Gender and Violence in Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard's Plays

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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard are two generational playwrights whose work not only defines their perception of American masculinities but also the role and social consequences of women in domestic environments. It is with mothers, daughters, and wives that the writers delve into dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, which often lead to physical and psychological abuse. This study analyzes the clash between gender and violence on Williams and Shepard's selected plays, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *A Lie of The Mind*. By considering whether these playwrights perceive and treat their female characters similarly in reality and literature, one can conclude that Williams and Shepard's tendency to put women through traumatic experiences is not only the representation of their social and cultural atmospheres but also a form of literary technique. Thus, this capstone analyzes how both playwrights' ideas revolve around American masculinities and violence, the authors' personal experiences, and the cycle of abuse that women suffer in the plays.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, Sam Shepard, drama, violence, masculinities, gender studies, domesticity, marriage, motherhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Readers often perceive drama— if not literature as a wider concept— through the lens of male writers. Not only are the dialogues and narratives constructed around masculinity but also the characters seem to be motivated by their subjective interpretations of reality. This interpretation is, in large part, a consequence of cultural constructions of gender. Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard are considered two of the greatest modern American writers, and there is no doubt that their capability to portray pain, love and confusion at the same time is what defines them as artists.

My research topic considers and evaluates how and why these two authors jeopardize female characters and present men whose behavior is driven by their need to not only follow the social standards but also perpetuate their misconduct to secure a powerful role in the household. However, do Williams and Shepard jeopardize their female characters the same way? If not, how and why do their male characters threaten them differently? Is there a potential stimulus for these playwrights, such as mothers, daughters, and love affairs, which triggers their tendency to put women through traumatic experiences? This thesis analyzes the domestic physical and psychological violence toward Williams and Shepard's female characters, and their relationship with American masculinities. Moreover, it delves into exploring masculinities, womanhood (such as mother, sister or wife), and how the consequences of said abuse differ according to their social status. Indeed, this thesis evaluates the role of circumstantial situations, such as alcoholism, when it comes to determining these women's culminations but also their transformations in the plays. Thus, I want to prove that these female characters hurt and, if there is an answer to my questions, show that men have mistreated them by engaging in social power dynamics.

Sam Shepard and Tennessee Williams belonged to two different social and cultural generations, which may lead to readers believing that different perceptions of women can be distinguished in their work, even though they are, in fact, merely crafting similar female characters previously created by other authors, such as Eugene O'Neill's Mary Tyrone. Despite their differences in narrative technique, such as style and plot, one can notice that Shepard's and Williams' male characters follow patterns of mistreatment, given that they not only involve women in angry and threatening interactions but also jeopardize their physical and mental stability. Their plays, especially the ones I will be analyzing, present angry, disturbed and traumatized women who have been abused by men —usually partners, fathers, sons and brothers— and their coping with their everyday life. Some of them still have to coexist with their offenders, while others have developed parallel realities in which to prevent men from maintaining healthy lifestyles and relationships.

In Tennessee Williams's plays, these victimized women tend to be the protagonists, whereas in Shephard's they are more often incidental characters. Women are verbally and physically abused, sometimes sexually, without a specific goal. Some of Williams' main characters, such as Blanche DuBois (Chapter 2) or Amanda Wingfield (Chapter 3), tend to alienate themselves and shelter in a world of fantasy and madness to survive in society. On the other hand, Shepard's female characters (the few that are actually well-defined), like Beth (Chapter 2) or Ella (Chapter 3), suffer from physical abuse, and deal with alcoholic husbands. Thus, I identify a pattern with which to analyze gender roles in these authors' plays with the aim to show and compare their functionalities as characters, the violence to which they are exposed, and the physical and psychological aftermaths. Indeed, I believe that characters such as Blanche DuBois and Beth, who personify the angst and misery of gender roles, do convey a powerful

statement of violent sorrow which men —husbands, lovers, sons, and brothers— have been in charge of inflicting. After all, it is possible to observe that said characters, no matter how they are classified,[1] display commonalities regarding treatment, and social disadvantages.

My primary sources are works and interviews from both authors. I have selected the majority of these plays because their depiction of women's vulnerability is either radical or more defined. Indeed, I could have chosen other plays in which women are also regarded as victims, but these seem to emphasize not only their struggle but both the direct and indirect consequences of the male environment they live in. I have presented them with *A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke, The Glass Menagerie, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Night of the Iguana* by Williams, along with *Fool for Love, A Lie of the Mind, Buried Child, Curse of the Starving Class* and *Motel Chronicles* by Shepard. Moreover, interviews and personal essays have also determined their perspective on life, womanhood, masculinity and violence. The secondary sources with which I have been working include articles and books that discuss the relationship between the authors and their approach towards female characters. Moreover, I have some secondary sources that analyze other relevant features in their plays, such as the exploration of men's codependency in Shepard's literature, or sexual identity in Williams' plays.

In conclusion, my work is meant to show how female characters function in a patriarchal setting, and what consequences it has on their development, the plot, and

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[1] Mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, etc.

the reader. Psychology and family problems are themes that have proved to provide

magnificent works, not only art, but particularly American literature.

CHAPTER 1: THE DEPICTION OF MASCULINIZATION IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND SAM SHEPARD'S 20TH-CENTURY AMERICA

Hegemonic masculinity is a powerful social construct that blinds the consciousness to lay the foundations of misogyny. The recurrent theme of women and their treatment in the twentieth century's cultural masculinization[2] has been lately discussed by feminist scholars and writers[3] in historiography and literature from a gender studies approach, whose aim could be to disclose the relationship between genders from an analytical and biographical perspective. Tennessee Williams was sixteen years old when he not only wrote but also won a contest with the prompt "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?", where he described very forward-thinking situations regarding women's roles in marriage from a male perspective, such as a "wife's drinking, her smoking, [or] her sexual affairs".[4] On the other hand, Sam Shepard stated in 1984 that "there is some hidden, deeply rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, that has to do with not being a man, and always, continually, having to act out some idea of manhood that invariably is violent."[5] Indeed, their portrayals of dysfunctional relationships and families led them to be conceived as social writers. However, it is remarkably crucial to evaluate the role of history, and its so-scrutinized subfields, such as biographies, as the discipline that has thoroughly narrated the evolution of not only the study of gender interactions but also their influence in literary and cultural studies. The objective of this chapter is to answer the

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[2] "[t]he masculine that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standard for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting"; Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Equity," in *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality.* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 27.

[3] Simone de Beauvoir or Judith Butler.

[4] Michelle Paller. *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 144.

[5] Michiko Kakutani, "Myths, Dreams, Realities—Sam Shepard's America," New York Times, 29 January 1984, 26.

following questions: did these playwrights try to mimic norms of male behavior by shaping character and narrative patterns inspired in the way the United States functioned as a society between 1945 and the 1980s? To what extent do their male characters exemplify a social stereotype if there is one? If so, could it be extrapolated to the authors' personal lives, and, therefore, work? This chapter analyzes not only the reasons behind the authors' choices when depicting gender roles but also the ones that led them to portray men the way they did. Therefore, it examines how historical and social events shaped Williams and Shepard's lives with the aim to understand how the influence of male identity in the United States across the twentieth century led to reinterpret manhood in contemporary literature and contemporary culture. Moreover, it explores the reasons behind their artistic intentions as a result of their childhoods, relationships, and interpersonal dilemmas as *men*. The goal is, indeed, to comprehend the authors' perspectives of manhood as narrators and protagonists.

One should strictly analyze the history of American gender studies to comprehend why Williams and Shepard's female characters are not only undermined but also intrinsically and, — in more than one case, involuntarily — complex. Indeed, history as an interdisciplinary discipline explores and delves into most of the answers as to why men—if one conceives them as the representation of gender whose values depict social constructs— have (mis)behaved[6] and embodied oppressive demeanors. It has been wrongly argued that there is no deep analysis of or justification for American masculinities, which M. Kimmel, and his satirical observation that "American men have no history,"[7] have tried to refute. Indeed, some scholars have conceived American

[6] The concept of "misbehaving" changes with the feminist movement. In 1950, catcalling was not perceived as it is in 2020. Therefore, to behave well or wrongly depends on whether we analyze *the act* from a 1950s or 2020s perspective.
[7] Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 1.

masculinities as the display of patterns of uselessness and arrogance, but given that the roots of American misogyny are found in how the ideal man has been perceived throughout centuries, it is it essential to agree that without gender analysis one would not be able to deepen in historical understandings of not only the humanities but also the sciences. While some believe that Kimmel's move was a cynical step to depict the lack of male achievements and the state of "intellectual culture somehow devoid of the masculine perspective",[8] others have proven that his rather provocative statement was a mistaken approach of how to interpret men's contributions to American society. Was there an underlying explanation as to why men started wars, tried to embody an ideal, or enjoyed alcohol so much? Indeed, to understand Shepard and Williams' work one must be willing to consider historical events and sources as domineering elements of influence not only in their creative process but also in one's determining factors of scholarship. Therefore, it is not possible to analyze any of their female characters without acknowledging the circumstances of Williams and Shepard's women and the male-female relationship prototype in the twentieth century.

The first generations of twentieth-century historians of the United States did not contemplate the idea of analyzing heterosexuality or masculinity as an angle from which to start shaping a narrative. On the other hand, their goal was to find and examine sources to apply to create the said narrative. Certainly, they had gathered and evaluated a long list of primary sources such as war posters, propaganda, letters, archives and annals which contemporary scholars were able to reread from new perspectives and methodologies. In the academic writing of the 1950s, a 'domestic harmony' and balance between genders were acclaimed, even though men's experiences at war were

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[8] Bryce Traister, "Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinities Studies" *American Quarterly* (2000): 280.

contrasting with civilian life; therefore, these scholars introduced "feelings of crisis in masculine self-perception."[9] As a consequence, history was focusing on the cause of events, such as military strategies, rather than on social and cultural impacts. Moreover, the fact that all notable historians, such as Michael Howard or Stephen E. Ambrose, were white men increased the chances of them entirely omitting any possible reading of men's participation in the marriage, parenthood, and household; that is, a neglect of the history of their roles in gender relationships. However, some instances, like an essay titled "The Crisis of American Masculinities"[10] by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in 1958, prove that men were unsettled by a potential change in the conception of roles.

Following this frame, the second-wave feminism in the 1960s drove reforms in college systems, and new academic fields that focused on the study of gender and feminism were created, including gender studies, women's studies, and feminist studies, amongst others.[11] Furthermore, one should consider the 1960s as the beginning of American masculinity studies with analytical approaches in academia after Leslie Fiedler published *Love and Death in the American Novel*, where he explored the history of American normative sexuality, masculinity and men's dissatisfactions. Thus, the beginning of interdisciplinary studies in the humanities allowed history to explore the nuances of relevant facts as well as to deepen in the roots of existing versions of realities that had been neglected in early decades; although comparative, social, and political history had been used to approach World War II, for instance, it would take more time for gender history to settle as a methodological discipline within the field. As a result,

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[9] Stefan Horlacher, "Towards Comparative Masculinity Studies: On the Independence of National Identity and the Construction of Masculinity," in *Post-World War II Masculinities in British and American Literature and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 8.

