

From Womb to Words: Unveiling the Changing Understanding of Hysteria

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.1590>

APA Citation: TEBER,S. (2024). From Womb to Words: Unveiling the Changing Understanding of Hysteria. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 6(2).1-15. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.1590>

Received:
08/02/2024

Accepted:
12/05/2024

Keywords:
hysteria, wandering womb, American drama, witchcraft, mental trauma.

Abstract

In ancient periods, there was the tendency to label a woman as mad or hysteric if she behaved in a strange manner. The reason was that, since at those times women were considered to be inferior creatures, their bodies were thought to be degraded easily. Accordingly, in the medieval period, hysteria was linked to distress in the womb, which would affect the whole body easily. In that sense, in this period hysteria was only associated with women. Especially ancient Greeks believed that hysteria occurred due to not having enough sex or orgasms. Therefore, according to them the cure for this ailment was getting married and having a satisfying sexual life. However, in the dark Middle Ages, hysteria started to be related to witchcraft, rather than sexual dissatisfaction. It was still linked to women only, but this time they were believed to be possessed by the Devil if they showed any disturbances or symptoms of hysteria. With the developments in science and technology, the understanding of hysteria changed from being associated with unfulfilled sexual drives or spirit possession to being a result of having psychological scars due to mental traumas or repressions. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to reflect the changing understanding of hysteria through female characters from 20th century American drama.

1. INTRODUCTION

Long ago, women were considered to be inferior creatures compared to men for many reasons; being ignorant, weak, incapable of doing hard work, unable to read and write, and being unqualified to talk or have an idea about literary, scientific, or philosophical discussions are only a few of the arguments for women's inadequacy. Therefore, men were believed to be the figures of authority in every field of life such as economy, politics, culture, art. Everything was forbidden to women. They could not be educated, work, vote, or have property. Their only duty was to marry, bear children, and be a good wife, mother, and housewife. Hence, based on this understanding putting women in an inferior position that "the female role as homemaker enabled feeble-minded women to *better* survive outside an institutional setting" (Bergman, 2000, p.119), there was the precarious belief that if a woman started to behave in a strange manner which can be exemplified with "the trances, the fits, paralyses, the choking, the tearing of hair, the remarkable emotional instability" (Scull, 2009, p.7), she would be labelled as mad or hysteric.

Accordingly, the first common medical diagnosis linked to women was known as hysteria, derived from the Greek term *hystera* meaning 'womb' or 'uterus'. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks identified hysterical ailments and "linked this syndrome with the 'agility of the uterus'" (Haute and

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Geykens, 2012, p.11). In other words, they believed that the distress in the womb could affect the whole body's health. Ancient Greeks even asserted that "especially in virgins, widows, single, or sterile women this 'bad' uterus- since it is not satisfied" (Tasca and et.al, 2012, p.111) wanders around the body causing trouble for the woman. In other words, the ancient Greeks linked hysteria to not having sex with men and not having orgasms. The idea was that unless a woman was sexually satisfied, the womb, the centre of a woman's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, would wander within the body. After Hippocrates analysed "hysteria as the disease of the wandering womb, it is characterised as a typically female disease and associated with sexuality- or to be more precise, with the lack of sexual encounters" (Wald, 2007, p.28). As a result of this disease, women suffer from many symptoms such as pain in different areas of the body, paralysis, and speech loss together with a state of unconsciousness, sexual desire, dizziness, hallucinations, abrupt fits or seizures, formidable thoughts, abnormal heart rhythms or irregular pulse, and sometimes death. These symptoms reveal the idea that "such a diagnosis of being over-emotional, of being out of control and unstable, is very much linked to the feminization the term hysterical engenders. Those who are hysterical can by no means be taken seriously" (Kransy, 2020, p.126). This situation can be associated with the inferiority of women because contrary to the male body, the female body is susceptible to any kind of degradation. Because of this, the womb had the tendency to get deteriorate, particularly as a consequence of being lacking in sexual satisfaction. In this respect, it can be suggested that hysteria was firmly considered to be a disorder associated with women only.

Based on these prevailing beliefs on hysteria and cultural practices in ancient times, how to treat this ailment was mainly based on restoring the womb to its right place. Some ways of achieving this included physical massages, herbal remedies, and spiritual practices such as prayers, and offerings. However, Hippocrates and other physicians recommended that women "should marry young (as close to menarche as possible), engage in repeated intercourse with her husband and bear as many children as possible, so that the womb will always be moist and heavy and thus incapable of movement" (Faraone, 2011, p.4). This reveals the fact that ancient Greeks found sex or orgasm as the cure for hysteria. The aim was to provide women with a satisfying sexual life and to fulfil the assumed psychological need of the uterus.

