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Sigler: Stuck Walking Down Memory Lane

Professor Magee

ENG - 390 – A

15 December 2016

I'm Stuck Walking Down Memory Lane

Both Blanche Dubois in Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* have gone through tragic events in their past which shape their psyches of the present. Their fragmented minds are both a blessing and a burden because they use their distorted views of reality to cope with the actual events going on around them but, the events occurring around them stem from their traumatic past and hallucinations. They are forced to constantly deal with two types of reality before they eventually reach their demise. Blanche experiences a metaphysical death, being forced to go to the Asylum and Willy faces a physical death because he commits suicide. Both of these ends are tragic but their inevitable demise is only second to the constant onslaught of psychological trauma they must suffer through the traffic of the stage. Throughout the plays both Blanche DuBois and Willy Loman use their past as a coping mechanism, which in turn provides the characters with depth and a purpose to their actions, before descending into their tragic pasts.

PTSD has been a rising issue in the past fifty or so years; it became an official diagnosis in 1980. Since then, we as humans have looked increasingly into this issue. There was a study done on May 15, 1996 in which twenty combat veterans with PTSD were compared to eighteen combat veterans without PTSD on symptom rating scales. The conclusion of this test was: "The subjects with PTSD exhibited a greater degree of depression, anxiety, agitation, anhedonia, and

positive symptoms of psychosis than the comparison group. Specifically, the PTSD group manifested increased hallucinations, delusions, and bizarre behavior” (Butler). What this study proves for the sake of this paper is the presence of hallucinations, delusions, and bizarre behavior. The reason this is imperative is because both of the characters we will be focusing on suffer from PTSD. “Blanche DuBois suffers from auditory hallucinations where she will hear all the sounds of the events that she is hallucinating about. The most common event we read about is the death of her young lover: “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” (Williams 141). In comparison to the auditory hallucination that Blanche suffers from, Willy Loman suffers from a more classic version of hallucinations, delusions, and bizarre behavior. He will essentially relive all the events of his past. The only time he may not relive the delusions are when he is talking to his brother Ben, where Willy often asks him for advice:

“WILLY. I’ve got nobody to talk to, Ben, and the woman has suffered, you hear me?

BEN. [Standing still, considering it]: What’s the proposition” (Miller 100)?

The reason these hallucinations are important is because it changes the entire dynamics of these characters. Without their mental illness, these deep and complex characters become relatively simple and shallow. Blanche simply becomes a school teacher who was fired because she slept with a student, and now must live with her sister and Willy Loman becomes a salesman who is simply too old to continue doing his job. With these mental illnesses though they get purpose and direction; it explains why they act the way they do.

Their mental illnesses though stem from the guilt they feel from ruining someone else's life. Blanche blames herself for the suicide of her young lover Allan, who she rejected when she found out that he slept with another man. There is a point in the play where Stella begins to describe the relationship between Blanche and Allan to Stanley: "But when she was young, very young, she married a boy who wrote poetry.... He was extremely good-looking. I think Blanche didn't just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human! But then she found out-" (Williams 124) This quote establishes why Allan's death took such a heavy toll on Blanche. Their relationship was described from the outside as Blanche worshipping him, and even Blanche describes her love for him as: "I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or myself" (Williams 114). This obsessive love was essentially suffocating Blanche. She loved him with her whole heart and when he died, he took her heart with him.

Willy Loman blames himself for a different type of death throughout the book. He blames himself for the metaphorical death of his son Biff's future. After Biff flunked out his math class he went directly to Boston to meet Willy so he could talk to Biff's teacher and try to give him four more points to pass the class and graduate. The only problem is when Biff got to Boston and went up to Willy's hotel room; he found Willy sleeping with another woman:

"BIFF. Never mind.

WILLY. Never mind! He's going to give you those points. I'll see to it.

BIFF. He wouldn't listen to you.

WILLY. He certainly will listen to me. You need those points for U. of Virginia.

BIFF. I'm not going there.

WILLY. Heh? If I can't get him to change that mark you'll make it up in summer school.

You've got all summer to-

BIFF. Dad....

WILLY. Oh, my boy...

BIFF. Dad....

WILLY. She's nothing to me, Biff. I was lonely, I was terribly lonely.

BIFF. You-you gave her Mama's stockings!

WILLY. I gave you an order!

