little toys...And on
the lawn, on the enormous, grassy, shady lawn
of the – Georgian, yes *Georgian* mansion, not
Greek revival, I’m tired of Greek revival! – will
be their swing, their shallow pool for goldfish,
their miniature train, their pony. (459)

Mrs. Buchanan later goes on to say that the children should not have a pony because “I knew a little girl, once, that fell off a pony and landed on her head! *Goodness, she grew up to be almost as odd as Miss Alma!*” (459), illustrating the fact that that Mrs. Buchanan

is concerned more with the public perception of her future grandchildren than their safety. Mrs. Buchanan is a doctor's wife and has a successful son who is also a doctor; she is likely one of the "pillars of the community" in Glorious Hill. Despite all of this, though, Mrs. Buchanan is still desperate for the approval of the Combine. She must achieve societal status through her son, and she cannot let her son do anything that might interfere with her standing. Through her selfish efforts to dissuade Dr. John from even a casual friendship with the eccentric Miss Alma, Mrs. Buchanan acts as a powerful agent of the Combine – making Miss Alma an outcast because she does not fit the mold.

Miss Alma is not the only eccentric who is shunned by the Combine in Glorious Hill. Miss Alma and some of her friends have formed a scholarly group to transform Glorious Hill into the "Athens of the Delta." Miss Alma describes them as a "group of sweet and serious people that get together because of – interests in common – cultural interests – who want to create something – vital – in this town!" (446). For all their scholarly ambitions, though, it is clear that the group is merely lonely people bonding together over common interests. The group does not hurt anyone or attempt to force anyone outside of the group (with the exception of Dr. John) to listen to their essays; one has difficulty finding a reason why a such peaceable group of people should be shunned by society, but nevertheless, the group is shunned. Each of the members of the group is likely an outcast of society for their individual eccentricities, but as a group, they draw even more negative attention. Alma's father does not want her to be a part of the group because they are "not the sort of young people that it's an advantage to be identified with" (446). The good minister even goes so far as to tell Alma that she should leave the "little band of eccentrics, this collection of misfits that you've gathered about you which

you call your club” (446). which is a cruel thing to say, as Alma notes. (446) Mrs.

Buchanan criticizes the group also:

I know what they have in common, the freaks
of the town!...A certain little group that don't
fit in with the others. sort of outcast people that
have, or imagine they have, little talents for this
thing or the other – over which they make a big
fuss among themselves in order to bolster up their
poor little, hurt little egos! They band together,
then meet at each other's houses once a week, and
make believe they're disliked and not wanted at
other places because they're special, superior –
gifted!” (459, 460)

Mrs. Buchanan also attempts to make them seem less unique as she does with Miss Alma by saying that “every Southern town has them, and probably every Northern town has them, too” (459). Miss Alma's group of “misfits” garners a lot of extremely negative criticism from the “normal” people in Glorious Hill. This could be due to the fact that in creating the group, the town's outcasts have created a society for themselves. In this subset of society, the eccentrics of Glorious Hill have found a place where they belong; they are essentially evading the Combine. The Combine of society wants to make them outcasts so that they will eventually start acting “normally” to be accepted; with the formation of the group, however, the eccentrics have outsmarted the Combine. By creating their own society, the eccentrics have thrown a wrench into the machine of

society, which causes Rev. Winemiller and Mrs. Buchanan, agents of the Combine, to work even harder to make the eccentrics feel alone.

The Combine of society is a powerful force in The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, but not every character is completely susceptible to it. Even under the pressure of an agent of the Combine – his mother – Dr. John treats Miss Alma with respect. He believes that “she’s a little bit – quaint, she’s very excitable, but – there’s nothing *wrong* with her” (457), and he treats her as such. He treats her with kindness, even in the face of his tyrannical mother. But he is not in love with Miss Alma, which is what she desires most from him. John knows the way Alma feels for him, but he continues to treat her respectfully, until her “true self” wins the struggle inside of her. When John takes Alma to the hotel, he does not seem to have any intention of sleeping with her, taking her there is more of an act of appeasement than anything else. Alma changes in the hotel room, though. Her true self wins the struggle when she tries and fails to get Dr. John to sleep with her with no shame: “I’m not ashamed of tonight! I think that you and I have been honest together, even though we failed!” (484). In the hotel room, Alma changes forever from the “good church girl” to a woman with uninhibited desires. As Alma changes, the stage directions note that “*something changes between them* [Alma and John]” too. John stops respecting Alma for her quaint and eccentric ways, and sees her as a woman – the fleeting object of his desire – and he uses her, the way her true self wants to be used. John shows a hopeful side of the Combine in his kind treatment of Alma, but even after he stops respecting Alma’s eccentricity and sees her as a woman, he will never love her.

In The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, Tennessee Williams explores the powerful influence of the Combine of society in regard to eccentricity. Rev. Winemiller and Mrs.