[10] Men must "recover a sense of individual spontaneity. And to do this, a man must visualize himself as an individual apart from the group, whatever it is, which defines his values and commands his loyalty"; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Crisis of American Masculinity," *Esquire*, November 1958, 65

[11] Betsy Crouch, "Finding a Voice in the Academy: The History of Women's Studies in Higher Education," *The Vermont Connection* (2012): 17.

the birth of masculinity studies took place in the mid-1970s, with the complete establishment of feminist scholarly criticism[12]. Judith Fetterley —an influential and pioneering scholar in women's studies and American literature- published *The Resisting Reader* (1977), where she stated that "American literature is male."[13] Even though literary approaches are likely to be predominant in masculinity studies nowadays, it is vital to be reminded that sociology and anthropology were the main areas of research.

The third stage in the history of masculinity comes with R. W. Connell, who introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity[14] in the 1980s in order to analyze from a gender studies' perspective the history of men's behavior in the United States. Indeed, the history of manhood begins to be narrowed down with books such as *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (1986) by B. Wyatt-Brown, where the exploration of white male violence towards black slaves is analyzed, or J. W. Scott's *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* (1986), where the importance of gender in history was discussed by authors such as Foucault. Indeed, Foucault's firm position in favor of the existence of denaturalizing the body was useful for feminist readings to speculate whether the author intended to avoid the gender discussion. Other scholars agree that Foucault's ambiguous neutrality toward gender should be regarded as problematic given that he fails to consider factors such as gender justice or sexual objectification.[15]

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[12] Anne Lombard, "New Directions for the History of Manhood in America," *American Studies* (2010): 193.

[13] Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (United Kingdom: Indiana University Press, 1977) 12.

[14] A tool to identify "those attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality, involving both men's domination over women and the power of some men over other (often minority groups of) men"; Rachel Jewkes et al., "Hegemonic masculinity: combining theory and practice in gender interventions," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* (2015): 113.

[15] Angela King, "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body," *Journal of International Women's Studies* (2004): 33.

On the other hand, Judith Butler's decisive theoretical definition of performative and contingent gender introduced new means of envisioning manhood. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) she states that "because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis."[16] Thus, gender is a social construction of manners, patterns, and behaviors that need to be analyzed. As a consequence, Butler's theories about gender performativity led to the history of masculinity as an accepted discipline of history in the 1990s, and, therefore, academics began to analyze past events from a lens that engaged in the exploration of genders' behaviors throughout history.

Throughout the twentieth century, many scholars have delved into the biographies of Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard. Indeed, biographies became historical narratives through which many readers could understand the playwrights by being exposed to their life experiences. However, other academics opted to take a gender studies approach by analyzing social and cultural features from their works rather than stylistic ones. These literary scholars include Lynda Hart, whose many articles about Shepard such as "Sam Shepard's Spectacle of Impossible Heterosexuality: *Fool for Love*" (1989) were key in reinforcing the feminist readings of the author's plays; Carla J. McDonough has also published on theater and masculinity, as well as on the intersection of manhood and performativity in literature. *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997) analyzes the gender dynamics

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[16] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (NY and London: Routledge, 1990) 140.

presented in American plays written by men in the twentieth century, including Williams and Shepard.

Femininity[17] was seen as one of the main threats to men's personalities and egos; they needed a strong defense toward their lack of trust in their capability as men. The term 'male crisis' started being used in the 1950s as a response to the women's movement after women appeared with more frequency in the workplace and public spaces, which, was not as debated in history back then but rather in later decades,[18] unlike other social and cultural issues such as domesticity. As Sam Shepard confessed, "the female part of one's self as a man is, for the most part, battered and beaten up and kicked to shit just like some women in relationships (…) men themselves batter their own female part to their own detriment."[19] However, the connotations of the word 'man' can be multiple, as it may simply mean 'human being' but also imply emphasis if used as an interjection. What did it mean to be a man back in 1940-70s in America? Halie, the mother in Shepard's Pulitzer winning play *Buried Child* (1979) cannot help but fiercely scream, "What has happened to the men in this family! Where are the men!"[20] when she overhears her old, sickly and alcoholic husband confess that he was the perpetrator of their child's murder with the complicity of their other sons. E. Goffman, along with other scholars, believed that every man in the 1960s looked upon the Western ideal of "young, married, white, urban, northern heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports"[21] — a kind of man that Halie sees vanish along with

[17] conceived as a cultural and social construct that determines what feminine behavior is, such as sensitivity or domesticity.
[18] Anna Gavanas, *Fatherhood Politics in the United States: Masculinity, Sexuality, Race, and Marriage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 114.
[19] Carol Rosen, "'Emotional Territory': An Interview Sam Shepard," *Modern Drama* 36 (1993): 6.
[20] Sam Shepard, *Buried Child* (New York: DPS) 67.
[21] Erving Goffman, *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963) 128.

Goffman's list of morals and physical attributes. Thus, the conception of masculinity in the United States historically depended on sexuality, physical shape, and habits, while one could say, then, that it excluded domesticity, femininity, and intellectuality. Tennessee Williams, for instance, stated that he started getting involved with creative writing since it was his refuge from "being called a sissy by the neighborhood kids, and Miss Nancy by [his] father, because [he] would rather read books in [his] grandfather's large and classical library rather than play marbles and baseball and other normal kid games."[22] Therefore, the dispute over femininity was generally linked to the fear of not only domesticity but also homosexuality. Paller states that "a man who is truly comfortable with his sexual nature, and especially one as well situated in life (…), has nothing to fear in the opinions of other people: he knows he is."[23]

Williams' plays *Orpheus Descending* (1958), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), *Period of Adjustment* (1960), and his *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) present a group of women who are notable for their sexual desire for men who are either homosexual or unable to commit in long-lasting relationships.[24] Nevertheless, these male characters never show fear for the outcome of women's reactions to their sexuality but the men's. Some scholars believe that Williams' homosexuality in a world dominated by heterosexual men is represented through complex and distraught female characters: Blanche Dubois, Maggie Pollitt, or Amanda Wingfield are subject to men's rules but are willing to challenge them. On the other hand, if one takes into consideration the expression "to make a man [out] of

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22 Tennessee Williams, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (NY: New Directions Publishing, 2008) Foreword, XIII.
23 Michelle Paller, 112-113.
24 Louise Blackwell, "Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 35 (1970): 12.

someone,"[25] one would realize that Williams' implications of 'normal kids' should be associated with the 1930-60s society's ideals of men, which have been the same ones for several reasons: war, expertise in sports and mechanics, and heterosexuality. Thus, for example, sports became a normalized tool to masculinize "male family involvement"[26] as well as to promote fatherhood values and skills which mothers seemed to lack; that is, 'manly things', or habits that boys were supposed to be instructed by their fathers. In 1940, becoming a soldier was not a life choice, but rather a moral obligation: American government propaganda represented war service "not only as an obligation of male citizenship, but also as the ultimate expression of masculinity itself."[27] For instance, the hyper-masculinization was present in war posters, where men's white, muscular and broad bodies were portrayed as more than ready forces to combat the enemies,[28] which, indeed, reinforced sexuality and fertility, as well as physical qualities that emphasized the ideas of bravery and strength.

However, some of these brutal conditions of the war eventually had an impact on the development of the soldiers' lives, especially after their return to the United States, where they had to not only remain as strong social figures but also to adapt to new lifestyles. "The click I get in my head when I've had enough of this stuff to make me peaceful…"[29] is how Brick, the main character in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* defines his experience with alcohol. Indeed, his incapacity to fit into the traditional role of husband can be interpreted as a display of either a flawed man or a painfully unconventional one that punishes himself for it. However, Brick's grieving over Skipper's suicide cannot

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[25] "to give a boy or young man the qualities that a man is traditionally expected to have" *Macmillan Dictionary* 2002.
[26] Anna Gavanas, 114.
[27] Katherine Jellison, "Get Your Farm in the Fight: Farm Masculinities in World War II," *Agricultural History* 92 (2018): 9.
[28] Katherine Jellison, 9.
[29] Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: DPS, 1955) 15.

be understood by anyone —neither his wife Maggie nor his parents. It is probable that after he romantically rejected Skipper —along with not only Maggie's but also society's fear and refusal of homosociality— Brick underwent a series of personal reflections on his sexuality. On the other hand, his duty as a husband and a father is not being fulfilled, and the only way a man can cope with his feelings without openly expressing them is by heavy drinking, which is socially accepted.

Brick's alcoholism will not be the only example to be used neither in Williams nor in Shepard's plays. Like all of these characters, Brick falls into a spiral in which his feelings would be trapped. Alcoholism is thought to be one of the main reasons as to why Brick, along with almost all Williams and Shepard's male characters, are fueled to abuse women and to destroy their dysfunctional relationships. However, men's overconsumption of alcohol, such as Stanley's in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), is usually perceived as a means of integration rather than it "[being] akin to a refusal of socialization."[30] Though a problematic and harmful interpretation of social interaction, it is indeed how masculinities perpetuated the myth of liquor as the solution to oppressed emotions and burdens.

To give another example, one could also analyze Samuel Shepard Roger VI, Sam Shepard's father, who had been a pilot during World war II. His initial stationing in a southern Illinois army base — where Sam Shepard was born in 1943 —along with his constant moving, led him to fall into a spiral of drinking and dysfunctionality. Indeed, the playwright believed that his own father was a mystery he could not unravel: "he was a teacher and a Fulbright scholar. At the same time, he was extremely violent and could be quite mad and totally unpredictable and alcoholic. He would disappear for

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[30] Daniel Thomières, "Tennessee Williams and the Two Streetcars," *The Midwest Quarterly* 53 (2012): 375.

long periods, then suddenly reappear, without explanation."[31] However, the playwright's interpretation of events about women's treatment by men after World War II reveals that there was a disappointment that women could not understand, and, indeed, a psychological assault toward them; he confirms his witnessing of such incidents, not only in his family but in his community since "these were men who came back from the war, had to settle down, raise a family, and send their kids to school – and they just couldn't handle it. There was something outrageous about it."[32] Other instances that evidence that alcohol was hindering relationships can also be found in Williams' literature, as mentioned before, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, where Brick starts drinking heavily in an attempt to conceal his feelings. As a consequence, his wife Maggie has to lock up his liquor in order for him to sleep with her.[33] In the 1950s-60s era, the preoccupation with manhood intensified because "the period followed wartime self-confidence based upon the sacrifice and heroism of ordinary men."[34] Fear of not meeting the social expectations along with the rise of women's movement in the workplace left American men wondering what their role in society was.

Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard were known for the emotional depth and the amplitude of the traumatic content of their works. Although some may think that they have no connection at all, it is of important relevance to conceive their display of gender clash in a postwar era where writers were still fascinated by the realism of social inequality and class segregation rather than personal and intimate issues. Indeed, some argue that their capability to write such dark texts was due to their enduring distressing

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[31] Mel Gussow, 'From Plays To Fiction: Thanks, Dad; Sam Shepard's Rascals Are Inspired by Memories Of a Mysterious Father," *New York Times*, 15 October 2002, 1.
[32] George Plimpton, *Playwrights at Work* (New York: The Paris Review, 2000) 333.
[33] Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 19.
[34] James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 2.

situations, such as Williams' sister Rose having undergone one of the first lobotomies in the country,[35] or Shepard having been raised by a depressive and alcoholic father. While Williams generally opted to focus on female characters through whom to explore madness and violence, Shepard believed that relationships between men —especially fathers and sons— were essential to understand the authentic American male. However, Williams wrote about and for different people. As Bigsby states, there is "a sympathy for those discarded by a society for which he anyway had little sympathy," [36] yet he opted to depict battered women and aggressive men in distressing and destructive settings from which they were almost never able to escape.