Nevertheless, "the rise of Christianity brings about a turning point in the understanding of hysteria" (Wald, 2007, p.28) since the Middle Ages was a highly dark age for the people. It was a time when everything was based exclusively on the Bible, the Church, and religious regulations. Therefore, it was not possible to relate hysteria to sexual dissatisfaction anymore because "the ideal chastity makes it impossible to regard sexual abstinence as damaging and sexual act as a possible cure" (Veith qtd. in Wald, 2007, p.28). In this period, there was great pressure on the people since everything was under the control of the Church and the clergymen. They were not allowed to act against the doctrines of the Bible and what the clergymen had declared. In addition, in such a male-dominated society women faced many restrictions because "man, with his superior intellect, would far surpass woman in his ability to interpret the Bible, understand God through the natural world, and grasp intricacies of theological debate" (Westerkamp, 1999, p.34). Taking these conditions into account, women having lived during the Middle Ages can be classified as one of the most explicit examples of the unworthiness of women due to the fact that women were powerless and secondary beings compared to men. Basically, all these regulations, "Puritan theology, church rituals, and devotional practices applied and reinforced patriarchal goals and assumptions within and through religious ideas and institutions" (p.34) gave way to excessive control over women.

Similar to antiquity, during the Middle Ages women had the same disturbances and symptoms. However, while in ancient times these indications related to hysteria were considered to be the result of a lack of sexual satisfaction, in the Middle Ages the complaints of women were taken as "their being

inhabited by demons” (Grose, 2016, p.xvii-xviii). The people, generally male characters, who were ruling the society were stuck with the idea that women were morally, physically, mentally, intellectually, and culturally weak; thus, their bodies could easily be possessed by evil forces. To put it differently, “in the medieval period ... hysteria came to be affiliated with witchcraft” (Koerber, 2018, p.29). Wherefore, women needed to be controlled strictly since they were defenceless creatures both mentally and physically which is why women were considered to be potential sinners and witches. In that sense, they were either exorcised or burnt.

Not surprisingly, during the Middle Ages, diagnosing hysteria was not based on scientific proofs but the ability of the physician who was examining the patient; hence “if a physician cannot identify the cause of a disease, it means that it is procured by the Devil” (Tasca and et.al, 2012, p.112). Since it was a time depending on religious dogmas, superstitions, and the Church, there was no need for a scientific proof for charging a woman with being the vessel of Satan. Witnessing her unusual actions and not being able to find any explanation for them were enough for the doctor to diagnose that woman with witchcraft or demonology. It is clear that in this period hysteria gained a new understanding which is explained as follows; “due to Christianity’s emphasis on sinfulness and woman’s particular guilt, hysteria is comprehended as an indicator of evil possession” (Wald, 2007, p.28).

Nonetheless, with the improvements in science and technology and the emphasis on reason and logic, in the late 1800s, Jean-Martin Charcot, a French neurologist, took a more modern and scientific approach to hysteria. He brought forward a new term “‘traumatic hysteria’, thereby differentiating it from ‘female hysteria’” (Grose, 2016, p.xviii) owing to the fact that hysteria was no longer a disease only related to the unfulfilled sexual drives or spirit possession. Charcot examined several patients with hysterical symptoms. He claimed that these symptoms were caused by internal injury affecting the nervous system. Namely, Charcot “developed the neurological examination” (Merskey, 1995, p.28) while he also accepted the psychological basis in the development of hysteria.

Later on, one of Charcot’s students Sigmund Freud developed his approach and worked on hysteria together with his partner Josef Breuer. Together, they wrote several studies on female hysteria. They believed that “the hysteric suffers mostly from reminiscences” (Breuer and Freud, 1936, p.4). Basically, they suggested that hysteria was not triggered by a physical injury, a problem in the nervous system or the body itself, but by a psychological scar resulted from mental traumas or repressions. What Breuer and Freud claimed is that “memories that lingered in repressed form in the unconscious, only to return to the surface with a vengeance years later in the disguised form of symptoms” (Scull, 2009, p.138). This means that our unpleasant memories or traumas could manifest themselves through physical symptoms. This was a whole new understanding for the notion of hysteria because they associated hysteria with psychological damage the person might experience as a result of “the impact of unconscious memories” (Wald 2007: 35) or a traumatic event the person had experienced before. This enhances the fact that hysteria was not gender-based anymore due to its being acknowledged as a psychological disorder. In other words, in the 20th century hysteria was related to the nervous system, not the uterus, which emphasized that men could also suffer from hysteria.

Basically, from the 19th century onwards, a totally different interpretation of hysteria has been recognized which is far from being female based because “hysteria starts being gradually associated with the brain rather than the uterus. . . if it is connected to the brain, then perhaps hysteria is not a female disease and can affect both sexes” (Tasca and et.al, 2012, p.114). The symptoms which are related to hysteria are associated with identity disorders or psychological illnesses. This reveals itself when the patient cannot make the distinction between reality and illusion which influences the person’s everyday life.

Taking all the information stated above regarding how hysteria has been defined since ancient times, the chief purpose of this paper is to analyse female characters in twentieth-century American drama as the embodiments of the changing understanding of hysteria.