BIFF. Don't touch me, you-liar!

WILLY. Apologize for that!

BIFF. You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!" (Miller 95).

After this exchange, Biff went home and burned up his shoes and his chances at college. Biff lost all willingness to graduate from high school by talking to his teacher or going to take the class in summer school. Willy never forgives himself for this exchange between his son and himself because he knows that the reason that Biff never succeeds in life is his fault.

“The conflicting inner selves that make up Willy Loman’s many-sided persona represent his experience of the outer world refracted through the distorting medium of his fantasies. As the action of the play progresses, the connections between Willy’s inner world and external reality, which are tenuous enough to begin with, grow

increasingly unstable and volatile. He is driven to kill himself, the ultimate act of self-deprecation in his struggle to impose fantasies upon a reality that consistently thwarts his ambitions and will.” (Hadomi 14).

Willy blames himself for the death of Biff’s future and that is the reason that whenever Biff comes around in the future, the hallucinations become worse and worse. Both Blanche and Willy start in two completely different mental states than where they end; they both get progressively worse until they reach a point where they both experience a death of some sort.

Starting with Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, we see Blanche use her hallucinations as a coping mechanism that progressively gets worse as the play goes on, until she reaches a point of a metaphorical death. Our first major glimpse of Blanche’s mental state comes from her monologue about how she had to prepare the funerals of three family members: her father, her mother, and Margaret. Blanche says:

“I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn’t be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths-not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, ‘Don’t let me go!’ Even the old, sometimes, say, ‘Don’t let me go.’ As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet,

with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, ‘Hold me!’ you’d never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn’t dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw!” (Williams 21).

This sets up the fact that Blanche has a broken psyche. That the deaths of her family members have taken their toll and death of her lover have taken a huge toll on her stability. When she is being confronted or entering a stressful situation that she doesn’t like, that is when the hallucinations begin to kick in. The first time we, the reader experience Blanche’s auditory hallucinations is very slight. Stanley asks her if she ever fell in love and at the notion of having to explain her history when she first got to the house after explaining and reliving the events of her family members dying; essentially makes her sick and she doubles over. The stressful situation starts off small which is simply Stanley is asking her if she has ever fallen in love but, that is enough to send her into the past because of the ordeals she recently had experienced.

The next time we experience the auditory hallucinations, is during Blanche’s recounting of the death of her young lover Allan. Her retelling arises from Mitch talking about his Mother and how she is worried that when she dies, Mitch will be lonely. This essentially pushes Blanche into her coping mechanism because when Allan died she was extremely lonely. She admits to this much later in the play when she says: “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...” (Williams 146). Even though Allan was gay, she loved him very much and when he committed suicide, it destroyed her mental stability and since she caused his suicide; she cannot move on from that single event: “I saw! I know! You disgust me...” (Williams 115) She is forced to relive her greatest failure every time she cannot cope with how her life has played out. She becomes

obsessed with not being shown in full light because the light can be taken as a representation of truth. She tries to hide from the truth of her own folly by covering all the lights in the house with paper lanterns, only going on dates with Mitch at night, and she even states: “I don’t want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!-Don’t turn the light on!” (Williams 145).

The first two hallucinogenic episodes are small in comparison to her mental breakdown when Mitch comes in and confronts her about her being promiscuity and being run out of Laurel. Mitch accuses her of lying and she rebuttals: “Never inside, I didn’t lie in my heart...” (Williams 147) She experiences an episode but, because of the woman selling funeral flowers in the background; instead of being sent back to the episode with Allan; she experiences the deaths of her family members:

“BLANCHE. Legacies! Huh....And other things such as bloodstained pillow-slips-‘Her linen needs changing’-‘Yes Mother. But couldn’t we get a colored girl to do it?’ No, we couldn’t of course. Everything gone but the-

MEXICAN WOMAN. Flores.

BLANCHE. Death-I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are.... We didn’t dare even admit we had ever heard of it!” (Williams 149).

Blanche became familiar with death and it caused it to become something taboo to speak about. Both her and the person dying knew they were going to die soon but, neither of them ever spoke about it. It became a guillotine waiting over both of their heads for one of them when it fell, it

would mean death. For Blanche, it was the anxiety of waiting that affected her so strongly, putting her into the situation where she will relive these events.