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) depicts a family tragedy through which American postwar elements are in constant harmony with the depiction of gendered behaviors: a beautiful but single woman, Blanche Dubois, who comes to visit her sister, and an aggressive and retired soldier and brother-in-law, Stanley, both of whom struggle for the power of a household in New Orleans. It is believed that the male protagonist of this play, Stanley Kowalski[37], is one of the most prominent characters in Williams' literature, not only because of his brutal shifts but also his inner nature as man. Stanley —a white, broadly built, and attractive man, whose ideas of social integration are sex, alcohol, and violent manners[38]— was an engineer for the army during World War II, more precisely, a Master Sergeant.[39] He seems to be Williams' intent to personify the 1950s American male that abounded in the country after a period of war, violence, and emotional and economic instability. One of the most important scenes is the fight over

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[35] George Plimpton, 87.
[36] C.W.E. Bigsby, 36.
[37] Stanley Kowalsi's figure gained popularity after Marlon Brandon performed this role in *A Streetcar's* stage version (1948) as well as in the movie adaptation (1951), thanks to which he raised to the Hollywood elites.
[38] Daniel Thomières, 375.
[39] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: Signet by Penguin, 1986) 24.

power, which ends up in a drunk Stanley raping Blanche after not only reprimanding her for her femininity but also acknowledging her 'manly habits' (such as drinking) :

> STANLEY: 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 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-Hal-Hal Do you hear me? Ha-ha-ha! [He walks into the bedroom.][40]

Daniel Thomières believes that sexual assault is a social metaphor rather than a culmination of Stanley's sexual desire for and objectification of Blanche: "it is certainly a matter of power for Stanley who reclaims his territory lost over the last six months."[41] Moreover, some academics believe that Blanche having been married to a homosexual man, her affairs with soldiers and young boys having been public, or her explicitly expressing her sexual desires "leave her if not inviolate at least untroubled by consequences. Sex is emptied of its provocative implications. It becomes reflexive."[42] Indeed, that could be one of the reasons that infuriate Stanley, who cannot understand the flexibility and security with which Blanche expresses herself in his household.

Even though Chapter 2 will discuss the concept of the household in depth, it is important to highlight its meaning beyond the triviality that it may comprise. Indeed, the perception of household from a male viewpoint is one of the most distinguishable elements in Williams and Shepard's literature. It is usually the setting of their plays, not only physically but also emotionally. The power of domestic realism "relies on the audience's recognition of the behaviors of family life in progress, peered at through the imaginary fourth wall of the family living room by an audience convinced that life is -

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[40] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 127-128.
[41] Daniel Thomières, 390.
[42] C.W.E. Bigsby, 48.

or can be- like that."[43] Therefore, it could be said that the audience's efforts to believe in said households are more important than the presentation itself. Even though these two authors depicted hazardous and distressed families, one should accept that households per se, especially unstable ones, seem to have been susceptible sources of worry, and eventual inspiration for these playwrights. Certainly, it is probable that Shepard's misogyny had been internalized by his exposure to unaccommodating environments, similar to Williams' necessity to depict madness as the reality into which men had driven women. Thus, one will eventually realize that gender perspectives matter when analyzing violence in these staged families.

Coming back to Shepard, according to theater director Gary Grant, "[in his plays] things are as they seem to be, and they are not as they seem to be, and sometimes this incongruity frightens terribly or makes us uneasy."[44] Indeed, even though Sam Shepard explored poetry and storytelling, surrealist drama is the genre that he particularly cultivated throughout his career; his plays pose different types of questions and problems, and, therefore, different types of plot lines. However, his prototype of the male character is shaped but generally distinguished by his anger and fear towards either his father, any female character or a combination of both. The playwright started to introduce women as protagonists later in his career because it would benefit the development of his male characters' minds. As he affirmed:

> [b]ecause before it felt so sort of overwhelmed by the confusion about masculinity, about the confusion about how these men identify themselves. That sort of overwhelmed the female. There wasn't even any room to consider the female, because the men were so fucked up. You spent the whole play trying to figure out what these men were about, who had no idea themselves. But then,

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[43] June Schlueter, "Domestic Realism: Is It Still Possible on the American Stage*?," South Atlantic Review* 64 (1999): 14. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3201742.
[44] THE BUCKNELLIAN. THE BUCKNELLIAN, October 27, 2010.
http://bucknellian.blogs.bucknell.edu/2010/10/27/backpage-shepardfest/

when the women characters began to emerge, then something began to make more sense for the men, too.[45]

Indeed, Shepard's testimony confirms that masculinity was an issue back in the 1960-70s, and his attempts to reveal masculinity by introducing women were so successful that he moved from avant-garde theater to a new genre focused on the family. However, even though some believe that his new interest in inclusivity as part of a gesture toward the rising feminist movement, one can clearly observe that Shepard's intention was no other but to benefit from a distinct artistic expression and —probably— economical perks that would provide him with future career opportunities. As he stated, "I don't really understand *that* [feminism]. I would never try to be a spokesman for it."[46] Shepard's Family Trilogy, which includes *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1979), and *True West* (1980), focuses on the dysfunctionality of families whose fathers and sons have perpetuated either through alcoholism, brutality, and madness; they also depict assaulted mothers and daughters. In *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), for instance, one can see that the depiction of the father figure coming back home with the food constitutes the epitome of the American man feeding his family. However, Weston —the father, after having disappeared for two weeks, dares to come back with a bag of plain artichokes and yell at his family: "MR. SLAVE LABOR HIMSELF COME HOME TO REPLENISH THE EMPTY LARDER!"[47]

REAL EXPERIENCES

American drama is a rather confusing but exhilarating genre. It is itself *family* drama, given that "its raw hurt, unfathomable cruelty, and unredeemable guilt"[48]

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[45] Carol Rosen, "Sam Shepard, Feminist Playwright: The Destination of *A Lie of the Mind*," *Contemporary Theater Review* 8 (1998): 34.

[46] Carol Rosen, "Emotional Territory", 7.

[47] Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays,* ed. by Richard Gilman (New York: Dial Press, 2005) 77-78.

[48] James F. Schlatter, "Some Kind of a Future: The War for Inheritance in the Work of Three American Playwrights of the 1970s," *South Central Review* 7 (1990): 60.

dominates all possible scenarios which characters and their destiny cohabit. However, the conventionalism with which the conception of "nuclear family"[49] in the United States has been approached is what may have kept domestic realism as the depiction of American most profound fears and dreams, which, of course, happen to occur within the premises of other social issues. Tennessee Williams idealized Southern ladies, and so did Shepard with violent cowboys. Even though it may seem that there is no connection between these playwrights' styles and approaches, they both employed symbolic characters as devices.

Just as all the mature women in Shepard's plays suffer from heartbreak and desperation, Williams' female characters are love-deprived and fragile. If one acknowledges that these playwrights' characters are considered to be seekers of poignant truths and summoners of explosive violence,[50] it would be appropriate to conceive gender roles as a main force of attraction with which to measure the downfall of their personas. Mothers, sisters, daughters, and love-affairs portray suffering women who go mad, and generally are violence-driven by their thwarted instincts. Under the realization that "if she (Blanche Dubois) had really deserved the punishment she gets at the end, we would have to conclude that she is a monster,"[51] one could conceive Williams' approach to his characters as a metaphor for pain, distress, and oppression.

On the other hand, Shepard's obvious choice to continuously follow a character-creation pattern narrowed his plays to a less diverse and rather male-centered ensemble of work. C. G. Whiting points out that only twenty-three out of his twenty-eight published plays include women, whose images are generally unfavorable,[52] which

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[49] June Schlueter employs the term "nuclear family" as the structural system to be achieved by American lifestyle; June Schlueter. "Domestic Realism", 12.
[50] C.W.E. Bigsby ,167.
[51] Daniel Thomières, 376.
[52] Charles G. Whiting, "Images of Women in Shepard's Theater," *Modern Drama* 33 (1990): 494.

seems to be more than relevant information to keep in mind in order to discuss Shepard's role in a potential feminist reading. Indeed, even though one can speculate about what Shepard's intentions were with his plays, there are records that prove he was in no way interested in being socially involved with feminism as a movement.[53]

Both Sam Shepard and Tennessee Williams seemed to not only base but transform fiction into a parallel reality in which personal and individual features had defined their perception of interpersonal relationships between men and women. Their conception of masculinity versus femininity was key to build upon domestic interactions, just as their authentic and raw encounters with partners, parents, and children were used as tools to personify their life challenges. Indeed, their plays often delve into intimate dilemmas, interpretations of reality, and intrinsic concerns on belonging in society. However, if this investigation aims to analyze violence of male characters towards the female ones, one should thoroughly accept that the authors' past as traumatized[54] human beings puts them in the right position to not only narrate but also believe their own perceptions.

To begin with, Shepard seemed to conceive his national identity as means of acknowledging evolution, thus affecting his writing production as well as his perception of society. In "Visualization, Language, and the Inner Library" (1977) he states that

> [w]ords [are] tools of imagery in motion. I have a feeling that the cultural environment one is raised in predetermines a rhythmical relationship to the use of words. In this sense, I can't be anything other than an American writer. I noticed though, after living in England for three straight years, that certain subtle changes occurred in this rhythmic construction. In order to accommodate these new configurations in the way a sentence would overblow itself (as is the English tendency), I found myself adding English characters to my plays.[55]

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53 Carol Rosen, "Emotional Territory", 7.
54 One should conceive their traumatic childhoods as the prelude of their artistic agendas.
55 Sam Shepard, "Visualization, Language, and the Inner Library," *The Drama Review* 21 (1977): 59.