2. PORTRAYAL OF DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF HYSTERIA IN 20th CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMA

The initial female character depicted as suffering from hysteria is Blanche DuBois from the play titled *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be regarded as one of his most popular plays which revolves around the protagonist Blanche by emphasizing her hysterical condition which results from her lack of sexual satisfaction; hence, throughout the play it is reflected that “sex has always been her Achilles heel. It has always been [her] sword and shield” (Nelson, 1961, p.146).

In the first scene, Blanche arrives at New Orleans to live with her sister, Stella Kowalski. Blanche expects to take refuge in her sister’s house. However, Blanche’s expectations for a better life are shattered by her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski, due to “having been raped by the man of the house in which she sought refuge, her mind unhinges, and she is removed for an indeterminate future to a public asylum” (Boxill, 1987, p.78). Blanche and her sister, Stella Kowalski, have spent their childhood in a plantation, Belle Reve, in Laurel, Mississippi. However, after getting married to a Polish man who works in a factory’s sales department, Stella moves to New Orleans where she has to live in a “small, dingy apartment on a slum street in the old part of town” (78). Basically, Stella’s life changes drastically as a result of this marriage and her small apartment becomes a hell for Blanche.

Like many of Williams’ plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is based on the theme of desire and sex. The first exposure to the portrayal of desire starts with the title. The word ‘desire’ stated in the title evokes thoughts related to passion and sex in the readers’ mind. Besides, Blanche explains how she has come to her sister’s place; “[with faintly hysterical humor] they told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off- at Elysian Fields!” (Williams, 1951, p.15). This means that in order to reach her sister’s apartment, Blanche must initially board the streetcar named Desire and subsequently transfer to the second one named Cemeteries, disembarking at Elysian Fields. The route Blanche describes reflects her life journey. In this respect, the term ‘desire’ has both a literal and metaphorical meaning. On the one hand, the streetcar named Desire is an actual streetcar line in New Orleans which Blanche rides in order to arrive at Stella’s house. On the other hand, it is actually her sexual desires that lead Blanche to move of New Orleans because her sexual affair in Laurel ruined her life and career as a teacher which is why she has to leave Laurel. The streetcar named Cemeteries refers to death and Elysian Fields represent afterlife and paradise according to Greek mythology. Blanche thinks that by coming to Elysian Fields, she will be peaceful. However, literally, and allegorically Blanche experiences death-like situations. Namely, she lets her desire drive her life and destroy it eventually.

Being the main character who is filled with desire for the opposite sex, Blanche tries to seduce every man she encounters throughout the play. Even though she has been raised with the southern values, Blanche does not hesitate to flirt with her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. Moreover, she sees no trouble in admitting this to Stella; “I called him a little boy and laughed and flirted. Yes, I was flirting with your husband!” (Williams, 1951, p.44). Besides, when Blanche meets Stanley’s poker friends, she immediately picks Mitch as the possible suitor and a suitable husband. Therefore, she tries to seduce Mitch through her beauty as well as her unreal purity and innocence as she says, “I want to deceive him enough to make him-- want me” (Williams, 1951, p.81). Clearly, Blanche has plans for Mitch. She contemplates on making Mitch believe that she is an innocent, pure and virgin woman

through “refusing any sexual activity beyond a kiss” (Murphy, 2014, p.78) which is far from reality since she is not as sinless as she seems.

Furthermore, as the play proceeds, Blanche becomes driven by her desires more intensely. When a Young Man comes to collect money for the newspaper, she cannot resist the temptation of flirting with the boy. Blanche apparently is a very sexual character who is unaware of the fact that her sexual desire will be the cause of her downfall. In a way, she seems unable to control her desires for men, and she does not consider whether these men are appropriate or not. In a way, “Blanche wants to be a ‘lady’ but she feels continually tripped by her sexual desire” (Abbotson, 1961, p.48-49); therefore, she always wants to be endowed with compliments and wishes to be desired:

BLANCHE. Oh, in my youth I excited some admiration. But look at me now!
[She smiles at him radiantly] Would you think it possible that I was once considered to be –attractive?

STANLEY. Your looks are okay.

BLANCHE. I was fishing for a compliment, Stanley. (Williams, 1951, p.38-39)

Blanche is extremely concerned about her beauty. She always wants to be beautiful and can never stand any imperfection. That is why she cares about her appearance all the time. In addition, Blanche does not want to be seen when the lights are on; therefore, she covers the light bulbs with paper lanterns so that nobody can see anything ugly about her. If somebody wants to look at her with a clear lightning, she overreacts:

MITCH. I’ve never seen you in the afternoon.

...

You never want to go out in the afternoon.

...

... I’ve asked you to go out with me sometimes on Sundays but you always make an excuse. You never want to out till six and then it’s always some place that’s not lighted much.

