

“KNOWING IT’S REAL MEANS YOU GOTTA MAKE A DECISION”:
DEPICTIONS OF POST-TRAUMATIC DISORDERS AND COPING MECHANISMS
IN *THE PUNISHER* AND *JESSICA JONES*

A Thesis

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Abstract

Post-traumatic disorders have been included in some of the most popular narratives in mainstream culture. Though the early decades of movies included 1948's *The Best Days of Our Lives* is an award-winning movie that follows three veterans home from World War II and depicts their struggles with reacclimating to society it became more popular after Vietnam veterans and their allies fought and protested for an appropriate diagnosis for PTSD after decades of it not being seen as a legitimate psychological disorder. Since then, post-traumatic disorders have been included in media as popular as the series finale of *M*A*S*H* in 1983, the most watched episode in history; and 2014's *American Sniper*, the highest grossing military movie of all time.

Similarly, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which started with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008, continues to include depictions of characters struggling with long-term effects of trauma. This thesis will take a closer look at two pieces of Marvel media which both feature progressive depictions of narratives deeply rooted in the trauma many of the characters suffer. In *The Punisher* (2017), post-traumatic disorders are portrayed differently within separate characters, ensuring that the depiction within the show as a whole is dynamic. In *Jessica Jones* (2015), Jessica's struggle with CPTSD manifests itself with a myriad of symptoms, each of which are depicted by the different ways they affect her daily life. The concluding chapter will include a brief history of the stigma against mental disorders and mental health therapy before looking at how the inclusion of therapy in these shows is working against these stigmas. It will end with a discussion of how Marvel is pushing the narrative that trauma is everywhere and can be felt by anyone regardless of background, as well as the importance of creating friendships and connections to the people around you in order to heal from trauma.

Trigger Warning/Author's Note:

Though I am not among the population of those who struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, I have attempted to keep those who are in mind through the course of writing this by including two sensitivity readers among those who offered feedback. However, the content of this thesis still includes explicit mentions and discussions of violence canonically included in both Frank Castle and Jessica Jones' stories. The introduction includes a mention of alcoholism within the movie *The Best Days of Our Lives*, as well as discussions of military violence in both *M*A*S*H* and *American Sniper*, including death. Chapter one focuses on 2017's *The Punisher* series on Netflix and includes mentions of physical violence, panic attacks, and major character deaths, as well as discussion of suicide and attempted suicide. Chapter two is a discussion of 2015's *Jessica Jones* and includes mentions of self-harm, attempted suicide, rape, alcoholism and drug abuse, and violent on-screen deaths. The concluding chapter mentions many of the aforementioned subjects in a final discussion of the content.

Introduction: Depictions of PTSD in Popular Media

On February 28, 1983, 121.6 million viewers sat down in front of their in-home televisions, many of them families, to watch the final episode of the series *M*A*S*H*, which ran for eleven seasons, and still holds the record for the most watched non-sporting television event in history¹. This final episode, titled “Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen,” was the length of five regular episodes at over two and a half hours long and followed the final events of the popular army medical staff of the 4077th *M*A*S*H* unit as the war in Korea came to a close. Like many of the other episodes of the series, the events that happened during the finale were a mixture of serious and comedic topics, from one of the characters “capturing” a band of North Korean POWs that reveal themselves to be classical musicians, to another character who spent the entire series trying to be discharged from the army falling in love with a civilian and deciding to stay with her in Korea after the war to find her family. After the iconic opening credits, the final episode opens up in a mental hospital, showing patients and doctors alike in fatigues and hospital robes, before transitioning to a patient’s room, slowly panning down on two characters in the middle of a conversation. To regular viewers, their faces are well-known: Alan Alda’s Benjamin Franklin “Hawkeye” Pierce, the main protagonist and one of few characters to stay for the entire eleven series; and Dr. Sidney Freedman, played by Allan Arbus, a psychologist who regularly visits the 4077th for both poker nights and to assist with patients and staff struggling with mental disorders. While this is not the first time the series discusses post-traumatic stress disorder — not even the first time Sidney helps Hawkeye with it — it is perhaps the most in-depth discussion of the importance of treatment.

¹ [https://mash.fandom.com/wiki/Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen \(TV series episode\)](https://mash.fandom.com/wiki/Goodbye,_Farewell,_and_Amen_(TV_series_episode))

While transitioning back and forth between Hawkeye’s conversations with Dr. Freedman and the events happening at the camp, the traumatic experience that landed Hawkeye in Sidney’s care, which happened on a bus ride home to the camp after a day of vacation, is slowly revealed through a series of conversations, showing that Hawkeye’s subconscious repressed the original memory to keep him from spiraling, though the trauma from it still remained. Hawkeye himself does not even believe that he should be in the ward with Sidney, but should be back at his M*A*S*H unit, where they need him as a surgeon to help heal wounded soldiers. To him, there



**Fig. 1: Hawkeye in the Mental Hospital,
“Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen”**

Screenshot from *SIMKL*.

was no “traumatic event,” they were simply on a bus, but Sidney knows the truth, and helps Hawkeye discover what his own mind has been hiding from itself. It was not *just* a bus, but there were wounded with them, one of which Hawkeye was trying to help in the back of the bus. Then there were not just wounded, but civilians, all of them hiding from the enemy, with something was

with them on the bus, making noise and putting everyone in danger. A chicken, Hawkeye thinks, but through these conversations with Sidney, he discovers that it was not a chicken strangled by its owner, but something much worse:

HAWKEYE: I didn’t mean for her to kill it, I just wanted it to be quiet. It was — it was a baby! She smothered her own baby! You son of a bitch, why did you make me remember that?

SIDNEY: You had to get it out in the open. Now we’re halfway home. (“Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen”)

Sidney, a military psychologist, has dealt with post-traumatic stress and repressed memories throughout his entire career, and his treatment of Hawkeye in the hospital is just another part of his work during the Korean war. But to the 121.6 million viewers at home who just watched Alan Alda as Hawkeye struggling with his mental state and coming to terms with a recent memory that has been repressed, the conversation surrounding post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, was brought into the homes of regular Americans.

In the decades following World War II, psychiatrists focused more on social stressors as the cause of mental disorders, replacing the old belief that relied on genetic dispositions, and mental health became a widespread concern for social communities (Horwitz 81). This, paired with the underlying idea that combat neuroses would only affect those with a predisposition to mental disorders, became the most important pieces discussed in 1952's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I)*, which focused on external causes and predisposition for mental disorders and not their symptoms. This manual completely ignored the idea that trauma alone could affect an individual, no matter their background (84). The *DSM-II*, published in 1968, included a diagnosis for psychosis that occurs "in individuals without any apparent underlying mental disorders and that represent an acute reaction to overwhelming environmental stress," though it was still believed that symptoms in these individuals would fade with time (84). The lack of a diagnosis for an individual affected by an environmental stressor that took time to show symptoms or that persisted after a certain amount of time became significant as more veterans returned home from the Vietnam War.