On the other hand, when asked about the introduction of female characters in his plays, he posed the question "as a man, what is it like to embrace the female part of yourself that you historically damaged for one reason or another?"[56], which emphasizes his need to find a reason to damage a woman as a consequence of his mistreated childhood as a male. As C.W.E. Bigsby states, it is completely agreeable to believe that "for Shepard, the American male is cut off from a past in which the national story gave him a central position and adrift in a present in which he is unsure of his role. Violence, once sanctioned by frontier realities no less than frontier myths, is now turned against those who represent seductive but constraining love or against the self which duly fractures."[57]

If we are to acknowledge real life as the foundation of Shepard's work and experience as a playwright, romantic relationships should be conceived as the focus of his conception of household and domesticity. Shepard stated "[w]ho could live with me! What other woman would put up with me?"[58] when describing his relationship with Jessica Lange. Indeed, he affirmed throughout his whole career that his living standards would clash with any other women but her. Shepard first married O-Lan Jones, with whom he had his first child, but his constant anguish and dissatisfaction with being a father led him to starting a long-lasting relationship (27 years) with the Academy Award-winner Jessica Lange. This spiral of adultery and persistent escapes reminds us of his father's unusual behavior toward him and his mother. Indeed, if one looks at his male characters, one would assume that they resemble not only his father's behavior but Shepard's as well. Shepard's behavior —his supposedly continual infidelities, extreme alcohol abuse, along with his attempt to hinder Lange's career by restraining

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56 Carol Rosen, "Emotional Territory": 7.
57 C.W.E. Bigsby, 193.
58 Carol Cadwalladr, "Sam Shepard Opens Up", *The Guardian*, Mar. 2010.

her— depict patterns of not only misogyny but also potential abuse. Jessica Lange stated that she opted out of work for some years since Shepard not only detested it but also encouraged her to become a stay-at-home mom and wife, which led to her frustration as the cause of some depressions. She stated that

> [h]e's not the kind of man who's going to follow a woman around. He'll come see us, but he's not going to pack his bags, sit on my locations for three months, and twiddle with the kids. Sam would've been happy if I never made another movie, if we could've lived together in the wild, idyllic manner we had in the beginning. But I kept wanting to act. Those separations became sources of real difficulty for us.[59]

As Lange stated, "[Sam] borrows generously from reality. His work starts with something seemingly real and then expands into areas that are only Sam's imagination."[60], which confirms his constant need to rely on his experiences in order to explore and build his own literary world.

On the other hand, homosexuality, madness, and dissatisfaction could be thought as the trademark for Williams' existentialism and inspiration. Even though Williams was thought to be "making a commentary on Western culture by dramatizing his belief that men and women find reality and meaning in life through satisfactory sexual relationships,"[61] one should carefully analyze if said dramatization can be extrapolated to his past experiences. One should not even consider homosexuality in Shepard's plays as more than a threat to masculinity since "[his] territory is not principally homoerotic but homophobic. His plays endorse a reactionary model of gender politics, [...] operating within such a dichotomy [that] the heroes deploy homophobic discourse to silence mavericks, avenge enemies, protect turf-in short to

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59 Nancy Collins, "Jessica In Love: Jessica Lange Tells It Like It Was with Baryshnikov, Sam Shepard, and Life on The Edge," *Vanity Fair*, October 1991.
60 Ron Rosenbaum, "Sex and Subtext," *Vanity Fair,* Oct. 1988.
61 Louise Blackwell, 9.

enforce male entitlement."[62] However, Williams' goal seems to be exactly the opposite, as female characters' dissatisfaction and angst derive from both their incapacity to find a partner who is not homosexual, and their realization that their expectations are not met by male ideals. Indeed, Williams depicts homosexuals whose ideals —sensitivity and lack of masculinity—attract women but also frustrate them.

Williams' world was surrounded by madness and disappointment. He was sure that he had always been inspired by his womanly surroundings rather than the masculine. In a letter to Donald Windham, he stated that [he] "used to have a terrific crush on the female members of my family, mother, sister, grandmother, and hated my father, a typical pattern for homosexuals."[63] His mother Miss Edwina, as Chapter 3 explores in depth, resembles Blanche DuBois and Amanda Wingfield at a first glance, given that his tendency to "*poetize* Southern heroines"[64] as well as their environments are key elements of his literature:

> My mother […] was essentially more psychotic than my sister Rose. Mother was put away once, you know. She was put away long before she was old, in the early part of the decade of the fifties. […] She was living alone, and I guess her fantasies got the best of her. (…) She called the doctor over to tell him about these threatening aspects of life, and he took her right to the bughouse![65]

As it was mentioned, his sister Rose Williams suffered from schizophrenia, which led to her lobotomy —against their father's desires.[66] Williams' surroundings were thought of as prison that limited his exploration of the world, the arts, and the sexuality. Certainly, "he claimed his own freedom at their family expense,"[67] given that his

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[62] Alan Shepard, "The Ominous 'Bulgarian' Threat in Sam Shepard's Plays," *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992): 60.
[63] Tennessee Williams*, Tennessee Williams' Letters to to Donald Windham 1940-1965,* ed. by Donald Windham (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977) 301-302.
[64] C.W.E Bigsby, 33.
[65] Tennessee Williams, "Mother and Miss Rose", in *Playwrights at Work*, 90-91.
[66] Williams' father position against Rose's lobotomy as described in "Mother and Miss Rose". Williams says that "[H]e cried. It's the only time I saw him cry"; Tennessee Williams, "Mother and Miss Rose" in *Playwrights at Work*, 91.
[67] C.W.E. Bigsbsy, 39.

fantasies and dreams, like Tom in the autobiographical *The Glass Menagerie*, were dependent on his parents' and sister's deeds.

In conclusion, Tennessee Williams used to create characters whose goals were to reset their lives in a postwar America, such as in his most famous play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. On the other hand, Sam Shepard's inspiration was his alcoholic father, through whom his experiences helped him shape not only his characters and plotlines but also his personal life. Their portrayal of American society, along with their interviews and personal experiences, indeed, are tools with which to evaluate the evolution of women's and men's roles in the household, the personification of the American male stereotype, and the aftermaths that such clashes had in the determination of gender performativity. Moreover, one can say that masculinities affected the playwrights' experiences in a way that probably benefited their creative writing while traumatizing their personal lives. However, the fact that both authors were able to leave an imprint of their witnessing allows scholars to further research from different approaches as well as to consider new primary sources the base of projects that would have never existed decades ago.

CHAPTER 2: MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS- *A LIE OF THE MIND* AND *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

A world filled with angry men wreaks havoc on the lives of women, particularly wives. As Lynda Hart states, "violence as a necessary ingredient for passionate love on the part of American men is portrayed as a lamentable truth."[68] While it is easy to conceive Williams and Shepard's approach to family literature as evidence that turbulent interpersonal relationships lead to domestic cruelty, it is essential to stress that this type of violence may take form in many ways, such not giving voice or name to a female character. Although one tends to associate physical torment with the term brutality, this is by no means a single concept given that psychological violence and manipulation attract these writers much more than aggressiveness. As gender roles play a key factor when analyzing assaults and dysfunctional relationships, miserable marriages and similar affairs in these plays distressfully shape the female experience by providing a detailed narrative on how men express ire toward women and, particularly in Williams' work, how women not only endure but respond to such mistreatment. Both Williams and Shepard perceive romances as a painful and raw characterization of a reality that asserts not only their so-hated roots but also their perception of interactions in (their) heterosexual households. Relationships, therefore, are seen as social constructions in which men seem to express their love through jealousy and possession, and women through domesticity and submission. However, is it possible that Shepard and Williams depicted romance through brutality with different intentions? How and why are battered wives or lovers depicted in their plays as delirious and child-like caricatures? In this chapter I argue that both playwrights victimized their female characters differently in order to not only use them as plot

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[68] Lynda Hart, *Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages* (Westport: Greenwood Press: 1987) 109.

devices but also to eventually narrate personal and social experiences through which female mistreatment could be perceived as either literary metaphors for cultural critique or real depictions of the writers' societies.

Even though almost every one of the playwrights' work displays a form of domestic violence, ―*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Summer and Smoke* (1948), and *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) being the most distinguished plays written by Williams, just as *Fool for Love* (1983), *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) being Shepard's distinctive plays about relationships ― it is certainly quite challenging to choose the one which defines "violent" the most. Indeed, the perception of violence is rather subjective, even though readers are likely to be more familiar with domestic assaults (writers mention bruising and beating more often than they discuss subjugation or humiliation). However, instances of molestation or psychological abuse are often disregarded because of their normalization and acceptance as common marital issues.

A LIE OF THE MIND

Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) is an accurate representation of the two sides of the physical-psychological abuse duality. "A woman who lives with a man like that deserves to be killed. She deserves it,"[69] states the abuser's mom, Lorraine. Shepard seems to agree with the general belief that the woman who "defines herself through her husband's satisfaction and happiness"[70] is conceived as the predominant female who is willing to fall for the battering cycle.

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[69] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind* (New York: Plume, 1987) 23.
[70] Ruth Nadelhaft, "Domestic Violence in Literature: A Preliminary Study," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 17 (1984): 245.

The play depicts the power of not only physical abuse but also constant emotional resignation. Even though it may seem that Shepard's literature is evolving by introducing his first rarity —a female main character whose poignant reality depicts the demons of living under heteropatriarchy— one will instantly realize that it is only a superficial element of concern camouflaged by the majority of male and female characters who not only support the abuser but also the misogynist social conventions tied to him. Beth is a young woman whose marriage to Jake seemed to be not only stable but also strong and peaceful until Jake's severe beating leaves her in the hospital with extreme brain damage. The play begins with an extremely remorseful Jake who is sure about having murdered Beth. Despite his multiple excuses and pretexts, some of which show alienation and despicability, such as "she got me in trouble more than once. She did it on purpose too,"[71] Jake's hostility toward her wife seems to derive from her devotion to acting, which he believes is no job. "It's an excuse to fool around! […] That's why she wanted to become an actress in first place. So she could get away from me."[72] Although he never gets to define 'trouble', he clearly states that "[Beth] starts dressing more and more skimpy every time she goes out"[73], so one could probably guess that his brutality gets constantly justified by his affection, love, and supposed devotion, which Shepard reveals as misogyny, jealousy, and manipulation. Indeed, the misinterpretation that jealousy and manipulation could by any mean indicate passion and affection mirrors Jake's inability to not only embrace Beth's flourishing as an individual —by trying to determine her career options or her fashion choices— but also appreciate her as a woman and as a partner.

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71 Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 12.
72 Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 11.
73 Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 7.

Common sense would suggest the reader not to expect a happily ever after since Shepard tends to end his plays with a rather tragic twist. Ideally, Beth would leave her husband, and start a new life without him, but as C. G. Whiting so correctly affirms, Shepard creates characters who lack freedom within their actions, and whose living conditions tie them to their imposed social status.[74] Unlike other maltreated Shepard female characters, who display a hint of bitterness and deception toward their fathers/lovers/husbands because of the cruelty with which they have treated these women,[75] Beth seems to conceive of men as a necessity to exist. Even though her father Baylor berates her, and her husband Jake injures and controls her, Shepard crafts a woman who not only keeps relying on them but also instantly surrenders to Jake's brother. Even though her husband's battering has left her speech-impaired, Beth's broken speech after her brutal injuring "[N]obody [g]an stop him in me […] HEEZ MY HAAAAAAAART"[76] denotes submission and devotion. However, Beth's mental stability —and even sanity— has been so fatally damaged that she is not able to distinguish reality from imagination anymore.

Beth is unable to determine where Jake is. She sees him in her brother Mike as well as in Jake's brother, Frankie. However, she is sure that her seeking of love, or rather the need to fill a void, is palpable within her household. Beth's desire for an affectionate Jake finally reveals her acknowledgment of the abuse she has suffered as well as her dissatisfaction with the stereotyped and overly aggressive man she married:

> BETH: You have his same voice. Maybe you could be him. Pretend. Just him. But soft. With me. Gentle. Like a woman- man. […] You could be better. Better man. Maybe. Without hate. You could be my sweetest man. You could. Pretend to be. Try. My sweetest man.[77]

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[74] Charles G. Whiting, 499.
[75] Lanelle Daniel, "Ties of Blood: The Woman's Curse in Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy," *Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association* (1990): 129-30.
[76] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind,* 19.
[77] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind,*76.