BLANCHE. There is some obscure meaning in this but I fail to catch it.

MITCH. What it means is I’ve never had a real good look at you, Blanche. Let’s turn the light on here.

BLANCHE. [fearfully] Light? What light? What for?

MITCH. This one with the paper thing on it. [*He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb. She utters a frightened grasp*]

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BLANCHE. What did you do that for?

MITCH. So I can take a look at you good and plain!

...

BLANCHE. I don't want realism. I want magic. . . I try to give that to people. I misinterpret things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! *–Don't turn the light on!*

[Mitch crosses to the switch. He turns the light on and stares at her. She cries out and covers her face. He turns the light off again.] (Williams, 1951, p.116-117)

It might be claimed that Blanche does not have self-confidence, and that she cannot stand being stared at and being analysed in detail. She even dislikes when somebody turns the lights on because this may enable people to realize some defects in her. This is an example for the symptom of hysteria because “strong emotions could disrupt the equilibrium of the body, as could readily be seen in cases of extreme fright or fear” (Scull, 2009, p.67). Therefore, in this scene, when Mitch wishes to see her, she reacts in a hysteric way which surpasses reason and logic. Hence, she does not let him look at her with the lights on.

The only thing Blanche wants is to seduce men to be with her because she needs to fulfil her sexual desire. In this respect, Blanche is jealous of Stella's relationship with Stanley because they can have sex whenever they desire by using the advantage of being married. Blanche in a way confesses this by saying “Stella, I can't live with him! You can, he's your husband. But how could I stay here with him, after last night, with those curtains between us?” (Williams, 1951, p.69). Owing to the fact that Blanche is not married, she cannot have sex according to the moral values. Namely, Blanche “is jealous of her sister's married life and cannot relate to her” (Heidairi and Mohammedi, 2016, p.231). Furthermore, she admires the sense of security and belonging Stella has thanks to Stanley.

Blanche is totally aware of the norms of the society; thus, she feels guilty, and she knows that her desire for sex and men is not appropriate. However, she cannot stop herself and “her appetite for sex” (Cardullo qtd. in Bloom, 2005, p.79). Therefore, she suffers from hysteria which may mean excessive emotional distress. No matter how shameful it looks, this condition is not entirely Blanche's fault. One of the underlying reasons for her “perverse and tortured sexuality” (Abotson, 1961, p.45) is her marriage to a poet, Allan Grey who turns out to be gay. When Blanche catches her husband with a man in a room, she expresses her disgust with him which causes her husband to commit suicide. As a result, when her husband dies, Blanche feels lonely, vulnerable, and manless because other family members have already died as well. Thus, she tries to find a safe haven to satisfy her needs which leads to “long series of shallow affairs” (Boxill, 1987, p.77). Shortly after, Blanche becomes a prostitute both to fulfil her sexual desires and to survive. She has sexual intercourse with many soldiers and many strangers in hotel rooms. In addition, during the time when she taught at a school, Blanche had an affair with a student. The moment this incident is revealed, she is expelled from the school. This act degrades her character in town, and Blanche feels so disgraceful that she tries to hide reality and explains her quitting job career by creating her version of the reality. She says that the principal let her take a leave of absence since she was having a nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, Stanley knows the truth which he describes to Stella as follows, “She didn't resign temporarily from the high school because of her nerves! . . . They kicked her out of that high school (because of) A seventeen-year-old- boy—she'd been gotten mixed up with! (Williams, 1951, p.101). It is clear that Blanche is living in an unreal world

since she constantly tries to alter reality about her past in order to forget about her immoral deeds. For instance, throughout the play, Blanche always has a bath. One reason is her wish to calm her nerves down due to the fact that she is now living in a place which is totally different from the one she has been used to in Laurel. Another reason for her constant bathes is to “wash away the taint of her guilt” (Abbotson, 1961, p.47) and past which can be understood from her statement; “Hello, Stanley! Here I am, all freshly bathed and scented, and feeling like a brand-new human being” (Williams, 1951, p.37). Blanche is obsessed with bathing since she really believes that water can cleanse all her regrets, sins, and immoral deeds. This can be regarded as a symptom of hysteria performing an act in an excessive manner obsessively.

To put it differently, in Blanche’s case, it can be suggested that Blanche is filled with desire; therefore, throughout the play she has been together with many strangers including soldiers and young boys, which also becomes the source of her destruction. However, she is not the only one to blame. Blanche has undergone several unfortunate experiences starting with her wrong marriage with a homosexual man; as a result, she could not feel sexually satisfied. After the death of her husband, she seeks for other men to reach that satisfaction which she explains as follows; “After the death of Allan—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with” (Williams, 1951, p.18). Besides, Blanche knows that she has to repress her feelings and desires to fit in the society for the sake of being a decent woman. In other words, Blanche needs to act in the way “society says a woman must act if she is to get a man” (Adler, 1990, p.43); however, she cannot help herself committing sins. Hence, throughout the play Blanche gets involved in sexual acts and behaviours. In that sense, Blanche can be regarded as a true example of a woman suffering from hysteria because of her sexual desires for men which is the “longstanding idea that there is a particular kind of feminine malaise that has something to do with sex” (Grose, 2016, p.xxi). Blanche perfectly fits this description of hysteria because she bears all the symptoms which contain,

flamboyant or histrionic display, hyperemotionality, seductiveness, exhibitionism and sexual maneuvering, linguistic exaggeration, a clinging dependency and demandingness in personal relationships, and a highly developed fantasy life. (Adler, 1990, p.42)