In order to adequately discuss current representations of PTSD, it is important to understand the history of how the diagnosis has been accepted (or, in many cases, not accepted) by the general public, as well as how these feelings have been included within popular culture,

especially cinema. With a disorder such as PTSD, which affects approximately 3.5% of adults, the fact that many characters within mainstream media are portrayed as struggling with it makes sense. By looking at these portrayals throughout the twentieth century, beginning around World War II, it becomes easy to understand the way the public viewed the symptoms of post-traumatic disorders, and the individuals who had them. Much of the time, these portrayals focused on men struggling to return home after war. For the case of this thesis, I will be briefly discussing three pieces of popular media at the time for three different eras: *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a critically-acclaimed 1946 movie that follows three men home from World War II; “Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen,” the series finale of hit show *M*A*S*H* and most watched single television episode of all time, as it portrays Hawkeye’s wartime trauma and how he comes to terms with it; and 2014’s *American Sniper*, based on the autobiography of Chris Kyle, which tells not only how Kyle achieved becoming the “Most Lethal Sniper in US Military History” (the subtitle for the book), but also the struggles he faced along the way and especially after returning home. These three pieces of media are among the most popular in their own times, but are still seen as progressive portrayals of PTSD today.

The Best Years of Our Lives (1946)

The Best Years of Our Lives was released in 1946 and was the winner of seven Oscar Awards, including Best Picture, the Golden Globe, and the highest-grossing film of the 1940’s (Levy). This movie tells the story of three veterans, Homer Parrish, Al Stevenson, and Fred Derry, as they simultaneously struggle with their return home to Boone City after their tours in World War II. The three different depictions of the ways returning from war affected men fit with the beliefs of post-traumatic disorders of the time. Undergoing a slight change from the

research done during World War I, the most common symptoms of this altered disorder were “restlessness, irritability or aggression, fatigue on arising, sleep difficulties, and anxiety” (Horwitz 70). Because it no longer resembled what had come to be known as “shell shock,” the terminology needed to change, turning to more general terms, like “war neurosis” or “combat fatigue,” connecting the psychological disturbance to the external factors that caused it for the first time (70). By 1943, around a quarter of all American soldiers admitted to hospitals were due to mental trauma, and about half of all discharges from the American armed forces during this time were due to psychiatric reasons (69). In 1943 alone, the number of American soldiers who suffered from psychological trauma almost equaled the number of draftees for that same year; during some of 1944’s most intense battles, around 75% of soldiers suffered from breakdowns (69). By the end of the war, mental health personnel concluded that psychological trauma due to combat is more common than not, though the manifestations of that trauma can differ according to each person’s experience on the battlefield. Given this, it makes sense that all three characters within this movie struggle adapting to civilian life after the war in different ways.

Homer was injured in an explosion after his vessel sank, and spends much of the trip home worrying about how his girl Wilma will react to his physical injury: the loss of both hands, replaced with prosthetic hooks. He is the youngest of the three men, barely out of high school when he joined the Navy, and worries that his girlfriend will not know how to react to his injuries. He is the first to return home, and the two others watch from the shared cab as he is embraced by his little sister,



Fig. 2: On Their Way Home, *The Best Days of Our Lives* (Top to Bottom: Fred Derry, Al Stephenson, Homer Parrish)

Image from *FILMGRAB*

mother, and then Wilma, though he remains still the entire time, worried about their reactions.

When the cab pulls away from the curb, he raises a hand to wave, and everyone around him notices the prosthetic for the first time, their faces shocked at the sight. His father offers to carry his bag inside, but Homer refuses, lifting it with the other hook. As soon as his mother sees this, she breaks down crying, and Wilma comforts her after everyone else has entered the house.

Then, the scene cuts back to the other two in the cab, riding in silence, yet somehow viewers know they are thinking about Homer, especially when Fred says, "You gotta hand it to the Navy, they sure trained that kid how to use those hooks," and Al replies, "They couldn't train him to put his arms around his girl, to stroke her hair." As the movie continues, Homer struggles adapting to life with his hooks, and especially adapting to the way his family treats him differently, breaking a window in anger with his hooks when he notices his little sister's friends staring at him.

Though Wilma's family no longer believes Homer loves her because he struggles so much to show his emotions (a known symptom of PTSD), he is able to show his vulnerabilities to her and marries her at the end of the movie.

Next, Al Stephenson returns home to a large high-rise apartment building, where he surprises his two grown children and his wife of twenty years. While they are all thrilled he has returned, he realizes just how much he has missed, between his children growing up so much he barely recognizes them and his daughter taking over the domestic concerns previously done by the maid. As he spends more time around his family, it becomes obvious that he has started relying heavily on alcohol, especially as they spend the night out on the town; when his pre-war boss suggests he return to work right away, he becomes angry, realizing that he needs more time to adapt to civilian life, and becomes angry when his boss offers him a promotion and a raise as long as he begins immediately. He continues to require alcohol in social situations, escalating to

a drunken speech at a banquet after approving a loan to another veteran with no collateral, understanding the difficulty of returning home from war and needing to readapt to being a civilian. Though his boss is angry at the move, his wife is proud, and they are able to rekindle their love for each other.

The third man, Fred Derry, returns to the dilapidated home shared by his parents and wife, Marie, who he married only days before shipping off to the war. It is only when he returns home that he learns she has taken a job and moved out. After a night of drinking, the Stephenson's take him back to their apartment, where he wakes screaming in the middle of the night from a flashback-nightmare of his friend's death. He yells to his friends, knowing that their deaths are imminent, and the music swells loudly as the Stephenson's daughter, Peggy, struggles to bring him back to reality, even after her eyes are open. Though he searches for a more meaningful job than the soda jerk position he had at the local pharmacy, he fails to find something. After Marie lavishly spends all their money within a few weeks, he is forced to take his old job, but it only lasts a few weeks before he is fired for punching a man after speaking down to Homer, who is visiting him at work. When he is unable to find another job, Marie demands a divorce and Fred decides to leave Boone City; however, he decides to stay when he is offered a job working for a company that scraps surplus military planes. The end of the movie brings the three men together again at Homer and Wilma's wedding, where Fred is the best man and is able to begin a relationship with the Stephenson's daughter.

Fred's trauma, portrayed in nightmares and flashbacks, is portrayed similarly to most portrayals of PTSD because these were common symptoms. Though he ends the movie in a better place than where he spends most of it, with a job that allows him to use the skills he

learned in the Air Force and beginning what viewers hope will be a happy, healthy relationship, there is no way of knowing whether these changes in his life have caused his flashbacks to end.

Lastly, because his wounds are more physical and he did not see much battle time, as he tells the men during the first stretch of their journey as they fly over the Midwest, Homer's biggest difficulty is getting used to the changed way he is perceived by those around him, especially those he cares the most about, like his family and his girlfriend. He is able to remove his prosthetics and show his most vulnerable self to Wilma only because she argues that she will never leave him when he insists he will. Their marriage at the end of the film gives hope for a happy life beyond the happy ending.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War

The time following the Vietnam War, fought between 1955-1975, was incredibly important to the creation of PTSD as an identifiable and diagnosable mental disorder. Unlike the wars before it, the average age for the American soldier during this time was only nineteen (compared to 26 during World War II), and many of these veterans became addicted to powerful drugs like heroin in hopes of suppressing their stress (Horwitz 85). Still, the number of psychological patients during the war was at its lowest, less than five percent of those evacuated from combat, ten times less than during World War II; many attributed these low numbers to the continuation of the "PIE² treatment" from World War II (85). Similarly, very little psychological impact was found after the fact, with reports for symptoms like depression and addiction relatively equal to that of the general population. Even with this, many of the media portrayals of

² Proximity to battle, immediacy, and expectation of recovery, the three focuses of World War I's shell shock treatment. For more, read Jones.

Vietnam veterans included men prone to violence and mental disturbance, “crazed by their wartime experience” (86). Common among these depictions were flashbacks, moments when a trigger reminds the veteran of a wartime experience that took them momentarily back to that place, intruding on their life.