These events fragment her mental stability even more than when she first came into the play. Each event happens more frequently until the events are happening pages apart in the play. In this scene, we see Blanche at her worst. The scene opens up with Blanche being evidently drunk and convinced that an old flame Mr. Shep Huntleigh has invited her to go on a cruise with him. Stanley later enters and the tension between him and Blanche rise to a boiling point. Blanche begins to lie and speak about the cruise she is getting ready to go on and Stanley gets fed up with her lies and begins to call her out:

“I’ve been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy’s eyes! You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say-Ha! Ha! Do you hear me? Ha-ha-ha!” (Williams 158)

Between her being confronted by Stanley and the loud noise from the Streetcar Desire, Blanche begins to have an episodic moment where she believes she is in danger. Blanche while intoxicated is essentially in a dream where she has convinced herself of the cruise but, the loud noise was the action that forced her into reality which is the very thing she fears/hates.

“Williams’ heroine speaks from traumatic experience and

not from psychic fabrications. Indeed, we contend that the play

traces Blanche's deliberate and self-conscious working through and mourning of the traumatic losses of the past, including her idealized, narcissistic conceptions of herself within a traumatic present. Thus she is more attuned to the most disturbing parts of reality and exhibits tragic insight born of traumatic experience." (Ribkoff)

This further solidifies this idea that Blanche makes up statements that she believes as true because she feels like they should be. Blanche is in tune with her tragic reality and uses her past as a coping mechanism for the present. Reality has become extremely tragic and traumatic for her so she uses her previous events to try and work through the reality which she is facing. During this exchange, Stanley begins to make his move and converges onto Blanche. She breaks a bottle and lunges at Stanley trying to protect herself. Stanley catches Blanche and then there is an implied rape scene between Stanley and Blanche. This is Stanley showing that no matter how powerful Blanche thinks she is, he is more powerful; that he is the king. It also leads to Stella sealing Blanche's fate and coffin.

In the final scene of the play, it is implied that Blanche told Stella what Stanley did but, Stella doesn't believe Blanche:

"STELLA. I don't know if I did the right thing.

EUNICE. What else could you do?

STELLA. I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley." (Williams 165)

This final scene is where Blanche experiences a metaphorical death; she is sent away to the insane asylum. During the final struggle between Stanley and Blanche; Stanley rips off the paper lantern off the bare bulb in the room, which signifies Blanche being shown the truth.

Blanche then realizes that she doesn't have any intimate relationships: "Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." (Williams 178) Blanche realizes that even her Sister doesn't like her enough to take her side, so when she is taken away to the insane asylum, Blanche would never see anyone again.

"In *A Streetcar Named Desire*'s final scene, Williams makes his sympathetic tone toward Blanche tangible by exploiting her vulnerability before the indifference of the people and society that surrounds her. In addition to the iconic comment "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (178), Blanche's vulnerability is also illuminated through stage directions such as "*a look of sorrowful perplexity as though all human experience shows on her face*" (167) and "*She turns her face to [the doctor] and stares at him with desperate pleading*" (177–8). Blanche's vulnerability leaves her sharply exposed before the cold unresponsiveness of the people who witness her defeat and represent the society in which she has been immersed: the men's poker game resumes abruptly after her dramatic exit, Blanche's own sister Stella returns her pleas delivered in a "*frightening whisper*" by staring blankly back at her in a "*moment of silence*" (174), and Eunice simply responds to her claim of rape with, "Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on" (166). The other characters in the play, representative of the era's misogynistic society, choose to disregard Blanche's plight in accordance with what society expects" (Seigle)

This quote further emphasizes why Blanche had to leave; she was never going to fit in with the society and those around her. Her life would be constantly denounced by those around her, which in turn would make her regress more and more into a fictional world that she has created for herself. One where she constantly tries to mourn the past, as if it will make her feel better than dealing with the harsh reality she must face. This is why when Blanche leaves the house with the Doctor and Stella calls out for her, Blanche doesn't respond. This is Blanche solidifying in her mind that she must rely on the kindness of strangers.

Both Blanche and Willy must face adversity in the form of their mind and a physical being. For Blanche she must face down Stanley and constantly struggle against him, ultimately leading to his victory and her inevitable demise. On the other hand, Willy must face not only his guilt to what he caused Biff to go through but, Biff himself. The two are constantly fighting about what the opposite person should be doing. Willy wants Biff to get a real job, stick around the house, and make more than thirty five dollars a week. Biff wants Willy to treat Linda better and to stop talking to himself and hallucinating. Eventually these two reach a boiling point in the garden scene where they lay everything on the table.