By considering these symptoms, it can be suggested that Blanche is the representation of the ancient understanding of hysteria which is “accounted for the instability and mobility of physical symptoms and of attacks of emotional disturbance in women, . . . by a theory that the womb somehow became transplanted to different positions” (Abse, 1966, p.2). Therefore, it can be claimed that this view is depicted through Blanche in the most obvious way.

For the second understanding of hysteria which is peculiar to the Middle Ages, the young girls, especially Abigail Williams, in Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, can be taken as examples because this play is built upon the actual witchcraft events that had taken place in a Puritan society in Salem, Massachusetts. Puritanism originated with Henry VIII, who sought to divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon. However, since the Catholic Church did not sanction this request, he established his own separate church which was distinct from the Catholic church. This new church formed new regulations in the new protestant religion. Nevertheless, a group of people called the Puritans claimed that this new church with new rules still had some remains of the Catholic Church, which is why they decided to leave the Church of England and form their own protestant faith. In this respect, the Puritans decided to leave England and go to the New World to establish a small community with its own laws and rules because they believed in the righteousness of Protestantism. Therefore, they moved to Salem to cleanse the sins from their Church and their religion; hence purify it. Puritans believed that they were supposed to send everything associated with evil away from their society. In that sense, any member of the society

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who acted against the doctrines of the Church was considered to be afflicted by the Devil or accused of being a witch. According to the ministers, such kind of people had to be identified, charged, and executed so that they could not affect others and ruin the social order.

Taking the actual events which occurred in Salem as a starting point, Arthur Miller begins his story with the depiction of the situation in Salem in the 17th century. This Puritan society in Salem was governed by theocracy and clergymen for the sake of their faiths and beliefs. Any kind of entertainment was forbidden. The lives of people were composed of following the doctrines of religion and the church. In that sense, anybody who behaved against the regulations and the requirements of the religion were seen as evil spirits; hence, they were sentenced to death. However, these people could be forgiven if they could put the blame on somebody else so that they would no longer be accused.

Besides, Salem was a male dominated society where women were seen as inferior creatures who were “more prone to hysterical symptoms and attacks than the physically and mentally more robust men” (Wald, 2007, p.29). The hardships and injustice women had to bear at those times can be summarized as follows; “women’s souls were considered to be more susceptible to the workings of Satan and were consequently to be guarded more carefully against it and more severely punished if transgressed” (Kocić, 2010, p.2-3). Therefore, it was strongly believed that women’s bodies were vulnerable to any evil interference or evil possession. That is why they were under great pressure and control.

What actually happened in Salem in 1692 is that the African servant named Tituba could not resist to the temptation of demonstrating tricks and incantations to the children, reminiscent of practices such as voodoo that she recollected from her time in Barbados. However, after that night, the girls started to have fits and act strangely and hysterically with spontaneous and unexplained bouts of laughs and tears. In this respect, *The Crucible* is based on the false accusations of some young girls who are considered to be witches. Therefore, at the beginning of the play Reverend Parris’ daughter, Betty, who is one of the girls accompanying Tituba one night to the woods, appears to be in a coma-like situation. Tituba is a black slave taken from Barbados and she is the servant of the Parris house. While Betty, her cousin Abigail, and two other girls were in the woods with Tituba, Reverend Parris sees them singing, dancing, and talking in a strange way which, he thinks, is highly unnatural. However, he does not have the courage to confess it to himself because this will tarnish his name and reputation. Therefore, Parris consults to a doctor about his daughter’s condition because of her unusual behaviour such as attempting to fly, senseless screams, not being able to stand hearing the Lord’s name and having sudden fits. Nevertheless, the doctor sends a message with another girl named Susanna “Sir, he has been searching for his books since he left you, sir. But he bid me tell you, that you might look to un-natural things for the cause of it” (Miller, 2003, p.7). Basically, the doctor cannot find a physical cause for Betty’s situation which leads him to relate her sickness to supernatural causes. Similarly, Mrs Putnam thinks the same for her daughter Ruth as well. Since Betty and Ruth are girls and since they cannot find the origin of their sickness because it is related to hysteria, it is much easier to explain their strange and hysterical behaviours with the intervention of evil spirits; in other words, “in accordance with the general attitude and beliefs of that period, the logical conclusion was that there must have been some interference on the part of Satan” (Kocić, 2010, p.1). This highly strict and narrow-minded authority led up to the chain of cases based on hysteria. The reason for such kind of an easy and quick accusation and conviction was that they were “generally considered to be more sinful than men by nature” (2). This mentality and attitude toward women were the cause of the events in Salem.