In the late 1960’s the advocacy group Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) emerged, its main concern to voice opposition not only to the war, but to the government and the Veterans Administration (VA), both of which were neglecting the needs of veterans (88). This group blamed the effect the war had on them on the American government, who sent them to participate in an unwanted conflict only to leave them helpless when they returned home. One of the actions they fought the most for is the construction of a psychological diagnosis that included those affected by the war, not only while physically in combat, but even years after returning home. For this, they compared their experiences with those of Holocaust survivors to assist in the creation of the diagnosis since many of their recounts were similar in ways, though not truly comparable. One important similarity between the two groups was that there was no screening process for the victims of the Holocaust, and that they were all exposed to the same horrific conditions, proving that the effects from the time spent in concentration camps was not dependent on a biological predisposition to mental weakness, as much of the psychological literature still believed (89). The VVAW also hoped to use these experiences to squash the still-lingering idea that all who suffer from psychological damage due to trauma are cowards; similarly, they identified with the idea of “survivors’ guilt” that emerged from the writings of Bruno Bettelheim about experiences in Dachau and Buchenwald (89). Lastly, these recounts from the survivors of the Holocaust aided in supporting the emerging idea that psychological damage following a traumatic event could sit dormant for a time before symptoms emerged.

They found it optimistic that the mental health professionals who aided the survivors of the Holocaust developed a relationship beyond the professional/client mostly seen until that time, aiding their patients in seeking reparations from German courts.

Because of the work of the VVAW and the psychological staff that worked with many among the group, it became widely understood that there needed to be a new diagnosis for the widespread mental trauma, especially that which may have sat dormant for a time before symptoms manifested



Fig. 3: Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Chicago, 1975

Image from VVAW

themselves. Since there was not any basis for diagnosing in this case, it also became clear that a new basis for diagnosing mental disorders was also needed. This would be the only way to assure that traumatized war veterans (along with others who suffered from trauma outside of combat but were not diagnosed in a timely manner) received not only an appropriate diagnosis, but also necessary treatment. In 1974, the American Psychological Association (APA) created a task force to revise the *DSM-II*, the first step in making psychiatry a legitimate branch of medicine. This new way of diagnosing acknowledged that symptoms would be all that was needed to diagnose an individual, no longer relying on environmental or biological factors — in fact, knowledge of the patient’s background was not needed at all (94). This also meant that the diagnosis of PTSD in veterans could no longer be linked to concerns of cowardice as it had been before, nor could it be based on the amount of time that has passed since the traumatic event due to the recollections of both Holocaust survivors and Vietnam veterans (95). This became incredibly important as veterans fought for treatment and compensation, both of which were denied in the past due to the connection between mental trauma and cowardice.

The creation of the post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis became slightly difficult with the new requirement that all diagnoses come from symptoms only, since the main factor in PTSD is the requirement of a traumatic event. This was only made more difficult by the fact that the symptoms of PTSD manifested themselves differently in different patients, so there was no defined set of symptoms that could alone mean PTSD, and one study found that only two percent of PTSD patients at the time had symptoms not accompanied by another diagnosis, like depression or anxiety disorders (96). In fact, many agree that the only reason PTSD does have its own symptomatic diagnosis was because of the deliberate, never-ceasing hard work done by the VVAW, other Vietnam veterans, and the psychiatrists who had a number of these veterans as patients. The new diagnosis consisted of three main parts: “its definition of a traumatic stressor, the particular symptoms that were likely results of the stressor, and the division of acute and chronic traumas,” and specified that these traumas existed “outside of the range of human experience” (98). This included combat, rape, and assault, but also other types of severe traumas from both natural and man-made disasters like “airplane crashes, fires, floods, bombing and torture” (qtd in Horwitz 99). The entire diagnosis is paraphrased by Horwitz at the end of his chapter, “Diagnosing PTSD,” as follows:

The symptom criteria for the diagnosis required, first, that the trauma be reexperienced through intrusive recollections, recurrent dreams, or feelings of recurrence. Second, sufferers had to show numbed responsiveness through diminished interest in activities, detachment from others or constricted affect³. Finally, they had to display at least two symptoms from among hyper alertness, sleep disturbance, survivor guilt,

³ A lack of intensity or range of emotions, or when the patient is unable to feel the appropriate response, especially with the intense emotions related to recalling traumatic events.

trouble concentrating, avoidance of reminders of the traumatic event, and intensification of symptoms following such reminders.

The third component of the diagnosis was this: “Symptoms may begin immediately or soon after the trauma. It is not unusual, however, for the symptoms to emerge after a latency period of months or years following the trauma.” Acute PTSD involved symptoms that arose within six months of the trauma and disappeared within this time frame. Chronic PTSD either persisted for longer than six months or arose sometime after six months had passed since the trauma. (99-100)

M*A*S*H

The next time post-traumatic disorders were brought into the public eye was during the Vietnam War, when regular Americans had the ability to follow the daily news through in-home televisions. By 1955, half of American homes had their own black-and-white television set (Stephens). This allowed them to follow daily updates about the war, seeing the gruesome wartime images within their own houses. Because of this, the realistic storylines included in *M*A*S*H* were able to parallel the very realistic fears surrounding life during wartime to a population who actively worried about it every day. In 2010, critic Noel Murray described *M*A*S*H* as a show able to exist as a “commentary on the futility of all war, and the inherent madness of military life, no matter the era,” but at the time it was aired, its primetime spot was consistently bookended by newsreels about the brutality of the war. Even for those who had no personal connection to the war, *M*A*S*H* offered them characters to connect with; in an interview quoted in a *Washington Post* article posted 35 years after the airing of the finale, Burt Metcalfe, one of the creators and writers, recalled a letter that they received from a fifteen year

old girl after season 3's finale, "Abyssinia, Henry," where former Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Henry Blake is killed on his way home, that read, "I feel that I have joined that all too noninclusive fraternity of those who have lost a dear one overseas," giving her a connection to the Vietnam War happening at the time that she did not have otherwise (Andrews). The show continued to include realistic depictions of real-life things that soldiers and veterans would relate to, as well as ways to remind the viewers at home that they are still a show about the war, like including real-life veteran broadcaster and war correspondent Clete Roberts to interview the characters in a season four episode called "The Interview."

It only makes sense, then, that *M*A*S*H* included depictions of post-traumatic disorders throughout its many seasons, with episodes where a soldier forgets his identity and believes himself to be Jesus Christ (season 4, episode 10, "Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?"); one who



Fig. 4: Sidney and Hawkeye Discuss His Recent Nightmares, Season 5, Episode 13, "Hawk's Nightmare"

Screenshot from SIMKL

finds himself paralyzed with no physical injuries (season 3, episode 13, "Mad Dogs and Servicemen"); or Hawkeye struggling with repressed childhood memories of a close friend pushing him into a lake and almost killing him when he was a boy (season 9, episode 17, "Bless You, Hawkeye"); plus "Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen" — all of

which include Sidney Freedman as a guest character. While this is not out of the ordinary with twenty-first century media, it was practically unheard of when *M*A*S*H* was airing. Until it was defined as a "disorder" in 1980, many psychiatrists did not accept it as such, but believed it was instead a flaw of character or, worse, all for show. But by deciding to portray Hawkeye Pierce,

the most prominent protagonist in the hit television show, as a man who suffered from this very disorder and who requires psychological help to treat it while still fighting the war in Korea, the creators of *M*A*S*H* took this highly stigmatized disorder and placed it in the minds of the general population.

“Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen,” however, was different than the other *M*A*S*H* episodes that discussed mental health in military men, in that it is the only one to include the psychological hospital. Every other time Dr. Sidney Freedman is included in the storyline, he travels to the *M*A*S*H* unit himself, visiting his patients as they live or are treated at the camp. Here, though, the writers decided to remove Hawkeye from the physical space of the camp, believably because this is the first time that an event at the camp was the purpose of Sidney’s visit. For the patients that come through the hospital, their traumas took place on the battlefield; for the doctors, nurses, and other *M*A*S*H* residents, their trauma either happened in the past and was repressed, or is an event that happened at home and they were unable to return to work through. It also works within the storyline, because the only thing Hawkeye wants to do when he is a patient at the hospital is return to his unit and do the work the army drafted him to do: save lives. He is angry that he is being held away from his need to help others, and Sidney uses this as part of his therapy, reminding him that he can only return to the operating table once he has faced the event that took him away from it. In fact, the trauma that Hawkeye underwent, witnessing a woman smother her own child in hopes of saving them from the enemy, is not fictitious, but something Burt Metcalfe, one of the writers and creators of the show, heard when he went to Korea to interview before writing the later seasons of the show (Wittebols). By including narratives just like this one, the writers of *M*A*S*H* were actively attempting to make their show more realistic to the audience, important especially given the time period for the

show. Much of the audience themselves would have been veterans for the Vietnam War and could have experienced the same atrocities depicted in the show. Portraying a character as well-known as Hawkeye Pierce struggling with PTSD and being treated for it, the minds behind *M*A*S*H* were bringing the idea of mental health treatment into the conversation, backing away from the historic stigma against it.

***American Sniper* (2014)**

Depictions of post-traumatic disorders in popular media did not end with the series finale of *M*A*S*H* in 1983. Many popular movies include characters that have been affected by a trauma in their past, and stories that follow soldiers home after fighting in war as they struggled with reacclimation, especially after 1988's "National Vietnam Veterans Study" revealed that around one-third of Vietnam war veterans suffered from some form of PTSD, many still showing symptoms even decades after they saw combat (Stump). Around this time, the portrayal of soldiers suffering from post-traumatic disorders in the media grew as the studies continued to show the immense numbers of veterans who struggled with it. These portrayals included *Born on the Fourth of July*⁴ (1989) and *Heaven and Earth*⁵ (1993); but these portrayals have continued through the Gulf War and the War in Iraq to present popular media to include more recent movies like 2008's *Hurt Locker*⁶ and 2014's *American Sniper*, which is arguably the most popular recent blockbuster war-related movie. This movie was nominated for Best Picture and

⁴ Based on the autobiography of Ron Kovic, who enlisted in the Marines. During his combat, he accidentally kills a fellow American soldier and becomes permanently paralyzed, only to return home to a Veterans' Administration that does not help him and other citizens who do not understand what he went through.

⁵ In this movie, Vietnamese civilian Le Ly is brutalized and raped after leaving her all-but-destroyed small village only to find herself in a string of other desperate situations. She meets an American soldier Steve Butler and the two fall in love, but he struggles with post-traumatic anger and depression and commits suicide.

⁶ This film follows the stories of three men in a U.S. Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit as they struggle with the loss of their friends and the stressors they meet during their time in combat.

five other awards and holds the record for the highest-grossing military movie ever (McClintock). This movie is based on the autobiography of Chris Kyle, the sniper with the most confirmed kills in military history. Though much of the movie focuses on the time he is deployed, following him as he becomes the most prolific sniper in history, it also includes multiple scenes depicting Kyle's difficulty returning home from war. One scene in particular shows Kyle, alone in his living room during a summer barbecue, staring at the blank television, though sounds from a battlefield memory block out the noise around him. He moves outside and is seated beside his wife, watching the picnic around him, especially focused on a dog as it plays



Fig. 5: Chris Kyle at the Picnic,
American Sniper
Image from FANCAPS

with a few children. One of them falls down and the dog begins to lick their neck and face, bringing playful screams from the child — but in Kyle's head, they are not playful at all, and he rushes across the yard to tear the dog away from the child. Not realizing where he is, he brings his arm up to beat the dog, but his wife screams his name and pulls him back to reality, distress

hitting him as he realizes what he was about to do. This, paired with his constant scares from loud sounds and music and the struggles he has in being present around his wife and kids, leads him to understand that he should get help for his post-traumatic disorder. Part of his therapy comes from helping other suffering veterans, which proves helpful to him given his main regret from his time as a Marine is “all the guys [he] couldn't save.” However, Kyle's story still ends with a tragedy: he begins to spend time at the range with other veterans and is fatally shot one day by another man suffering from PTSD.

DSM-5 and Modern Day PTSD

Since the diagnosis for PTSD was first published in 1980, it has changed slightly. The most current edition of the DSM-5 includes four categories of symptoms: intrusion, avoidance, alterations to mood, and alterations to arousal or reactivity; the patient must also show symptoms for more than a month and a strong change to daily function (“What Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?”). The DSM-5 also includes diagnoses for related conditions such as acute stress disorder, which manifests itself between three days to a month after the trauma and usually goes on to become PTSD; and adjustment disorder, which can occur when an individual’s response to a stressful event is more severe than would be expected. As more survivors of trauma seek treatment for what they have been through, we continue to learn more about post-traumatic disorders and the ways they manifest themselves, which includes the creation of a new diagnosis for things like reactive attachment disorder in young children who lack the ability to form attachments due to a childhood full of deprivation.

Another disorder that stems from PTSD is complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), which includes among its regular symptoms the inability to self-regulate or control emotion, specifically anger; very low self-esteem paired with an inability to see oneself in a positive light; and an avoidance of social situations and inability to create and sustain relationships (Villata et al. 2). The difference between previously recognized post-traumatic stress disorder and CPTSD is a “greater functional impairment” caused by the severe emotional dysregulation found in these victims (3). It is also believed that the differences between PTSD and CPTSD are due to prolonged exposure to trauma and an inability for the victim to escape the circumstances under which the trauma takes place (Hyland et al. 1). In their study on CPTSD in female adolescents who have suffered from sexual assault, Villalta et. al., describe some of the

symptoms that severe trauma may induce in victims, such as that it “may disrupt capacities in self-organization as well as triggering core post-traumatic symptoms (i.e., re-experiencing traumatic memories, cognitive and behavioral avoidance of traumatic reminders, and a persistent sense of threat); there is still not much research on CPTSD, especially relating to adolescents and young adults who have suffered from sexual assault and trauma” (2). But even with a small sample group, the study was able to find a series of disturbances that regularly occur in those who suffer from CPTSD. This altered diagnosis will be used in the second chapter of this thesis with the discussion of Jessica Jones, given her background with personal and sexual trauma and the inclusion of some of these added symptoms in the depiction of her post-traumatic disorder.

Portrayals of post-traumatic stress disorder on small and big screens alike have only escalated since *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and since Hawkeye's repressed traumatic memories became dinner table conversation in 1983. Movies about wars have increasingly discussed not only the terror of war, but the terrifying aftermath of what soldiers experience after returning home; television shows like *CSI: New York*⁷ (2004-2013) and *Stumptown*⁸ (2019) include main characters who have experienced trauma while fighting wars that has scarred them, and *Law & Order: SVU*⁹ (1999-present) constantly discusses the importance of therapy after sexual assault to lessen the after-effects of trauma.