In *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman seems to be further gone than Blanche because when he goes into the hallucinogenic state, they are sweeping paragraphs that go into great detail about the events of the past. Our first glimpse at the mind of Willy is in the very beginning of the play when Linda begins to ask Willy about him not being able to make it to Boston. The high flute begins to play and Willy begins to regress to the past: "I was thinking of the Chevy. Nineteen twenty eight... When I had that red Chevy—That funny? I coulda sworn I was driving that Chevy today." This sets us up for the rest of the play because the situation is caused by Biff not being able to find himself and Linda asking him about going to Boston. Willy still blames

himself for ruining Biff's life because after Biff caught Willy and the other woman together, he gave up on going to college.

“Much of the play takes place in a psychological construct which Willy creates. An Eden-like paradise which lies at the center of his neurosis, it is characterized by the paradoxical union of reality and his delusory fulfillment of his grandiose dreams of omnipotence. Willy's paradise, which he identifies with the time in which Biff and Happy were growing up in Brooklyn, was also synonymous with his and his sons' exclusive society in which they expressed, reflected, and validated his belief in their virtual divinity. Expressing his enthusiasm for Biff's divine condition, Willy ironically incorporated the concept of progress, time's movement, into his changeless paradise. He believed that Biff, who was already "divine" as a football player, would become more so as a businessman. Before Biff realized Willy's projected future, however, he lost faith in Willy's dreams, left the state of mind or paradise Willy had created, and destroyed its coherence. As a result, Willy moved from the condition of stasis to one created by a confusion of the present and of its fragmented paradise. Willy never experiences the future which is part of normal chronological time because he recognizes only the future which he believes is latent in his paradise.” (Ardolino)

Throughout the novel, Willy dreams of the varying events of the past what he deems as better.

For him it happens to be mainly revolve around Biff who he essentially put his life into. When

Biff doesn't turn out the way Willy wants him to, it further damages his mental wellbeing and he is forced to try and cope with his deteriorating mind. Our first instance of this just happens to begin with the event about the Chevvy and in connotation of the play this exchange is fairly small but, it is more the principle that this starts the play.

A prime example to the shattered psyche of Willy is right after he is fired. In the middle of Howard's office, Willy begins to hallucinate. After being fired, Willy cannot handle the current situation and begins to recall the day when Biff is playing at Ebbets field. "I don't think that is funny Charley. This is the greatest day of his life." (Miller 68) The reason this is important because this further establishes what Willy values. Willy values being popular over hard work. He constantly belittles Charley and Bernard because they are not: attractive nor popular. Willy also heavily believes in the idea of the American dream, it drove him to become a salesman. Now that he is fired, it causes him to recognize that he has failed his dream because of that he spirals into his hallucinations. Willy chose to become a salesman because it combines his need to be popular/attractive and his want to pursue the American dream and build a life for his family:

"His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers- I'll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty

or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people?” (Miller 61)

This is partly why Willy is in such a poor mental state. Between his sons failing and him failing his dream of being a great salesman. He cannot handle the present situation and returns to the past in order to keep his mind from breaking apart.

Willy is forced into reality that he has no job and that he has to ask Charley for more money than he usually ask for. Charley then offers a job to Willy but Willy gets offended because that would mean he has to give up his dream of being a salesman. Willy believes that it is the best job and that it is the best way to make money. Relying on Charley is like poison to Willy because it forces him to realize even though Charley wasn't well liked he is making more money and Bernard his son is more successful than both of Willy's kids. This comes as a shock to Willy because of how much he didn't value both Charley and Bernard as people.