Moreover, to accuse a woman in terms of demonology and convict her was as simple as breathing during the Middle Ages since “traditionally there were only two ways to convict a witch: by the witch’s confession or upon the testimony of two eye-witnesses to an act of black magic” (Baker, 2015, p.27)

which did not require any physical proofs. If a direct witness could not be found, then, the “accused witch’s property should be searched for evidence of magic: potions, poppets, charms, spell books, or related writings” (27) which were enough evidence for proving the implementation of witchcraft. At the end of a witchcraft conviction, the women would face with being burnt, public humiliation, or death, which means the community “punishes [the women] rather than treats medically” (Wald, 2007, p.28).

Accordingly, *The Crucible* is full of examples of girls accusing each other of witchcraft which is the obvious indicator for hysteria. The first one to get accused is the servant, Tituba:

HALE. *Grasping Abigail:* Abigail, it may be your cousin is dying. Did you call the Devil last night?

ABIGAIL. I never called him! Tituba, Tituba. . .

...

HALE. How did she call him?

ABIGAIL. I know not-she spoke Barbados.

...

HALE. Why are you concealing? Have you sold yourself to Lucifer?

ABIGAIL. I never sold myself! I’m a good girl! I’m a proper girl!

. . . *instantly Abigail points at Tituba*

ABIGAIL. She made me do it! She made Betty do it!

...

HALE. Woman, have you enlisted these children for the Devil?

TITUBA. No, no, sir, I don’t truck with no Devil! (Miller, 2003, p.37-38)

As it is obvious from the dialogue, Abigail Williams is the central figure in the witchcraft accusations. The moment people start to accuse Abigail and the other girls of bewitchment, Abigail does not hesitate to put the blame on Tituba. She clearly accuses Tituba of tempting and charming them without their wish, “and claimed that her spectre chased them around the house” (Baker, 2015, p.16). No matter how many times Tituba denies this accusation, the Reverend and Putnam try their best to make Tituba confess as Parris mentions; “You will confess yourself or I will take you out and whip you to your death, Tituba!” (Miller, 2003, p.39). Therefore, Tituba gets afraid and admits the guilt which is highly appreciated by the community as Mr Hale says “You have confessed yourself to witchcraft, and that speaks a wish to come Heaven’s side. And we will bless you” (Miller, 2003, p.41). As a result, Tituba starts giving names of other girls and women. When this news spread around the town, people definitely become afraid, and townspeople are enslaved by hysteria. Seeing Tituba giving some names to the court and being praised for it, Abigail and Betty decide to do the same in order to get out of this terrible situation:

Abigail rises, staring as though inspired, and cries out.

ABIGAIL. I want to open myself! *They turn to her, startled. She is enraptured, as though in a pearly light.* I want the light of God; I want the sweet love of Jesus! I danced for the Devil; I saw him; I wrote in his book; I go back to Jesus; I kiss His hand. I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil! I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil! (I, 42)

As she is speaking, Betty is rising from the bed, a fever in her eyes, and picks up the chant.

BETTY. *staring too:* I saw Goody Howe with the Devil! . . . I saw Martha Bellows with the Devil! . . . I saw Goody Bibber with the Devil. . . (Miller, 2003, p.42-43)

This scene exemplifies mass hysteria, where fear surpasses logic and reason, leading individuals to behave irrationally. The girls in the play desperately accuse other girls in order not to be punished. In this respect, Elizabeth Proctor, John Proctor's wife, is afraid of the fact that Abigail would give her name at the court. Elizabeth knows that Abigail will never do anything in favour of herself because of her love for her John which she admits to John; "It's her dearest hope, John. I know it. There are thousand names; why does she call mine? . . . there be monstrous profit in it. She thinks to take my place, John" (Miller, 2003, p.54). Namely, Elizabeth is totally aware of the fact that if Abigail gives her name, she will be taken without the need of a proof because the word of the witness is enough for the court. This symbolizes the fact that because of hysteria, many people turn to each other owing to the fear they feel in terms of being an immoral member of the town. They cannot think reasonably. In the case of Abigail, she accuses all the girls and women she hates of witchcraft.

In the aftermath, women readily accused each other of witchcraft without hesitation. Even the important people's wives were accused. It all starts with Abigail's refusal to accept her uncle's accusation; therefore, she begins accusing innocent people of witchcraft. After that, everybody in Salem starts to doubt each other. All the hysterical atmosphere and the delusive performances of the accusers result in the conviction and execution of innocent people because people believe that these can be taken as proofs for witchcraft.