⁷ Mac Taylor, played by Gary Sinise and the lead CSI through the whole of the series, was a Marine injured in the Beirut Bombings and who fought in the Gulf War, then was a New York City cop for a while before becoming a CSI (“Mac Taylor”). Because of his traumatic war experiences and injuries, he is sometimes portrayed as having war flashbacks, especially following loud noises.

⁸ Dex Parios, played by Colbie Smulders, is a discharged Marine who struggles with PTSD, as well as alcoholism and gambling addiction, and becomes a private investigator to try to work her way out of her debt. Throughout the series, she is depicted as having intrusive flashbacks, especially in moments she is reminded of her deployment, such as loud noises, flashing lights, and being in company of those who knew her best friend, Benny, whose death she witnessed.

⁹ Members of the “Special Victims’ Unit” investigate crimes related to sexual assault and trauma. Many times, these victims are shown attending different types of therapy because of their traumas, or the detectives having difficult conversations with them.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe

The Marvel Cinematic Universe, continually growing more popular as it adds more films to the ongoing story, has begun including more depictions of characters who struggle with mental illness. Even with its earliest releases, Marvel has not shied away from showing the darker sides of its own heroes, portraying broken people with traumatic backgrounds and difficult emotions, starting at the very beginning with *Iron Man* (2008) on the big screen. While this film focuses on Tony Stark's building of the Iron Man suit and his rebranding from weapons dealer to superhero, it also tells the story of an

alcoholic with anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders who finds peace in helping other people. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) includes Sam Wilson, who becomes the "Falcon," leading a therapy group for veterans; in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), James "Bucky" Barnes, the ex-"Winter

Soldier", is trying to re-adapt to civilian life after decades of working as a Soviet hitman. As the most recent Marvel media, this will be briefly discussed in the conclusion of this paper as a way of moving forward with depictions of trauma and therapy.

Due to their popularity, Marvel has branched out from theatre-released blockbuster movies to developing limited series for television and streaming platforms, including ABC's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020) and *Agent Carter* (2015-2016) and the most recent limited series releases on Disney+, *Wandavision* (2020) and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021).



Fig. 6: Sam Wilson Leading a Therapy Group, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*

Image from movie-screencaps

This also gave them the freedom to include content more suited for mature audiences by releasing series on Netflix, where they are able to discuss more complex and darker storylines that would not be acceptable in box office-topping movies. Matt Murdock's *Daredevil* (2015-2018), the first to be released on that platform, is a blind vigilante who struggles between his identities as a lawyer, a Catholic, and a "hero"; *Jessica Jones*' (2015-2019) title character is an alcoholic private investigator who got her powers as a result of an accident that killed the rest of her family, from which she never mentally recovered. *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) tackles the problems of racism, police brutality, and violence against black men. *The Punisher* (2017-2019), the most recent to be introduced, is the darkest series yet, focusing on Frank Castle, an ex-Marine who comes home only to witness his family brutally murdered and becomes a vigilante to take down those he believes were responsible. Within these series, Marvel has been able to tackle some of the more serious topics that are harder to discuss in family-friendly blockbusters, though they are included in some of the original comics: addiction, alcoholism, vigilantism, and mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. It is understandable for Marvel to avoid these heavy topics in movies meant to be enjoyed by families, but by releasing these series on a streaming platform, where they can be rated for mature audiences without affecting box office sales, Marvel is able to portray these darker subjects. By doing so, they are opening up the conversation around these very topics, bringing them to the forefront of mainstream comic and pop culture discussions, similar to the way Hawkeye Pierce's PTSD became a household topic in 1983. And, given the stigma against mental disorders and seeking mental help that has existed since symptoms similar to PTSD have were first understood, discussing not only mental disorders but also including portrayals of seeking treatment or finding help outside traditional

psychiatry shows members of the audience who may struggle with related things that there is nothing wrong with seeking treatment themselves.

This becomes especially true in two shows within the Marvel Cinematic/TV Universe, *The Punisher* and *Jessica Jones*. In both of these shows, each character introduced in the show has suffered from some sort of trauma, some related to time in combat, as many cinematic portrayals are. But in a way not typically seen in media that portrays combat trauma, many of these characters are able to seek treatment from the disorders that ail them, which goes against the narrative that has been around for 150 years, backed by the military: that trauma makes one weak and cowardly. By depicting these characters going to therapy, either personal or group, and being able to face their fears and their abusers, the creators behind this show are telling their audience that there is nothing cowardly about finding help when it is needed, whether that help be within traditional therapy or not. The second show, *Jessica Jones*, focuses on a more personal trauma, mostly between the main character, Jessica, and her past abuser, Kilgrave. Many of the depictions of trauma, especially those that became big box-office hits, centered around trauma related to combat and military tours, but by choosing to portray the struggle of a single character with the man who abused her, the creators behind this show are bringing victims of personal assaults into the conversation — especially with Jessica being a woman, whose stories of survival and perseverance from abusers are not often included in mainstream stories.

Additionally, Jessica does not find her peace through any form of traditional therapy; in fact, she rejects tradition, refusing to continue with therapy sessions thinking she can overcome her PTSD herself. Instead, Jessica finds the strength she needs in the community that forms around her as she goes after Kilgrave, in her relationship with other people. Not everyone responds to therapy, and Jessica's story allows any audience members who may have suffered something similar to

Jessica to feel a sense of visibility in a conversation that usually does not include them. This is also true within *The Punisher*, which brings multiple characters together to find vengeance and peace through connecting with each other and the outside world.

Perhaps most importantly, both of these shows include portrayals of characters who are not totally healed at the end of their stories, giving weight to the understanding that trauma does not always go away. Even after both Frank Castle and Jessica Jones face their trauma and take down those responsible for it, they are both still affected by the symptoms of their PTSD, unable to completely move on from their histories. Many depictions like to tie up stories of trauma with a happy ending, showing characters who have faced their fears or their abusers and come out completely healed at the end, even though this is rarely the case in reality. By including characters whose struggles with mental health do not end in the last scene, the creators of these shows are choosing to portray the realistic side of trauma in that it often continues to affect the victim's life, even after therapy and reparations have seemingly "healed" them.

The Punisher and *Jessica Jones* both feature narratives deeply rooted in the trauma many of the characters suffer, which will be the main focus for the two chapters of this thesis. The first chapter will analyze the depictions of different characters in *The Punisher*, discussing the dynamic way post-traumatic disorders are portrayed differently within separate characters. The second chapter of this thesis will further discuss Jessica's struggle with CPTSD, looking specifically at the different ways it manifests itself and how the different symptoms are depicted to affect her daily life. The concluding chapter will include a brief history of the stigma against mental disorders and mental health therapy before looking at how the inclusion of therapy in these shows is working against these stigmas. It will end with a discussion of how Marvel is pushing the narrative that trauma is everywhere and can be felt by anyone regardless of

background, as well as the importance of creating friendships and connections to the people around you in order to heal from trauma.