Willy then goes to a restaurant to meet Biff and Happy to supposedly celebrate Biff getting a loan from Bill Oliver. In reality though, Biff didn't even get to see Bill Oliver so in order to keep Willy sane in the beginning, Biff and Happy begin to lie about what happen and say: “Pop, listen! Listen to me! I'm telling you something good. Oliver talked to his partner about the Florida idea. You listening? He – he talked to his partner, and he came to me ... I'm going to be all right, you hear? Dad, listen to me, he said it was just a question of the amount!” (Miller 87) This is the story that Biff and Happy told Willy so that way he wouldn't begin to hallucinate. In the beginning of the scene, Happy is telling Biff that he should just lie to Willy that way, Willy wouldn't start talking to himself: “That's just it. You tell him something nice” (Miller 82). We can see that Willy's mental state is linked to how the situation is going because

when Willy believes that Biff is going to discuss the loan with Bill Oliver tomorrow he drastically improves but, when he finds out that Biff didn't even get to talk to Oliver he completely reverts back to where he was:

“OPERATOR. Ringing Mr. Loman for you!

WILLY. I'm not there, stop it!

BIFF. Dad, I'll make good. Sit down now.

WILLY. No, you're no good, you're no good for anything.

BIFF. I am, Dad, I'll find something else, you understand? Now don't worry about anything. Talk to me, Dad.

OPERATOR. Mr. Loman does not answer. Shall I page him?

WILLY. No, no, no!

HAPPY. He'll strike something, Pop.

WILLY. No, no...

BIFF. Pop, listen! Listen to me! I'm telling you something good. Oliver talked to his partner about the Florida idea. You listening? He – he talked to his partner, and he came to me... I'm going to be all right, you hear? Dad listen to me, he said it was just a question of the amount!

WILLY. Then you ... got it?

HAPPY. He's gonna be terrific, Pop!

WILLY. Then you got it, haven't you? You got it! You got it!" (Miller 86)

In this scene, Willy begins to hallucinate which we see from the interjections from the Operator paging Willy but, as soon as Biff lies to Willy and begins to tell him that he did get into see Bill Oliver, we see Willy go completely fine.

After the scene at dinner, Willy goes to the store to pick up some seeds. Throughout the play Arthur Miller adds a running idea that Willy needs to buy seeds to plant a garden. Before Willy completely descends into the past, he goes to the store, buys seeds, and begins to plant them in the garden. The reason he does this is his kids aren't growing up to be anything, he recognizes that both Happy and Biff essentially have no major future. He goes home and begins to plant something in the garden so that way he has something to grow, he can say that it will become something unlike his kids. Finally, Biff goes out to the garden and begins to fight with Willy; during both the planting scene and the garden scene Willy begins to hallucinate and dream of Ben. He begins to have a conversation with Ben where Willy proposes that he kill himself so Linda, Biff, and Happy will have money to pay for the house, open their store in Florida etc. What truly sends Willy into insanity is: "Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? I'll go in the morning. Put him—put him to bed." (Miller 106) This final speech from Biff has Willy wake up and realize that Biff loves him: "Isn't that— isn't that remarkable? Biff—he likes me!" (Miller 106). This makes Ben tell Willy that he should kill himself so he can give everyone his insurance money. The reason this final speech is so bad for Willy is that even though Biff essentially forgave him and tried to make good by him, Willy has never moved on from Biff catching Willy with the other woman in Boston. Essentially, no matter what Biff does, Willy will not forgive himself

because of what he has done to his family so in order to try and make up for it; he plans on killing himself because he thinks he will get the insurance money and give that to his family.

Why is it important though that both Blanche and Willy have PTSD? Well, for Blanche it is the reason that she lies all the time, which makes Stanley an enemy. She constantly tells lies because she thinks they should be truth. It drives her to try and form an intimate relationship with Mitch and try to further hers with Stella. Everything she has done after Allan's death lead to Blanche going to Stella for help: from being kicked out of Laurel to sleeping with the underage kid. She tries to find a way to fill the void inside of herself that Allan left when he died. For Willy, It is his driving force that leads him to commit suicide. Whenever he speaks to Ben, he is essentially having a conversation with himself about his innermost thoughts. The hallucinations force him into a spot where he kills himself because he simply cannot live with the destruction of his own dream of being a salesman and the destruction of his kid's futures. PTSD led to the hallucinations which give these characters meaning and drive to reach their eventual demise. Without their PTSD these characters would go from tragic to mundane. It would no longer be a story about a woman who caused her lover to commit suicide but to a school teacher down on her luck, forced to move in with her sister. It would go from a man who failed the American dream and let his family down to a salesman who simply cannot make work in the morning. Their PTSD changes the dynamic of the plays and essentially make them into the great American classics that they are.

Academy Festival, April 6 [2017]
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