Conversely, in the early twentieth century, hysteria was no longer associated with a sickness in women's uterus or with the manifestation of witchcraft because "Freud shifted the malady from gynecology to psychology, believing that . . . it was a serious mental illness" (Little, 2015, p.25). In this context, Mary Tyrone, from Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* can be taken as another portrayal of a woman affected by hysteria. The play is about a melancholic and an unhappy family. James Tyrone is the father of the family who "is drunk and miser. The mother is a sweet dope fiend. The elder brother is a cynical sot and the younger son is a sick and troubled boy" (Babae, 2011, p.8).

In such a family, Mary, the mother, "is in a state of perpetual mourning, first for her broken childhood dreams, and secondly for the loss of her baby" (Little, 2015, p.42); which is why, she is suffering from hysteria. Unlike the past, hysteria is no longer associated with sexual or demonological but psychological causes whose symptoms can be listed as anxiety, any psychological problem, not being able to make the distinction between reality and illusion, depression, hallucinations, obsessive compulsive disorder, and dissociation of self. In this respect, Mary fits this understanding of hysteria well enough because she goes through all the symptoms throughout the play due to "the torment and guilt of her traumatic past" (Little, 2015, p.35). It is a well-known fact that traumatic experiences in

our lives may affect us in all our experiences, consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, sometimes it is highly difficult to get over such devastating experiences; therefore, “trauma plays a crucial role in a number of mental disorders” (Wald, 2007, p.93). There are many ways to repress and escape from the traumatic experiences; however, somehow in some ways at some moments, something happens to remind us of the dreadful events we have gone through.

Accordingly, the puzzling character Mary Tyrone appears on stage as a woman returning home after having a treatment in a sanatorium for morphine addiction because of “a serious anguish and suffering with the death of baby Eugene, a difficult pregnancy” (Little, 2015, p.37). She is the portrayal of a long-suffering woman from her choices because she “sacrificed her personal goals for a domestic life, a choice made after meeting James for whom she had an adolescent infatuation. Throughout the play, she regrets this decision” (34). In that sense, Mary thinks marrying the actor, James Tyrone was a mistake. Basically, Mary has fallen in love with James, who was a handsome and successful actor whom she describes as follows; “He was different from all ordinary men, like someone from another world. . . I fell in love right then. . . I forgot all about becoming a nun or a concert pianist. All I wanted was to be his wife” (O’Neil, 1955, p.105). However, he turns out to be a drunk which she learns on their first night on honeymoon. Besides, Mary is angry with herself and calls herself a “fool” (105) due to the fact that in order to marry James and be a mother for her children, she has given up her desires, passions and objectives in life:

MARY. My father paid for special lessons. He spoiled me. He would do anything I asked. He would have sent me to Europe to study after I graduated from the Convent. I might have gone --if I hadn’t fallen in love with Mr. Tyrone. Or I might have become a nun. I had two dreams. To be a nun, that was the more beautiful one. To become a concert pianist, that was the other.

I haven’t touched a piano in so many years. I couldn’t play with such crippled fingers, even if I wanted to. For a time after my marriage I tried to keep up my music. But it was hopeless. One-night stands, cheap hotels, dirty trains, leaving children, never having a home--” (O’Neil, 1955, p.103- 104)

Basically, Mary is not satisfied with her present life owing to the fact that she “cannot let go of her youthful aspirations [and] dreams that would have led to life experiences that would have conflicted with being a wife and mother” (Little, 2015, p.35). Nevertheless, James believes in the fact that Mary has never had the talent for playing the piano which shows that “her delusion is created by her neurosis and addiction” (41). She is aware of the fact that even though she loves James desperately, she is not happy in their house due to not being able to feel that place as a home. In one of her dialogues with James she confesses:

MARY. It was never a home. You’ve always preferred the Club or a barroom. And for me it’s always been as lonely as a dirty room in a one-night stand hotel. In a real home one is never lonely. You forget I know from experience what a home is like. I gave up one to marry you- my father’s home. (O’Neil, 1955, p.72)

By marrying James and being a mother, she had expected to have a peaceful family and feels like she belongs to a home “where she can feel respectable and where she is not lonely. [However,] she feels

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abandoned” (Little, 2015, p.34). In addition, all the male members of the family refrain from disclosing the truth about her son Edmund’s illness to Mary. Therefore, she is in a way isolated from the family. They can never feel like a real and happy family.