Chapter One: “The Only Way Out is to Find Something That You Care About”: *The Punisher* and Varying Portrayals of Post-Traumatic Disorders

“I look at these guys, myself, so messed up by what we’ve done. What we were sent to do. It makes me wonder how anyone just comes back and carries on.” - Dinah Madani, S2E5: “One Eyed Jack”

Since his introduction in 1974 as a villain in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129, “The Punisher Strikes Twice!”, Frank Castle/“The Punisher” has never shied away from using extreme violence. Before his introduction into the Marvel Cinematic Universe through the Netflix series *Daredevil*, Frank Castle appeared in three separate *Punisher* movies: *The Punisher*, 1989,



Fig. 7: Thomas Jane as Frank Castle in 2004’s *The Punisher*

Image from GeekTyrant

starring Dolph Lundgren; *The Punisher*, 2004, starring Thomas Jane; and *The Punisher: War Zone*, 2008, starring Ray Stephenson. Just like the original comics, all previous versions of the Punisher have centered themselves around graphic, sometimes obscene violence, like shoving Billy Russo’s face into a recycling plant’s

glass grinder in *Punisher: War Zone* (2008) or when Thomas Jane’s Punisher (2004) stuck a knife up through the bottom jaw and into the brain of a man who was already dying. But while still keeping the amount of violence known to be a part of the Punisher’s character, the 2017 Netflix series focuses not on wild, cinematic gunplay but on the personal and psychological conflicts between the characters, using this version of Frank Castle, played by Jon Bernthal, to tell the story of a man with a dark and troubled past who uses violence in response to the violences that he has suffered. Further, this version of the story does not only focus on Frank’s

story, but includes many characters around him, all of which have suffered traumas of their own and are struggling with manifestations of their own traumatic events.

This change from the previous film versions is in part due to the specific way Jon Bernthal decided to portray his character, hoping that his depiction of him would be viewed more as “a complicated examination of grief and trauma, not an exploitation of assault” (“The Punisher character...”). Bernthal went into his portrayal of Frank with a lot of questions, many of them regarding just where the man’s drive comes from, turning to accounts and conversations with real-life veterans who struggle with some of the same challenges portrayed in the show. This, he has said, is the “great joy,” the “treasure” of his role — being able to meet and discuss these very real problems with men that he looks up to (Mancuso). He takes his role seriously, able to portray such a complex character and tell a story that he believes is important, especially to many suffering in similar ways as portrayed on the show. Bernthal even speaks of this in an interview, explaining what he has learned researching his role and conversing with veterans who have lived the same sorts of events written into Castle’s past:

For a lot of folks, I think when you suffer trauma, to be on-mission, to have a direction, to have an enemy that you know of and to be in it with likeminded people, it provides some sort of quiet from the storm. The monsters start to come in the quiet and when you have nothing to fight for... He has to deal with the fact that it’s when he’s not on-mission, when he’s not literally going after the worst of the worst, that’s when innocent people start to die... I don’t think he’s ever been a guy too concerned with finding peace of mind or finding love. He’s sadly at home in the blackness and in the darkness. (Mancuso)

Because of the work put in by Bernthal and other minds behind the series, this telling of the Punisher is able to take the story of a violent man and broaden the conversation around him to

include more sensitive topics, like issues with gun violence, the difficulty soldiers face when returning home from combat, and different manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder. Instead of the violent action-led stories of the past, movies filled with more fights and gunfire than plot, the creators behind this series have chosen to focus instead on the world that exists outside of Castle's actions, the realistic world filled with trauma and violence. By doing this, the creators tell a story not just about Castle, but about his connections to the people around him; about not only his struggle with trauma, but with the ingrained idea that trauma is everywhere, experienced by everyone, which is true not only for the characters in *The Punisher* but throughout Marvel's other shows, like *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones*, as well as the greater MCU.

The creators of this iteration of the Punisher are aware of how their narrative could affect the world around it, and have based some of their recent decisions on real-world issues. This is especially true with subjects of widespread discussion within the current political environment. This includes not only the portrayal of veterans fighting the same real-world battles as some of these characters, living on the same streets and constantly dealing with the same sorts of violence and crime portrayed in these shows, but also subjects more fraught, like gun violence and gun control. Bernthal has spoken out about his portrayal of Frank multiple times, but perhaps the most telling interview of his happened following the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting¹⁰, after which Marvel and Netflix decided to postpone their sneak peek of *The Punisher* at New York Comic Con, deciding the violent nature of the series was inappropriate to flout following the deadly shooting. They knew that Frank Castle has always been a character whose story relies

¹⁰ On October 1, 2017, 64 year old Stephen Paddock fired over 1,000 shots from his apartment window into the crowd attending the nearby Harvest Festival. Between the gunfire and the chaotic scene afterward, over 800 people were injured and 61 were dead. It is the deadliest mass shooting by a single shooter in modern American history, and his motivations were never understood because he ended the night by fatally shooting himself. For more, read Pearce; Levenson; Bui, et al.

heavily on gun violence — sometimes unnecessarily brutal amounts of it — and decided to delay introducing a character known to use weapons similar to those used by the shooter, acknowledging the nationwide trauma felt following the shooting. In response to this, Bernthal told reporters he hoped that his portrayal of Frank showed him not as a man who idolizes and exploits violence, but as “a guy who is in unbelievable pain, and there’s an unbelievable cost to the violence that he’s gone through in his life” (“*The Punisher* character...”). Instead of glorifying violence, the 2017 *Punisher* series focuses on overcoming trauma and forming connections with others to help heal from the violence seen both during combat and at home.

Many of the characters in Marvel’s darker Netflix series have tragic backstories, and Frank Castle, an ex-Marine who returns home only to witness his family’s murder, is only one of many characters within the series who suffers from PTSD, some of them, like Frank, due to their time in a war zone. Including multiple characters who suffer from PTSD allows this show to explore the spectrum of symptoms related to PTSD and the different ways it can manifest itself in different people. This allows for a more rounded and realistic reading of trauma and post-traumatic disorders that acknowledges the fact that every individual reacts to trauma differently. The analysis of this series’ depiction of post-traumatic disorders is split into three separate characters, discussed separately to avoid juggling the different plots that run together through the two seasons. After a brief introduction of Curtis Hoyle, who attempts to help each character move towards peace, I will first analyze Lewis Wilson’s struggle with readapting to civilian life after his tour of combat; second, Frank’s first season drive for revenge against his family’s murders and second season search for a new mission when he has accomplished the first; and Billy Russo’s struggle with amnesia due to the traumatic brain injury he receives at the end of

season one. Lastly, the chapter will close by returning to Curtis Hoyle and discussing how each character is aided in overcoming their trauma by the connections they build to the people around them.

Curtis Hoyle: Finding Peace and Successfully Assimilating to Civilian Life

FRANK: How often do you think about it? The shit we did over there?

CURT: All the time. But my conscience is clear. ("3AM")

Curtis Hoyle¹¹ served with Frank Castle in Afghanistan as a Navy corpsman. Unlike many of the characters that the show chooses to focus on, Curtis finds a positive outlet upon coming back to the States by leading a counseling group for other veterans who suffer from PTSD or have trouble returning to civilian life. In the episode “Kandahar,” Curtis explains his ability to have a positive outlook after all that has happened to him, telling his support group, “A



Fig. 8: Curtis Leads a Therapy Session, “Kandahar”

Image from MCU Wiki via fandom.org

good man risked his life to save mine. Yeah. And I decided not to throw away that gift he gave me. So I got a job... started my second life. And now I take pride in living that life well” (“Kandahar”). He does not forget what happened to him during his time at war, has the physical reminder of his prosthetic leg, but also chooses constantly, every

day, not to focus on the past, but to live a changed life that honors the men and women who have fallen, focusing the energy of his own mental hardships on helping other veterans through theirs.

¹¹ Hoyle only appears in two comics (The Punisher, volume 2, #1 and #2, July and August 1987), where he meets and then is killed by Frank Castle (“Curtis Hoyle, Earth 616”)

Curtis is the only character in the show whose wounds are fiercely physical, having lost one of his legs in combat. He has seen some of the same atrocities that Frank has and, like many of the veterans portrayed in the show, also suffers from mild symptoms of PTSD, but he is much more at peace with his time in the military than many of the other characters. This physical disability is barely discussed in the show and the two are compared only once, ignoring the idea that soldiers with physical trauma have a higher chance of suffering from mental disorders¹².