Buchanan become agents of the Combine in their selfish desires to change Alma or to show her in a negative light, respectively. Williams also thoroughly examines the struggle of the eccentric to find her true self – a journey of madness that ends when Alma's *doppelgänger* is unleashed from its prison. According to Lillian Feder, Alma's madness should end when her struggle ends, but sadly in society's eyes when Alma finds her true self, she is considered to be even madder than before.

*I'm not crazy, I'm just a little impaired
I know, right now you don't care
But soon enough you're gonna think of me
And how I used to be*

- "Unwell" by Matchbox Twenty

Conclusion

In Madness and Literature, Lillian Feder asserts that “considering literary works as the psychological autobiographies of their authors” is a “tedious procedure that adds little to our knowledge of psychology or literature” (10). However, in Tennessee Williams’ case it is important to know at least a brief history of his experience with madness, as madness plays such a strong role in his plays. A recurring theme in Williams’ plays is insanity, which comes as no surprise if one is familiar with the life of Tennessee Williams. His older sister Rose was diagnosed with *dementia praecox*, an early name for schizophrenia, (Leverich, 222) and had a lobotomy, forever changing her demeanor. Williams felt guilty for the rest of his life that he had not been able to do something for Rose or to protect her from the terrible fate of the lobotomy that Williams’ mother forced upon her – the pervading theme in his plays The Glass Menagerie and Suddenly Last Summer. In Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams, Lyle Leverich reveals that Tennessee also characterized himself as half-mad:

He addressed ‘the enemy inside myself’ – an essential division in his personality that would plague him and manifest itself in patterns of contradictory behavior throughout the years to come. It would divide him not only against himself but often against those closest to him, leading him to characterize himself

as 'half-mad.' (174)

In an article, columnist Rex Reed describes Williams' personality as "gentleness, kindness, mixed with madness and contradiction – conflicting traits that define the man, occurring in uneasy rhythmic patterns" (50). Williams is no stranger to the madness that manifests itself in his plays. Tennessee Williams began writing at an early age because he

took refuge in his own interior life of memories and fantasies...he had begun to find life unsatisfactory in and of itself, and he was forced to adopt the method of the artist of not explaining but putting the blocks together in some other way that seemed more significant to him. And so he started to write.

(Leverich 62-63)

Williams creates characters in his plays that, like himself, live in their "own interior life of memories and fantasies." The characters in Williams' plays have been shown to be eccentric, but are they eccentric for living in their own interior worlds, or do they live in their own interior worlds because society has shunned them?

The answer to this 'chicken vs. the egg' question is a combination of the two options. Catharine, Blanche, Laura, and Alma exhibited "eccentric" behavior before society shunned them, however, being shunned by society causes them to retreat further into their interior worlds. R.D. Laing supposes that the mad individual lives in his own illusory reality as a defense mechanism: "To forgo one's autonomy becomes the means of secretly safeguarding it; to play possum, to feign death becomes a means of preserving

one's aliveness... To turn oneself into a stone becomes a way of not being turned into a stone by someone else" (51). Eccentricities bring the characters in Williams' plays under the scrutiny of society. Because they are different, Catharine, Blanche, Laura, and Alma are shunned, because as Lillian Feder says "Madmen are, above all, individual victims of social dictatorship" (7). Williams makes use of the theme of society as a machine or a Combine, which links Suddenly Last Summer, A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie, and The Eccentricities of a Nightingale together with Ken Kesey's novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. All of these works explore the character of the Acutes/Eccentrics, the Chronics, and society's impact on them.

In Williams' literary world, the Combine effectively casts out the eccentric characters that do not fit within the framework of the societal machine. From research, it is clear that the members of the Combine have no right to do this, however. In Dr. David Rosenhan's study On Being Sane in Insane Places, the line between sanity and insanity becomes blurred:

The sane are not 'sane' all of the time...similarly the insane are not always insane. If it makes no sense to label ourselves permanently depressed on the basis of an occasional depression, then it takes better evidence than is presently available to label all patients insane or schizophrenic on the basis of bizarre behaviors or cognitions...that allegedly constitute only a small fraction of their total behavior. (6)

Although it makes no sense to cast out members of society for aberrant behaviors that do not occur all of the time, this is the practice of the Combine. Deviations from societal norms are frowned upon by the “normal” characters in Williams’ plays; however, the reader can see that mad characters should not be discounted in their madness. Through the examples in Suddenly Last Summer, A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie, and The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, it is clear that mad characters in literature have a different way of looking at the world, but the connotations of this should not necessarily be negative. Catharine, Blanche, Laura, and Alma can see what a life of conformity in the Combine would offer them, and they choose to live in a world of illusion instead. Who can blame them? As Don Quixote says in the film Man of La Mancha. “When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams – this may be madness... Too much sanity may be madness – and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and *not* as it should be!” In his plays, Tennessee Williams creates a cast of characters who try to see life as it should be, and not how it is, because the Combine makes the “real world” an uninhabitable place for the eccentric.

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