On the other hand, Beth's true duty in this play is ambiguous. She seems to be a distinctive *lie* since her husband has taken every functionality away from her. However, "Shepard's misogynistic and gynephobic fantasies"[78] minimize Beth to a device from which Jake can articulate his childhood and family traumas, such as his killing his father or his alcohol addiction, to which every Shepard's storyline usually gets reduced. Shepard stated that:

> [i]t became more and more interesting to [him] because of how that female thing relates to being a man. You know, in yourself, that the female part of one's self as a man is, for the most part, battered and beaten up and kicked to shit just like some women in relationships. That men themselves batter their own female part to their own detriment. And it became interesting from that angle: as a man what is it like to embrace the female part of yourself that you historically damaged for one reason or another?[79]

Thus, Shepard's affirmations assure that his approach to achieving a more heterogeneous dynamism by creating Beth as the central character was a mere strategy to provoke a stimulus for his male protagonists. Rather, Beth could have been a wonderfully crafted heroine in a typical Shepardian satire, and a character whose background and main stories engaged in a constructive reflection about how women carry this burden rather than how men justify —and intensify— their horrible demeanors. However, Shepard chooses "[to] rationalize male violence and [to] soften its consequences to appeal to the sentimentality of American audiences"[80] with dreamy men who refuse to take the blame for their actions.

It could be unexpected that Beth's brutal injuring is rather normalized by the vast majority of female characters until one learns about Baylor's abusive behavior at

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[78] Lynda Hart, "Sam Shepard's Pornographic Visions," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 21 (1988): 79.
[79] Carol Rosen, "Emotional Territory", 6-7.
[80] Catherine A. Schuler, "Gender Perspective and Violence in the Plays of Maria Irene Fornes and Sam Shepard," in *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon* ed. June Schlueter (London: Associated University Press, 1990), 224

their household. The fact that Beth's father has mistreated her is not fully disclosed, but his remarks toward her seem to indicate that Baylor neither loves nor cares about Beth's well-being. Furthermore, Baylor's attitude toward his wife Meg displays his abusive character which allows an understanding of the vicious circle of misogyny. "Another invalid"[81] or "we drove all the way down here [the hospital] from Billings just to see her. Now wake her up"[82] are Baylor's statements regarding his daughter's condition after the crude domestic episode. Whether Baylor's abuse has affected Beth and Meg's mental stability is a mystery, but Meg seems confused when she asks, "[W]ho's Jake?"[83], when visiting Beth at the hospital, followed by a very unstable observation that "they locked me up once, didn't they, Dad?"[84], just to find out that it had been Meg's mother who had been institutionalized. Indeed, Baylor's abusive behavior seems to be a pattern that follows the women in his clan. The wife-mom Meg is ironically one of the most developed female characters in Shepard's literature. Unlike in *True West* (1980), where the wife-mother is referenced as "Mom", Shepard provides Meg with a real name so everyone can address her by it rather than by her *status*.[85] Meg starts her journey in an awfully submissive marriage —in which one can assume she has been for many years— and, even though her husband has manipulated, invalidated, and turned her into his maid, she eventually acknowledges that his abuse is a result of not only misogyny but also fear of commitment and attachment. While it is unclear whether Shepard agreed with Meg's reflection on relationships, it is rather problematic that her perspective on marriage admits women's dependency and permissiveness. She openly

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[81] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 55.
[82] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 29.
[83] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 28.
[84] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 30.
[85] Indeed, in *True West*, Shepard does not grant Mom the freedom to exist outside her role in motherhood. He provides her neither a name nor a voice while her sons drunkenly destroy her house, which is another form of oppressive violence.

acknowledges abandonment and dissatisfaction in her marriage, yet she still argues that

women long for companionship and dependence on the male rather than an equal and

healthy relationship.

> MEG: The female - the female one needs - the other. The male one. [...] But the male one - doesn't really need the other. Not the same way. [...] The male one goes off by himself. Leaves. He needs something else. But he doesn't know what it is. He doesn't really know what he needs. So he ends up dead. By himself. [86]

However, Meg seems to believe —or rather justify— that men, especially her husband,

mistreat women because they seek other aspirations in life than to settle with a partner.

Men wonder, look for answers, and have dreams beyond the household. They do not

depend on anyone. However, do women not have these ambitions as well? Did Meg

conclude that her purpose was to marry, or was she taught to think in such manner?

Certainly, Meg evolves into a woke woman who no longer hesitates to confront her

husband.

> MEG: You think it's me, don't you? You didn't used to think it was, but now you think it's me. You think your whole life went sour because of me. Because of mother. Because of Beth. If only your life was free of females, then you'd be free yourself.
>
> BAYLOR: Well, you sure know how to speak the truth when you put yer mind to it, don't ya.
>
> MEG: All these women put a curse on you and now you're stuck. You're chained to us forever. Isn't that the way it is?
>
> BAYLOR: Yeah! That's exactly! […] I could be up in the wild country huntin' Antelope. I could be raising a string a' pack mules back up in there. Doin' somethin' useful. But no, I gotta play nursemaid to a bunch a' feeble-minded women down here in civilization who can't take care a' themselves. I gotta waste my days away makin' sure they eat and have a roof over their heads and a nice warm place to go crazy in.[87]

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[86] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, 77-78.
[87] Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind,* 78.

Baylor is the accurate personification of American masculinity and the American myth, which were extremely important to Shepard's childhood. Baylor has to constantly prove that he holds power in the household by disregarding, scolding, shouting, and frightening females. He seems to be empowered by Meg's lack of self-esteem and Beth's need for reassurance, which encourages him to perpetuate the myth of structuralist and hierarchical kinship. Indeed, Florence Falk affirms that all Shepard's female characters, including Meg and Beth, behave like what E. Goffman named 'child women'. They employ "expressions, gestures and actions to protect themselves from the abuses of male power,"[88] and they never dare to question the parent figure who oppresses them. Beth has been so invalidated as a person by her father and husband that she has lost all perspective.

Ron Mottram believes that *A Lie of the Mind* is the first play in which Shepard suggests that "male hate and violence might be healed,"[89] which not only depicts a wrong conception of Shepard's ideals but also a misunderstood reading of the female depiction in this play. While healing —either physically or psychologically— may never be one of Beth's outcomes, Shepard's use of gender as a weapon prevails as a force that stains the dichotomy presented throughout his plays, essentially throughout his family trilogy.

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Tennessee Williams' appreciation for women was not limited to his own family. His capacity to understand the female perspective of loneliness and constraint nourished the intensity of his literature. His female characters are indeed overly

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[88] Florence Falk, "Men without Women," in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York, 1981), 99.
[89] Ron Mottram, "Exhaustion of the American Soul: Sam Shepard's *A Lie of The Mind,*" in *Sam Shepard: A Casebook* ed. Kimball King (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1988), 98.

sentimental and devoted to their Southern roots, and one must agree that their behavior is shaped around a cultural adjacency to the loneliness that eventually leads to complete madness and misery. Even though Blanche DuBois has always been perceived as the angst-filled character of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)*,* it is undoubtedly true that Stella, her sister and woman of the household in New Orleans, was raised under the same circumstances as Blanche. The plantation of Belle Reve in the fictional Laurel, Mississippi, is the very authentic Southern environment in which both sisters were raised. Blanche earnestly reminds Stella, "you can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you just suppose that any part of a gentleman's in his nature!"[90], as the South is a place where pursuing marriage with a gentleman was the aim of any decent belle who opted for wealth, social status, and protection. Therefore, *Streetcar*'s revolves around two women's confrontational situation in which their flourishing depends on patriarchal constructions and *desires*. Blanche is not only known for her delicateness, her sensibility, and her beauty, but also her drinking, her increasing insecurity, and, especially, her multiple sexual affairs with soldiers and an underaged boy. Her distortion of the world leads to fantasizing, thus representing her as prey for men who would either marry or treat her as an inferior.

Blanche's nemesis is Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski, who is a remarkably crude, lecherous, and intense salesman from a working-class neighborhood in New Orleans. Blanche critiques the barbarism, almost monstrosity to her, with which Stanley approaches not only life but also marriage: no lady should be treated with such disgrace, ferocious anger, and disproportionate libido. Indeed, the violence at the Kowalski's household is so palpable that Blanche's personality traits seem to get enhanced the more Stanley openly expresses his disgust toward her. Williams foreshadows Blanche's

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[90] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 71.

destiny at the Kowalski's house by providing a more detailed description of Stanley's behavior: his enthusiasm for alcohol and gambling, his hostility toward pretentiousness, and his notable tendencies for sexual harassment.[91] As Blanche points out to Stella:

> BLANCHE: He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something —sub-human—something not quite to the stage of humanity not yet! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is —Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you-*you* here-*waiting* for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other apes gather! There in the front of the cave, all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking! His poker night![92]

Even though Blanche is skillfully diving into the roots of a problem she thinks to have detected, such as the primal and the obscene as sub-human concerning violence, sex, and poker[93], her speech is full of contradictions, like herself. It conveys Blanche's loathing for her sister's enjoyment of subjugation and sexual desire, which contradicts not only Blanche's moralistic perspective of marriage and womanhood but also her reality as a sexually active woman. Blanche's refusal of "the stone age" denotes her antipathy for mistreatment, servitude, and subordination. She identifies Stanley as the oppressor but also other stereotypical men like him; "ape[s]" is a qualifier that rather disseminates the animal aggressiveness of men concerning their most primal needs, which aligns with their incapacity to reach women's most untold wishes. Therefore, Stanley represents the ape, that is who is not in synchrony with the contemporary form of society's standards. The irony behind Blanche's reflection on the stone age questions

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[91] "He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining at the way he smiles them"; Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 29.

[92] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 72.

[93] Just as his father, who got into a poker fight and got his ear bit off, would use it to his advantage to scare Rose's boyfriend, telling him that the doctors "had to take cartilage from his ribs, and skin off his ass, and they reproduced something that looked like a small cauliflower attached to the side of his head! So any time anybody would get into the elevator with my father, he'd scowl, and people would start giggling. That was when the young man stopped calling on Rose"; Tennessee Williams, "Where Plays Come From" in *Playwrights at Work*, 95.

the morality of Stanley in a 1947's society where everything already is crude for women. Thus, if men are already mistreating women in 1947, where are Stanley's limits if he still lives in the stone age? Blanche's attraction to Stanley's aggressive manners is undoubtfully the underlying issue in the 1940's households. Both society and men have actively been responsible for Blanche's perception of her persona as well as her excess of guilt -—a pang of guilt related to circumstances for which she is completely innocent, such as her husband's suicide, or her subsequent rape by Stanley.

However, one should analyze Stanley's character not only as a domineering male but also as a threatened *owner* whose perseverance in possessing what he believes should be his defines his intrinsic knowledge of and craving for sexism's outcomes. For instance, Stanley's threatening reflection on the Napoleonic code presages his yearning for the physical property of the female — an underlying exhibition of his approach to embracing his privilege over both his wife Stella and Blanche. Unquestionably, Stanley's reliance on 'what is Stella's is mine' could likely be applied to his perception of Blanche — a new and frustrating *form* of possession that he is unable to tame. Despite appearing more fragile than Stella, Blanche awakens Stanley's most susceptible feelings, such as fears and anger— a complex transition from revulsion to (dubious) lust, which leads to Stanley's need to overpower Blanche. For as Calogero et al. point out, "interpersonal or social encounters include catcalls, checking out/ staring at, or gazing at women's bodies, sexual comments, and harassment. Media exposure spotlights women's bodies and body parts while depicting women as the target of a non-reciprocated male gaze."[94]Thus, Stanley's main dilemma revolves around controlling and defeating the female. "I'll have a look at them first!"[95], he yells at

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[94] R. M. Calogero, S. Tantleff-Dunn, & J. K. Thompson. *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2011) 6.
[95] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* 42.