Witnessing many tough life experiences, Mary constantly tries to escape from the present by clinging to her past life which is only possible through the use of morphine. She basically tries to “deceive herself about the unpleasant reality of life” (Babae, 2011, p.9). One thing she never wants to admit is “Edmund’s life threatening consumption” (Abbotson, 1961, p.104). Hence, thanks to the power of morphine, she pretends that “Edmund has only a cold, thus freeing herself from any need to worry or act” (104). She insists on believing in the illusion that his illness is not serious. Furthermore, she blames herself for Edmund’s illness:

MARY. I blame only myself. I swore after Eugene died I would never have another baby. . . I shouldn’t have let you insist I have another baby to take Eugene’s place, because you thought that would make me forget his death. . . I was afraid all the time I carried Edmund. I knew something terrible would happen. I knew I’d proved by the way I’d left Eugene that I wasn’t worthy to have another baby, and that God would punish me if I did. I never should have borne Edmund. (O’Neil, 1955, p.88)

Mary already believes that Eugene has died because of her careless attitude by leaving him alone with his jealous brother who infected the baby with the disease he was carrying. In this respect, she thinks that by having another baby “to overcome her shattering sense of guilt on the death of Eugene” (Babae, 2011, p.10), God is punishing her with Edmund’s illness.

As a result of her incapability to handle her fears and harsh realities, Mary takes refuge in morphine all the time because “morphine injection is a means to relieve anguish associated with conflicts and anxieties” (Little, 2015, p.38). In this respect, morphine is the best way out for her to reach “a life free of psychological pain, where she can forget about her unhappy marriage, selfish husband, the death of her baby, Eugene, [Edmund’s illness] and even her own addiction” (Abbotson, 1961, p.104). In one of the scenes, Mary reacts to Edmund’s illness in an excessive manner:

MARY. . . . Saying you’re going to die! It’s the books you read! Nothing but sadness and death! Your father shouldn’t allow you to have them. And some of the poems you’ve written yourself are even worse! You’d think you didn’t want to live! A boy of your age with everything before him! It’s just a pose you get out of books! You’re not really sick at all! (O’Neil, 1955, p.90)

She definitely thinks that Edmund is as healthy as them and he is only pretending to be ill, which is influenced by the books he reads. Wherefore, she takes morphine because she thinks “there is no other that can stop the pain—all the pain” (O’Neil, 1955, p.103). Together with morphine, Mary loves the fog which symbolizes the hazy atmosphere of unconsciousness; “I really love fog. . . It hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch you any more” (O’Neil, 1955, p.98). For Mary, fog functions similarly

to morphine because both of them help the character isolate from the realities, pains and sufferings she has to bear.

At the end of the play, Mary moves into a state of unconsciousness due to an overdose of morphine and begins talking to herself. Edmund tries to make her hear what he is trying to tell; however, “she does not seem to hear” (O’Neil, 1955, p.173). She starts to move around and hallucinate which James and Edmund are watching:

JAMES. Oh, we’re fools to pay any attention. It’s the damned poison. But I’ve never known her to drown herself in it as deep as this. . .

MARY. *Staring dreamily before her. Her face looks extraordinarily youthful and innocent. The shyly eager, trusting smile is on her lips as she talks aloud to herself.*

I had a talk with Mother Elizabeth. She is so sweet and good. A saint on Earth. I love her dearly. It may be sinful of me but I love better than my own mother. Because she always understands, even before you say a word. . .

I had prayed to the Blessed Virgin to make sure, and to find me worthy. . . the Blessed Virgin had smiled and blessed me with her consent. . .

She pauses and a look of growing uneasiness comes over her face. She passes a hand over her forehead as if brushing cobwebs from her brain—vaguely. (O’Neil, 1955, p.175-176)

In this last scene, Mary’s speech implies that she is not willing to follow her mother’s footsteps, meaning she is reluctant to establish a home and start a family. Therefore, dissociating herself from her mother suggests that Mary is actually struggling to find her own identity. Namely, the play ends with Mary living “in a narcotic dream in which she relives her past as if it were physically occurring, and it seems a dream to which she is destined to keep returning” (Abbotson, 1961, p. 104).

To sum up, the female character, Mary Tyrone, cannot make the distinction between reality and illusion, and she constantly runs away from the sad facts about her family and herself. She has psychological sufferings; therefore, “Mary can be viewed as melancholic in Freudian terms which are psychological rather than gynaecological as previously understood” (Little, 2015, p.45). Therefore, it can be suggested that Mary is a successful representation of the modern understanding of hysteria as a mental illness with all her delusions and hallucinations.

3. CONCLUSION

The arguments given above prove the fact that the interpretation of hysteria has changed through the ages. Firstly, it was associated with a disease related to womb and therefore it was only peculiar to women, which is demonstrated through the portrayal of Blanche. Then, during the Middle Ages in Puritan societies any woman acting strangely, hysterically and against the regulations of the Church was accused of witchcraft indicated with the character Abigail. This emphasizes the fact that hysteria was still only common to women. With the beginning of the twentieth century, these understandings were totally rendered meaningless due to the fact that hysteria was proved to be a mental illness associated with any psychological symptom which is clearly shown with the depiction of Mary’s condition. This fact includes men within the realm of hysterical cases based on the fact that it is actually considered to be a psychological disease; hence, not only women but also men can suffer from hysteria.

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Basically, the understanding of hysteria has changed dramatically over the centuries which could be exemplified by the female characters from the 20th century American drama.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

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