Neither the mild symptoms of his PTSD nor his identity as a disabled man affect Curtis' ability to re-acclimate into civilian society, and he is able to find a positive outlet upon coming back to the States by leading a counseling group for other veterans. But, more than this, Curtis is able to articulate why he and Frank have found very different outlets. In episode one, "3 AM," Curtis tells Frank that, by continuing to focus on Maria and his family even though there is nothing he can do about it, the "only person [he is] punishing" is himself ("3 AM"). When Frank asks Curtis what he regrets, he says nothing. He has made peace with everything he has done, and this is the main difference between him and Frank — hence why Curtis can focus his attention on helping others while Frank is still out seeking revenge for what was done to his family. Curtis also plays an important piece in the story of every other character within the series, providing friendship and acting as a sounding board for some of those who will be discussed through the rest of this chapter.

¹² For more on this, read Wong, et al; and Wiseman, et al.

Lewis Wilson: Constricted Affect, Emotional Instability, and Suicide

“I just know that I fought for this country and that it’s got no place for me. [...] We risked our lives and we did terrible things, and it meant nothing when we got home” (“3AM”)

Throughout the first season, Lewis Wilson¹³ struggles from PTSD, with constricted affect, emotional instability, and suicide being his depicted symptoms. Though he becomes one of the antagonists of the first season, Lewis Wilson is introduced to viewers through a veteran’s therapy group. He joins them after being sent home from his tour in Iraq, though he regrets nothing he did during his tour with the First Infantry Division; as he tells the group of veterans during a group therapy session, he “hated the enemy ‘cause [he] had to, but [he] respected them,” and the memories of the people he killed “don’t haunt” him (“Kandahar”). Instead, the incident that triggers him was a press officer reporting an American Apache hitting American troops as an “enemy ambush” instead of “friendly fire,” which he viewed as disrespectful of the dead soldiers. This became a fear of his, manifesting in nightmares of the press lying about something he did and causing him to be discredited for the time he served, which escalated into the PTSD that caused his dishonorable discharge, which only got worse following his return home.

The first time the show brings Lewis’ PTSD to the forefront is at the end of episode three, when his father wakes him from yet another nightmare only for Lewis to fire a shot from the service pistol he keeps under his pillow, missing his father’s head by only a few inches. After this, he realizes that he is putting his father



Fig. 9: Curtis Visits Lewis in his Makeshift Trench, “Resupply”

Image from kissthemgoodbye.net

¹³ Wilson’s character was created specifically for the show, not appearing in the comics of other previous versions of the story.

at risk by staying in his basement, so he decides to dig himself a trench in the yard¹⁴ and sleep out there instead. At this point, his father has no idea how to help Lewis and so he calls Curtis, knowing Lewis was part of the therapy group he leads. Curtis shows up and tries to talk to him, but his words are continually muffled by Lewis' brain, unheard by both him and viewers as Lewis fidgets with his dog tags hanging around his neck. Being back home bothers him, and he wishes that he were still able to fight for his country, but he cannot, riddled with nightmares at home that he never experienced when he was deployed. Lewis also thinks that his discharge should have been due to a physical injury, that he should have "gotten something" the way Curtis has with the loss of one of his legs, a physical reminder of the sacrifices he made, but Curtis explains the flaws in his point of view:

LEWIS: And you got that over there? Your leg?

CURTIS: 'You got that over there.' Are you listening to yourself? I didn't get nothing over there, I lost it. No, seriously, somewhere on a Baghdad rooftop there's a size 11 boot with my foot still in it.

LEWIS: You know what I meant.

CURTIS: I think I do know what you meant, but I don't think *you* know what you meant. You see, when you look in a mirror, you still see a soldier. And out on these streets, that soldier is invisible to everyone else. If only you'd got something over there, like half your face burnt off or a hook for a hand. That's what you meant. ("Resupply")

Lewis tells him that he never suffered from nightmares or inability to sleep or anything he is feeling now when he was deployed, but now that he is home, he cannot get away from these things. He finds this especially degrading because he has no visible scars from his combat the

¹⁴ This can be a common thing for soldiers who have returned home to do when they are struggling returning to civilian life; in the same scene, Curtis tells Lewis that his father, a Vietnam veteran, did the same.

way Curtis does, because all of his scars are in his mind. He is among those who view mental trauma as stigmatic, not as viable as the physical wounds of combat — and the fact that he was discharged because of them only makes it worse.

Lewis applies to the private military contractor group ANVIL, run by Billy Russo, who served with Frank and Curtis. All he wants is to be able to continue to fight for his country, and since he can no longer do it through the military, this is the next best option for him. However, after Curtis hears he has applied to Billy's company, he tells his friend,

CURTIS: You won't be doing him or yourself any favors if you put him in combat situations. I'm telling you, man, if I was out there, I wouldn't want that kid watching my six. And a team's only as good as its weakest link, right?

BILLY: And this one would snap?

CURTIS: Only a matter of time. ("Resupply")

Being turned down by ANVIL only angers him further, and it is the last straw. After this, the manifestation of his PTSD quickly escalates from nightmares to physical violence, especially towards O'Conner, one of the men from Curtis' therapy group, when Lewis learns he is a fraud who never actually served in Vietnam as he claimed he did. This specifically angers Lewis because O'Conner is feeding on the fears of veterans — fears that Lewis finds very real and absolutely terrifying, to the point where they caused the nightmares that led to his discharge. When Lewis confronts him, his anger gets the best of him. They begin to fight, O'Conner stabbing Lewis in the stomach, but he quickly overpowers the older man, gains control of the knife, and stabs him back. Here, something in him snaps, and the music swells as he continues to repeatedly stab O'Conner, his desire changing from anger to self-defense to rage far beyond simply wanting to kill him.

Almost immediately, he begins to lose control of his emotions, the ramifications of his actions becoming more real as he realizes what he has done, and his expression changes from one full of rage to one seeping with regret. He paces, working through a myriad of emotions, unsure of what to do as he watches O’Conner die in front of him (“The Judas Goat”). Given this, though, he is surprisingly emotionless as he washes the blood off of his hands and tends to the wound on his hip, his movements deliberate, matching the soft music playing in the background of the scene, which continues as he cleans up the murder scene. Though he spends a few moments of the scene seemingly regretting his actions, his response to it all could be viewed as what the medical literature refers to as “constricted affect,” when the survivor of the trauma is unable to portray the appropriate emotions, especially at times that may cause recollection of the traumatic events (Stanborough). When he gets home, his father is there even though he should be at work, and he tries to cover his blood-covered hands from the only person that seems to care for him anymore. It is obvious that his father is worried about him, and though he offers to help Lewis in any way possible, Lewis tells him, “There’s nothing you can do,” but accepts the sleeping pills he offers (“Crosshairs”). Similar to his lack of feeling after O’Conner’s murder, he is unable to reply to his father’s words of affection, and is completely stoic as his dad hugs him.



Fig. 10: Lewis Contemplating Suicide, “Crosshairs”

Image from *kissthemgoodbye*

However, once his father leaves the house once again, he is forced to face his actions now that there is no one to save him from the thoughts in his head, obsessing over what he has done.