Blanche with the intention to read her personal love letters —again, an obvious threat toward her personal space and belongings, which unfolds Stanley's ill-intentioned actions to prevail over her sister-in-law. The power game that Stanley decides to start reveals that a truth about his utter lack of respect to the female.

"Living [was] constantly a defensive existence"[96] for Rose Williams, and so it is for Blanche, who seems uncapable of discerning appearance from reality. M. McBride considers that "the healing, transcending force is, or would be, love — assured acceptance,"[97] to which Blanche fails to succumb. Certainly, Blanche firmly believes that "some things are not forgivable. Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable! It is the one unforgivable thing in my opinion, and it is the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty,"[98] thus aggravating Stanley's ultimate act of cruelty, resentment, and unjustified desire: a rape. Indeed, Stanley's need to subdue —not only sexually but also emotionally— Blanche, in his house and on his bed is his closing statement to a dour relationship. D. Thomières wrongly believes that "it seems obvious that the rape has nothing sexual about it"[99] given that Williams is trying to depict a competition for power and territory. However, omitting the sexual implications of Blanche's rape would be irresponsible. Her sexuality, as well as her fading youth, have been subjected to judgment by men since the beginning of the play; she has been forced to repress her reality into a lie to maintain a façade, which not only will Stanly exploit to justify his brutality but also Mitch to reject her from being accepted in the community. A. Vlasopolos believes that "despite the fact that Blanche represents only an illusory threat

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[96] Tennessee Williams, "Mother and Miss Rose", 93.

[97] Mary McBride, "Loneliness and Longing in Selected Plays of Carson McCullers and Tennessee Williams," in *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon,* ed. June Schlueter (London: Associated University Press, 1990), 146.

[98] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* 126.

[99] D. Thomières, 390.

to the Kowalski union while Stanley's rape has the power to destroy the marriage, the man's act is more easily forgiven than the female's desire,"[100] which, in fact, enhances the oppression of the female in a world filled with Kowalskis. However, Blanche's destroyed self-esteem and loneliness, just like Meg's in Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*, may play a role in her path to self-destruction. When she affirms that "[she has] always depended on the kindness of strangers"[101] while sordidly being led off to a mental institution, Blanche finally acknowledges her perpetual delusion but also denounces her community's (including her sister's denial), where rape and violence seem to be part of an illusion.

Although it is quite apparent that Williams' personification of malevolence tends to be a hypersexualized and oppressive villain like Stanley Kowalski, it is still uncertain whether the author transforms the feminized men as the honest but still destructive ones. Indeed, gay men, such as Allan Gray (Blanche's deceased husband), also end up injuring and indirectly belittling their female partners, either by cheating or implicitly disregarding their appetites and relationship expectations. Williams indeed intends to delve into women who long for men whose intentions are not as brutal as heterosexual men's. However, despite Blanche's need to reject brutality from men who do not fit her expectations, she shows them her vulnerabilities and desires. Her paradoxical life can be summarized in both her lack of purpose and her constant need to find one. This is exemplified in Mitch, an apparent thoughtful gentleman——and also a homosocially dependent man—[102], who seems to be captivated by Blanche's grace and backstory. Certainly, Mitch is the most delicate male in Stanley's world, to

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[100] Anca Vlasopolos, "Authorizing History: Victimization in "A Streetcar Named Desire," *Theatre Journal* 38 (1986): 338.

[101] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* 142.

[102] Mitch resembles Tennessee Williams in many ways: he over-depends on his mother; he seeks Stanley's companionships; his effeminate sensitivity denotes hints of homosexuality.

whom a very unsafe Blanche can become an ally — a vulnerability which Mitch takes advantage when he needs it the most. Blanche's "pose as the fine lady is the doppelgänger of her shame, and her obsession with her looks the doppelgänger of her panic that she can no longer turn the trick and that she will no longer find any comfort."[103] What seems to be the beginning of a love story and happy ending for Blanche eventually becomes another display of male authority which will vanquish her. As the play has already unraveled, Blanche is not the virgin a man would want to marry. Mitch's words "you're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother"[104] resonate as a form of oppression that Blanche has not experienced yet. Indeed, she has never before faced rejection for being sexually active, so the refined men that she seeks as a partner become another disappointment in her life. Had Blanche only been raped by Stanley, would she have been considered *clean* or also filthy, worth of disregard by any man?

On the other hand, Stella's precarious circumstances seem to be enduring for her and her expected child. Nevertheless, she is not willing to give up on her purposes in life, which are routine, family, and, essentially, companionship; survival is Stella's purpose. To fulfill her duty, she must believe —mostly pretend— that Stanley has not raped her sister. Thus, Stella's constant determination throughout the play contrasts with her final decision to ignore Blanche being sexually molested by Stanley. Some argue that Stella personifies selfishness, but as a character, she is mostly aware that undergoing constant battering is her only sustainable way to survive in a misogynist society; like Blanche, she is no longer a virgin, as she has been married to a lower-class

[103] Ralph F. Voss, *Magical Muse: Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002) 116.
[104] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 121.

brute, but she is also a mother. As Mitch tells Blanche, she is not *clean* anymore. Stella, just like the rest of Southern women, are not deserving of love, affection, and company unless they meet the social standards that men have set for them. Therefore, women are left with the option to either marry under terrible circumstances, face battering, and undergo mental trauma, or endure loneliness, alienation, and subsequent insanity for the rest of their lives. In any case, Williams' depiction of Blanche and Stella's fate is unhappiness no matter their inevitable fate.

As Louise Blackwell affirms, Stella belongs to Williams' women "who have subordinated themselves to a domineering and often inferior person in an effort to attain reality and meaning through communication with another person."[105] However, Stella juxtaposes Blanche's need to hide her desire by expressing her fluent sexuality with Stanley —which is their form of communication. She never denies —in fact, she leads the readers to believe that her marriage is mostly sustained by their sexual life— that she enjoys Stanley's brutishness and mishandling. On the other hand, Blanche's reluctance to admit her lust for men is what defines her oppressed femininity.

In Shepard's relationships, women assume "an artificial pose"[106] who cover the background stories of men that are seemingly willing to unravel their traumatic experiences. On the other hand, Williams' constant obsession over the southern belle and her tragic destiny lead to Blanche's ambivalent perception. Unlike Shepard, whose female characters in *A Lie of the Mind* are childish and inconsistent, Williams' women in *A Streetcar Named Desire* exhibit complexity and emotional depth. However, all of them are exposed to a physical and emotional violence that unfolds problematic male behaviors: sexual harassment, rape, mistreatment, submissions, humiliation, and

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[105] Louise Blackwell, 11.
[106] Florence Falk, 95.

threatening. Male gaze and power are presented as the source through which females are shaped, dominated, and, eventually, destroyed. Indeed, even though Shepard employs Beth and Meg as devices to create a complex and interwoven background for his male protagonist, Jake, the playwright seems to finally problematize the brutalization of the cowboy he always idolized. On the other hand, Williams' profound desire to narrate the tragedy of Blanche DuBois evinces his need to evaluate pernicious Southern values in marriage and relationships.

CHAPTER 3: MOTHERHOOD AND DOMESTIC LIFE – *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* AND *CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS*

When Tennessee Williams affirmed that "it's best [that] we stay away from our mothers,"[107] he openly expressed what astute readers already assumed about his work: his fascination for the tormented nurturing figure. Representations of domestic life in Williams and Shepard's theater display the resonant climax of unbalanced, unequal, and destructive marriages. Even though Shepard indeed provides a (marginalized outlook) of the female experience in the household, and Williams seems to prove his eagerness to delve into not only maternal but also marital frustrations, both playwrights' works reveal an increasing social and cultural demand to untangle women's inner demons, as well as to uncover and empathize with their most authentic stories. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) wholeheartedly invites the audience to a desperate and never-ending spiral of delirious memories, all of which correlate to the domestic perception of Amanda Wingfield's role as a mother in a dysfunctional household. On the other hand, Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) presents a farm family from which Ella Tate wishes to be liberated so as to seek values and ideals that have not been ravaged by the paterfamilias. Both plays show exhaustion and insanity, as well as the psychological, emotional, and physical subordination of the mother to the father, despite his perpetual absence. Nonetheless, the depiction of these forsaken female characters is accompanied by an immense feeling of failure and frustration that defines their role in their marriages, and their *duty* as mothers. Despite the similarity with which both playwrights approach abandonment, disillusion, and angst in their presentation of motherhood, one should attempt to explore each protagonist's situation in her household, as well as her husband's and son's demeanors.

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[107] Robert Berkvist, "An Interview with Tennessee Williams", *New York Times* Dec. 21, 1975.

I intend to examine how domestic life and motherhood are depicted as psychological burdens for which Amanda and Ella are blamed; these protagonists miserably struggle to break away from households filled with dereliction, alcohol, and heartbreak. Indeed, I argue that their discontent (or rather unhappiness) is mostly linked to their male counterparts' abusive deeds, which do not always have to be excessively violent, but maybe passive, dismissive, and unethically ungenerous.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Miss Edwina played a fundamental role in Tennessee Williams' life — to the extent that his most vulnerable insights, dreams, and challenges revolved around his mother's construction as a traditional southern belle. Given that he endured his mother's frustrations and delusions, he majestically captured her helplessness within the culture and everyday nature of being a woman. Certainly, like Amanda Wingfield, her histrionic and fragile mental state led her to have periods of intermittent rapture and disenchantment, which heightened her perception of her surroundings and reality. Williams believed that "she could be kind, she could also be cruel, generous and stinting, affectionate and distant, trusting and possessive,"[108] which would later define Amanda Wingfield's personality in *The Glass Menagerie*; in fact, Miss Edwina ended up adopting Mrs. Wingfield as her alias.[109] However, while one can presuppose that Amanda is the embodiment of Williams' interpretation of motherhood, it is also true that Mr. Wingfield could be a metaphor for his impression of fatherhood, Cornelius C. Williams — an obvious mirror of Williams' struggles to emotionally connect with his predecessor. Just as he recalled his mother's ferocious cries of agony whenever his

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[108] Lyle Leverich, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (New York: Crown, 1995), XXV.
[109] Lyle Leverich, 561.

parents attempted to engage in sexual intercourse,[110] it was also speculated that he was also aware that Mr. Williams was willing to expose Miss Edwina to his contracted gonorrhea from a prostitute.[111]

Thus, as might be Miss Edwina's life, *The Glass Menagerie* offers an intrinsic framework to appreciate the nature of a woman whose sexual life is not only repressed but also subject to male judgment. The play presents a mother who has been abandoned and mistreated but hankers to get hold of memories in which to live permanently. Indeed, when Amanda bitterly states that "[she] married no planter! [she] married a man who worked for the telephone company! . . . A telephone man who — fell in love with long-distance!,"[112] the playwright is inviting the audience to understand his witnessing of her resentment for an intoxicated man who abandoned his family.[113] Amanda's oral formulation "long-distance" is constructed around her unwillingness to admit her husband's utter neglect. Undeniably, it is with great *distance* (since his great deed was deserting and forgetting) that Mr. Wingfield tortures Amanda. Indeed, although she insists that her husband's belongings such as his phonographs records are a "painful reminder"[114] of his existence, she longs to exist in a former reality where her marriage lived—or so she thought —of perpetual domestic bliss; Amanda desires to revive her nostalgia by tormenting herself with painful memories of her past in which her husband never seemed to be *present*; Williams describes her bony appearance as "a

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[110] "She was terrified of sex. She used to scream every time she had sex with my father. And we children were terrified. We'd run out in the streets and the neighbors would take us in"; Tennessee Williams in *Playwrights at Work*, 92.
[111] Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985) 91.
[112] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: New Directions Books, 1999) 82.
[113] Although Cornelius Williams never committed to abandoning his family, it is known that he would disappear for months, thus leaving his children with their grandparents for prolonged periods of time.
[114] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* 34.

relic of the faithless Mr. Wingfield,"[115] which certainly outlines not only her physical state but also the audience's perception of her well-being.

One should fully delve into the role of marriage and domesticity to understand *The Glass Menagerie* and Amanda Wingfield's personality, for a forceful internalized misogyny is what leads to the character's anxiety and her daughter Laura's fear of rejection, as well as her son Tom's need to vanish from their lives just as Mr. Wingfield did. Amanda has incorporated all the duties which she has been taught a woman must do. Despite promising that she has neither enjoyed nor properly carried out domestic tasks, she still swears by them in order to satisfy a man whom she thinks her son Tom has invited over for dinner. She states: "[Y]ou can't have a gentleman caller in a pigsty! All my *wedding* silver has to be polished, the monogrammed table linen ought to be laundered! The windows have to be washed and fresh curtains put up. And how about clothes? We have to wear something, don't we?"[116] Some may believe that Amanda is merely trying to impress a guest, while others could suggest she is intending to seduce him into marrying Laura. Amanda's commitment—or rather incorporated obligation— to ensure an unknown man's satisfaction and comfort denotes her necessity to rely on not only her domestic capacity but also her looks to attract a man into saving her and her daughter from misery. Thus, Amanda's not so indirect abusive destiny could be easily summarized by stating that a) she lives in a patriarchal society where her domestic and motherly duties are considered her only value as a woman; b) her alcoholic husband deliberately abandoned her being fully aware that it would cause her social and economic disadvantages; and c) the pain she endures is inflicted with no

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[115] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* 40.
[116] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, 60.

moral repercussions for the man, which enhances his dominance over her fear to be socially excluded.

Certainly, Amanda being forsaken is deemed as a legitimate act, as the ends justify the actions for those who resort to stating 'what did she do to him? there must have been a reason for him to leave!' rather than 'what a despicable act on her husband's side!' Similar to *Streetcar*, the obscene need to blame and shame single women for the sake of it not only denotes predominant misogyny but also powerful cruelty. Amanda's evocation of Blanche Dubois's life is unmistakable, as both are judged and punished for their opinions on instinct and primitive behavior. Indeed, just as Blanche, Stella, and Maggie are shamed for her sexual desire prior, during, and after their marriages, *The Glass Menagerie* displays violence which is easily hidden and justified with the conviction that Amanda is at fault not only for her single status but also for her survival strategy: the world of memories and fantasies.

> AMANDA: I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South— barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! —stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room —encouraged by one in-law to visit another —little birdlike women without any nest —eating the crust of humility all their life! Is that the future we've mapped out for ourselves? I swear it's the only alternative I can think of![117]

That is indeed the most substantial punishment that Mr. Wingfield has inflicted on Amanda. Like Blanche, Amanda is a middle-aged, unmarried woman; she is no-longer pure, young, or *clean*. Moreover, she depends on her daughter's ability to marry well. Amanda lives in a limbo, which prevents her from evolving (and surviving) as a person in a society full of prejudice toward women like her: single. However, there is a high

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[117] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* 34.

probability that Mr. Wingfield would suffer any social and cultural consequences for his actions, such as community exclusion or public embarrassment, and, unlike his wife, neither would he face a confrontational transition, for although he is a cowardly *man* that fled home without giving an explanation —and not firmly ending his marriage—, he would enjoy plenty of opportunities. Williams ensures that he is not provided with a first name, for Mr. Wingfield embodies the oppression that wives, daughters, mothers, sisters, and lovers undergo when they are abandoned, cheated on, battered, or humiliated. Indeed, Mr. Wingfield does not need a first name, a stage appearance, or a background story, because his smiling picture hanging in the living room "becomes a sign of his masculinity, for which marriage (to a woman) is death"[118] as well as an "ultra-masculine and quintessentially homosocial construct of manhood."[119] On the other hand, As Amanda so fairly believes, spinsters (and the offensive connotation that the word carries) are vulnerable females whose rights seem to be violated because of their lack of domestic linkage. As she later states, "old maids are better off than wives of drunkards!"[120]

Williams' male characters tend to find courage amid of their display of cowardice. They convince themselves that leaving the seemingly unhinged females behind is the only solution to the pain they have either inflicted or perpetuated. Indeed, they blame women for what they have done to them rather than acknowledging their guilt. Like Mr. Wingfield, Tom, who as the only man left in the house adopts the role of head of the household, wishes to escape; he angrily dares to reproach his mother that "he pays rent [and] makes a slave of [himself]"[121] —a perpetual culpability of which she must be held

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[118] Kenneth Krauss, "Seeing Through *The Glass Menagerie*: The Emerging Specter of Male Beauty," in *Male Beauty: Postwar Masculinity in Theater, Film, and Physique Magazines*, ed. Kenneth Krauss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 23.

[119] Kenneth Krauss, 23.

[120] Tennessee Williams*, A Streetcar Named Desire*, 62.

[121] Tennessee Williams*, A Streetcar Named Desire*, 39.

because he feels entitled to fulfill his dreams. However, is Amanda able to achieve -or have- any dreams? When Tom says "and you say self- *self's* all I think of. Why, listen, if self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is—GONE!"[122] it is obvious that his malice toward his mother has fallen into an abusive dynamic of power relations over the household; although some have tried to justify that Tom's selfish behavior is a reactional attitude toward Amanda's constant criticism of his reading and socialization choices, it is still no apology for what C. A. Schuler believes that "mothers must continually shoulder the blame for any mental or emotional disturbances experienced by the adult males who were once helpless victims."[123] S. Blackburn affirms that "men may marry women who resemble their mothers and sisters, but they find mistresses among [those] degraded women [for whom] they need ascribe no aesthetic misgivings."[124] Certainly, men in Williams' (and also Shepard's) plays tend to follow a pattern whose pathway to a never-ending spiral of gender abuse has been learned in their previous households as sons and brothers. On the other hand, women are in need of finding men to make them what (men indeed) have told them to be: nurturing wives and mothers. For instance, in *Streetcar* one could assume that Stella may have married Stanley seeking fecundation, thus fulfilling her duty in the social spectrum of patriarchy. Stanley's masculine traits, as well as his forceful and eminent fertility, are key elements for Williams's social plots. As the playwright skillfully describes Stanley in the stage directions —providing a more detailed image of the character— he can be compared to "a gaudy seed-bearer."[125]

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[122] Tennessee Williams*, A Streetcar Named Desire*, 41.
[123] Catherine A. Schuler, 224.
[124] Simon Blackburn, *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 96.
[125] Tennessee Williams*, A Streetcar Named Desire*, 29.

Once established that motherhood was not a categorical alternative but a need that revolved around femininity and womanhood, it should be affirmed that mothers may be exposed to double abuse: by their husbands and their sons. However, it has been exposed, it is not that these women can choose whether they want to opt out of motherhood. As it is envisioned in almost all Williams' plays, females are expected to adhere to the social norms, some of which include their capacity to act as mothers interwoven with their roles as caretakers of the household. Just like Blanche DuBois, whose tragic ending juxtaposes her desire to fulfill the patriarchal objective to marry and have children, Maggie in *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* is undermined as a woman because of her apparent inability to provide the Pollitt family with an heir.

CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS

The opening dialogue of Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* introduce what easily could be the conflicting mother-son perspective of a household's reality— a conspicuous hell with Shepardian prototypical characters: a drunken and abusive father, a battered mother, a traumatized son, and a neglected daughter. It is irrefutable that Shepard's fatal attraction to domestic violence transformed him into a family playwright. From his early memories of childhood when his mother would carry a gun and shoot at neighbors in Guam[126] to his father suddenly vanishing and making drunken comebacks months later. Indeed, his plays not only expose his perspective, but also "articulate mood and value"[127] on how household dynamics function in a male-centered society. The Family Trilogy (*Buried Child*, *True West*, and *Curse of the Starving Class*),

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[126] "All the women were issued army Lugers, and I remember my mother shooting at them"; Kenneth Chubb, ""Metaphors, Mad Dogs, and Old Time Cowboys: Interview with Sam Shepard," in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York, 1981), 187.
[127] C.W.E Bigsby, 164.

and almost every one of his plays, have a parent-son fixation —or maybe obsession—, which, unlike Williams' plays, restricts not only the interaction between mothers and sons but also the audience's meditation on whether motherhood's depiction is exclusively abusive. Shepard expert Lynda Hart accurately affirms that "as Shepard strives to create fully-developed female characters in his plays, the suppression of the feminine as a site for deliverance into an alternatively conceptualized future becomes more pronounced,"[128] which reinforces the theory about his embrace of American oppressive reinstatements.

Sam Shepard's essential stage directions present the parents' situation through a violent lens of dramatization and broken language, like their relationship. Even though the beginning of the play offers a conversation between Ella and Wesley on this accident, the audience never gets to fully delve into a *real* —or rather partial— representation until Wesley's monologue uncovers his painful memory of the previous night:

> Dad's voice. Dad calling Mom. No answer. Foot kicking. Foot kicking harder. Wood splitting. Man's voice. In the night. Foot kicking harder through door. One foot right through door. Bottle crashing. Glass breaking. Fist through door. Man cursing. Man going insane. Feet and hands tearing. Head smashing. Man yelling. Should smashing. Whole body crashing. Woman screaming. Mom screaming. Mom screaming for police. Man throwing wood. Man throwing up. Mom calls cops. Dad crashing away. Back down driveway. Car door slamming. Ignition grinding. Wheels screaming. First gear grinding. Sound disappearing. No sound. No sight. Planes still hanging. Heart still pounding. No sound. Mom still crying. Soft crying. Then no sound. Then softly crying. Then moving around through the house. Then no moving. Then crying softly. Then stopping. Then, far off the freeway could be heard.[129]

Certainly, Wesley's perception of the events does not coincide with his mother's frightening experience: "[H]e wasn't threatening you. […] He was just trying to get in.

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[128] Lynda Hart, "Sam Shepard's Pornographic Visions", 71.
[129] Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays,* 138.

[…] He was drunk. […] You locked the door. […] You didn't have to call the cops."[130] Wesley seems to have a latent desire to justify his father's not only offensive but also crude actions that affect the dynamic of the family. As Marranca accurately notices, Shepard's depiction of households is only normative and defined by sons, given that parents, especially the mothers, tend to be presented as "comic-pathetic" and troubled.[131] It is essential to understand that Shepard's intention was to incorporate to the play sons who perpetuated the same mistakes as their fathers —as he did in his turbulent personal life. Alcoholism[132], abandonment of children, and despicable treatment are some of the misdeeds through which his characters express and defend their misogyny. However, it is crucial to understand that his characters are created around the conception of his relationship with his father, which painfully deteriorated throughout the decades because of their similarities, thus wreaking havoc on Shepard's creative process. Indeed, his father's cruel and despotic demeanor (heavy-drinking, repudiation, and abandonment) toward Jane and Shepard himself is thought to be the obvious cause for the playwright's disavowal of norms. Even though the playwright seems to assume and criticize his misdemeanors through every one of his male characters, it is the lack of female representation and inclusivity that betrays his motives. As D. Auerback affirms, "the feminine principle is powerless to intercede and stop the endless progression from one violent man to another,"[133] which denotes the weak envisioning of the female experience in his interpretations of family dynamics.

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[130] Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays,* 136-137.

[131] Marranca, 16.

[132] Not only did Shepard confess his alcoholism, rehab process and relapses in letters Johnny Dark, but he was also arrested twice for DUI back in 2009 and 2015. John J. Winter. *Sam Shepard: A Life*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017) 152.

[133] Doris Auerbach, "Who Was Icarus's Mother? The Powerless Mother Figures in the Plays of Sam Shepard," in *Sam Shepard: A Case Book*, ed. Kimball King (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1988), 54.

Ella, despite not being wonderfully crafted as a main character, seems to have strong and temperamental ideas, and proves that she is reluctant to keep being constrained. Her condition within the household is more than evident since her mental stability cannot withstand the "destructive forces crushing it [the household] from without and the disintegration from within."[134] Of course, not only does she decidedly opt to put the house on the market without consulting Weston, but she also starts an affair with the real estate agent who is supposed to metaphorically tear the house apart—how is she supposed to do it if Weston is constantly absent? One should not upbraid Ella for making suitable family decisions, as she has assumed the role of the household head because she had no other option. Her strong but silenced presence contrasts with her decisions throughout the play, as some scholars believe that she lives in two different realities which she uses at her convenience.[135] On the other hand, Emma, Ella and Weston's daughter, is an aggressively fierce over-achiever (and over-dreamer) whose lack of exposure to a father figure has led to embracing her masculinization within the household. She is the only character who not only fully acknowledges the dysfunctionality of the family but also dares to openly articulate her thoughts on the existential tragedy of being trapped in it. Emma, who is approximately thirteen or fourteen years old, suffers either indirectly or directly from a patriarchal household and society. For instance, she implies that she has sexually lured a sheriff into dismissing her after having been arrested at the police station.[136] Of course, Emma would not have ended up detained had not she started a shooting at the Alibi Club. Is Emma naturally violent, or has she found a glimpse of safety in it? How and why did

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[134] Doris Auerbach, 55.

[135] Phyllis R. Randall, "Adapting to Reality: Language in Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*" in *Sam Shepard: A Case Book*. Ed. Kimball King (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1988), 128.

[136] Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays,* 196.

Emma conclude that her sexual objectification could be the means to her liberation? Still worse, why did the sheriff agree to engage in this supposed sexual intercourse with an underaged girl?

Toward the end of the play, Ella refers to Wesley as "you're disgusting, you're even more disgusting than him [Weston]. And that's pretty disgusting."137 Indeed, one can see that Wesley's disrespect toward his family, especially Emma and Ella, derives from his constant need to exhibit his predominant masculinity in a fatherless household. For instance, one should analyze the scene where Emma explicitly tells her family how hard she has worked on a "how-to-chop" chicken charts and samples. Ella, consciously, decides to devour the chicken pieces. However, Wesley urinates in his sister's demonstration charts while Ella and Emma argue over Ella's decision to eat her daughter's work: "Wesley unzips his fly, takes out his pecker, and starts pissing all over the chart on the floor."138 —an animalistic act that defines a primitive behavior where territorial marking is thought to be a defensive strategy. Like Stanley Kowalski in *Streetcar*, men display a "phallic exercise of potency"139 through which to prove that they can overpower any threatening female. When Emma reproaches him: "[D]o you know how long I worked on those charts? I had to do research. I went to the library. I took out books. I spent hours," Wesley only articulates: "[I]t's a stupid thing to spend your time on."140 Probably Wesley's appreciation for his sister's efforts, achievements, and life ambitions is non-existent because he has grown up in an environment where his mother was either reprimanded or intimidated. In the end, "she [Emma] dies only because she happens to be a part of Weston's family;"141 she was cursed from the minute

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137 Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays,* 195.
138 Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays,* 142.
139 Doris Auerbach, 57.
140 Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays,* 142.
141 Charles G. Whiting, 498.

she was born, and later she decided to hope for aspirations in the real world rather than the domestic one. Certainly, Emma dies because of her ambition, but also because of her father owing money to some people who, in pursue of revenge, decide to install a bomb in Ella's car —the one that Emma decides to ignite. Even though Shepard tries to present a very unstable and careless mother, the significance of Ella's agony and uneasiness after Emma's death is never either scrutinized or displayed but ignored — leaving her behind to show what Shepard considers relevant: the fight over the land and the curse of blood ties. However, it is omitted that the father has led, once again, to the destruction of not only the house but also a household member, thus entirely disregarding that a female has been assassinated in the name of Weston and freedom; he's neither blamed nor punished. Shepard is more preoccupied to emphasize the son's metamorphosis into his father rather than the father's damage to his family.

Both Amanda and Ella suffer from misery and abuse in their marriage and families. They have to come to terms with not only their limited social boundaries, fragile interrelationships, and abusive husbands, but also with the guilt and blame that their partners should be carrying. Indeed, their role in the household is an indirect battering of their status (women) since they have to accept that being mothers constitute suffering and subordination. Amanda's efforts to domesticate Laura could be thought of as a means of survival for both of them, given that she is aware that she will be repudiated by any men at her stage in life: single, middle-aged, and no longer virgin. One can also notice that Williams aims to depict a 1930's society where women's sexual desire was stigmatized, either for its excess or its shortage. On the other hand, Shepard's play presents two of his archetypical women: the constantly abandoned mother, and the undervalued daughter. Ella seems to be the most transgressive character in the play since, even though she is afraid of her husband's brutality, she takes risks

that may jeopardize her physical and mental stability in the house. Furthermore, unlike Amanda, she is neither preoccupied nor invested in taming Emma and her desire to escape the confined and unhappy world of domesticity. Certainly, Ella's boldest move comes with her decision to sell the house —the symbol of a broken and dysfunctional household.

CONCLUSIONS

Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard subject males and females to a scrutinization through the lens of violence, theatricality, and social reality. The intricacy of gender interactions allows the audience to reflect on not only the demeanors that divide men and women but also the reality of domesticity, marriage, and motherhood from two different perspectives. Undoubtedly, the role (and history) of masculinity and gender studies is essential to comprehend why these two authors developed male characters that perpetuate abusive behavior toward women. Indeed, from the 1930-60s society's ideals of men, which include war, display of expertise in sports and mechanics, and, the involvement with the normative heterosexual conduct, one can start shaping *the ideal* man who will eventually think of alcohol, violence, and gender division as means of personal survival as well as struggle for power and identity in the United States.

Men's behavior in Shepard's plays dazzles the promising complexity and depth of the female experience in relationships, motherhood, and daughterhood. *Curse of the Starving Class* represents a dichotomy through which characters exploit their most sensitive fears. Ella, along with her daughter Emma, can be thought of as one of the most transgressive women in Shepard's play. Even though Ella's actions seem to be presented as malevolent (she intends to sell the house, she is unfaithful to her husband with the real estate agent, she sometimes behaves carelessly with her daughter), her life revolves around an alcoholic husband and a pretentious son whom Shepard redeems for their unintentionally blood-related patterns of conduct. Emma is the only ally Ella could have in the house, but they disregard each other as well. Emma is conceived as the subversion of the complicit subordination to her father and brother, but her social

expectations along with her father's misdemeanors lead to her death. On the other hand, both Beth and Meg in *A Lie of the Mind* are revealed as the submissive wives who, despite the constant battering and humiliation, do not want to acknowledge their partners' maltreatment in their relationships and households. This play seems to examine domestic violence from the male perspective, as the abuser is not only justified but also analyzed as the victim of a situation in which he has not chosen to be. Indeed, the role of the cycle of battering is enhanced by Shepard's minimal efforts to subordinate his subjacent desire to deepen into the son-father relationship to embrace Beth's storyline. Thus, Shepard leaves Beth as a plot device for Jake's storyline regarding his alcoholism and his fatherless childhood.

Differently, Williams always invests in the consciousness of the female by craftily shaping heroines and their worlds: the dreams, the domesticity, and the ceaseless worries about their unsuccessful (and miserable) fate. Even though his male characters are as crude and brutish as Shepard's, he manages to shed some light into the female perception of reality, which is founded in the misogyny of the social norm and the expectations of the feminine. *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are meant to define women and their solitude after men have set unreachable goals for them. Indeed, Williams explores Blanche Dubois' most intricate emotions while deepening into the parallel world which she needs to survive. Blanche's contradictory actions indeed constitute her desire to escape from—or rather change—a reality to which she does not belong in order to fit the patriarchal standards, such as Stanley Kowalski's. The role of homosexuality in *Streetcar*, as in the majority of Williams' plays, appears to sometimes subjugate the heterosexual outlook. However, gay characters eventually hurt and belittle (may be not physically) women as much as the straight ones do. On the other hand, Amanda's world of rules and apparent

perfectionism is the channel through which to express her unceasing exasperation regarding the future of her household. Mr. Wingfield's absence seems to leave Amanda apathetic but not enough as to forget that she must still play Cupid to secure not only Laura's but also her integrity as women, mothers, and wives.

In conclusion, both playwrights seem to engage their male characters in a traditional pattern of objectification, mistreatment, and neglect of the female, but they differ in their means and aims, despite sharing specific circumstances, such as alcoholism. Furthermore, Williams' focus on the female experience contrasts with Shepard's fascination with homosocial relationships, whereas Shepard's exploration of breaking the domestic rules contrasts with Williams' depiction of women's captivity within their households.

Although the role that different types of American identities could play in abusive interrelationships was not the aim of this study, I discovered that comparative approaches regarding the American Midwest and the South could further advance the research of not only these two playwrights but also other writers, such as Eugene O'Neill, who wrote about domestic and social realism in the twentieth century. Are Midwestern and Southern families experiencing the same difficulties? Are these writers worried about similar issues? Shepard and Williams present domestic realism —of course, with quite innovative elements, especially in Shepard's radical Brechtian influence— as a force that drives American families to either be wrecked or more united. However, I believe that Midwestern farms and Southern plantations in these two authors' plays, despite sharing a common signifier (the brutal man), pose an unequivocal different signified (the meaning and metaphor behind).

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