Here, the camera goes shaky, flashing between cuts of Lewis as he spirals: pacing across his basement bedroom, unable to stop the shaking

of his hands as the pounding of his heart grows louder than the background music. He struggles to breathe and holds back tears, all before cocking the pistol that has been in the waistband of his jeans the whole time. He puts the barrel in his mouth, and the music grows louder again as his hands shake, but he does not do it (“Crosshairs”). The next time viewers see him, he is joining his father on the couch in their living room, where they share a pizza and some beers and watch the classic 1974 Muhammad Ali fight together. He tries to confess to his father, but he will not hear it, thinking that everything Lewis has done was in the military (“Crosshairs”).

Over the next few episodes, Lewis’ emotions continue to spiral out of control, obsessing over the thoughts and ideas that O’Conner put into his head, especially the fact that America leaves their veterans behind and does nothing to help them when they return from the wars that the politicians start. He continues to grow more violent, turning towards domestic terrorism and building bombs to attack the ATF Field Office, a police precinct, and a courthouse. After altercations with both Curtis and Frank, Lewis sets his sights higher and plans to assassinate second-amendment-fighting Senator Stan Ori, who just happens to be protected by ANVIL, the same company that turned him down earlier. However, it is here that he runs into Frank Castle, and is forced to take Karen Page¹⁵ as a hostage, using the bomb he has strapped to his chest to keep Frank away as he pulls Karen into an elevator and tries to use her to escape, revealing that he never planned on surviving his attack on Senator Ori and was willing to take anyone who opposed him down, as well. Once they reach the basement, Lewis begins to lose control after nothing has gone as planned. Karen tries to talk sense into him, tries to get him to reveal the next

¹⁵ Karen Page was first introduced in *Daredevil*, where she became secretary for the law firm that defends Castle. She was the first character to sympathize with Frank and used her journalistic connections to find out more about who Castle was before his crimes in hopes of proving him innocent. After this, she becomes one of his only allies, along with Curt, and one of very few people that knows he is still alive after his supposed death in season 2, episode 12 of *Daredevil*. Throughout *The Punisher*, the next chronological piece of Frank’s story, they maintain their friendship and Frank feels a need to protect her. She is present in this scene to interview the senator Lewis is attacking.

step of his plan, but he is rambling, telling her he refuses to go to jail and reciting a poem drilled into his mind by his sergeant. This poem, “The Young British Soldier” by Rudyard Kipling (1889), provides advice to young soldiers about how to handle battlefield struggles and military



Fig. 11: Standoff Between Frank and Lewis, “Virtue of the Vicious”

Image from *kissthemgoodbye*

life. The strict structure of the military was what provided stability in Lewis’ life, and the loss of this adds to his inability to reacclimate to civilian life, where there are no rigid structures and rules to follow. After Frank and Karen defuse the bomb, though, Lewis realizes that he has lost control of his plans and, seeing no other end, he locks himself in

the walk-in freezer, rewires the bomb, and blows himself to his death, reciting the lines of the Kipling poem that advise him to do just that:

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
 And the women come out to cut up what remains,
 Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
 An' go to your Gawd like a soldier. (Kipling)

Lewis’ story is one of anguish, one that shows an even darker side of post-traumatic stress disorder in American veterans than Frank Castle’s. Lewis’ reversion to suicide and the fact that he honestly believed he had no other options than to resort to violence and terrorism are among the characteristics of mental disorders that are often ignored, seen as too violent for media to portray. But instead of ignoring it, this is just another way that Marvel uses its Netflix series, particularly *The Punisher*, to discuss darker, grittier sides of mental disorders.

Frank Castle: Nightmares and Survivor's Guilt

"You know, as long as I was at war, I never thought about, uh, what would happen next. What I was going to do when it was over. But I guess that's it. I think that might be the hardest part, the silence. The silence when the gunfire ends. How do you live in that?" ("Memento Mori")

After returning home from his most recent Afghanistan deployment, Frank Castle is the only survivor of an attack on his family. Even though he was involved with Cerberus, a secret heroin smuggling operation funded by the U.S. military and was basically used as a government hitman, it is not until he witnesses the death of his wife and children that he begins to suffer from symptoms of PTSD. Even though he regretted what he did while part of Cerberus, he was still able to return home to his family and have something to live for. But when that is taken away from him, too, he is no longer able to cope, turning all of his energy towards taking down everyone responsible for and connected to the death of his family¹⁶. After this, Frank tries his best to rejoin civilian society. The first episode of the *Punisher* opens with him killing the rest of the men whom he believes were connected to the death of his family, obviously unable to separate himself from that event no matter how hard he tries. During these scenes, the camera changes between shots of Frank, shots of the people he is after, and shots of the picture of his family Frank keeps with him, reminding both Frank and viewers why all of this is happening, what Frank's drive is. The last he kills, connected to the Irish Mob hit from *Daredevil*, gets to have a conversation with him about his purpose:

MICKEY: You won. You killed everyone. The bikers, the cartels, the Kitchen Irish. They're all gone.

FRANK: Yeah, almost.

¹⁶ This happens in the second season of *Daredevil*, where Frank's character is introduced to the MCU. He is on trial for killing members of the mob, who he believes were responsible for his family's deaths, and is represented in court by the main characters of that series.

MICKEY: I get it. An eye for an eye and all that. I got a family of my own.

FRANK: I don't.

MICKEY: For God's sake, man, killing me isn't gonna bring yours back. What does it change when I'm dead?

FRANK: Nothing. ("3AM")

Nothing will change with these people dead, not even for Frank. With everyone dead, he is still not able to move beyond the death of his family. Six months pass, and he is living under the name Pete Castiglione in a small apartment in New York City and working for a construction company, where he is able to focus his anger on demolition work — but it does not work, and he is not able to move on. He is shown working through an entire workday, already there in the morning when the other men show up and still there after the sun goes down, taking a sledgehammer to a concrete wall. Once he is by himself, though, he lets his anger get the best of him, furiously screaming with each hit between momentary glimpses of a carousel. Viewers familiar with his arc in *Daredevil* recognize this scene as the one that replays the most in his head, of the day his wife and children were killed. By including these breaks into what is going through Frank's mind as he beats away at the concrete, viewers are reminded once again that everything he does is for his family, and even six months after killing the last man responsible, he still cannot get them out of his head.

Frank returns home at the end of the day, and the memories of his family follow him there. He sees them as he washes his hands, the blisters from never-ending days with the sledgehammer always present; he is reminded of them, of the meals they shared together, as he sits alone at his small table. A picture of them sits beside his bed, presumably the last thing he sees before he turns out the lights. He dreams of them at night, wakes believing for a moment

they are still alive until the brutal reality hits him. Every morning, Frank is awoken with the same memory: Maria, his wife, enters their room, bright with the morning sun, and wakes Frank. Each time the dream is shown, a piece gets added to it, and by the end of the first episode, it turns from a happy memory to a nightmare, with a ski-mask wearing soldier entering the room and shooting Maria in the back of the head. After this, Frank returns to the construction site, sledgehammer in hand, and the memories of Maria and his children that day at the carousel flash between hits once more.

These nightmares continue throughout the course of the first season, growing to include more people as time passes, creating a visual link between Frank's deepest fears and the people he allows himself to get closest to. The biggest example of this would be Frank's nightmare in episode six, "The Judas Goat," where it includes not only his wife and kids, but the entire Lieberman family, who he has been helping out at the request of David¹⁷, since the world



Fig. 12: A Scene from Frank's Nightmare, "The Judas Goat"

Image from [kissthemgoodbye](#)

believes he is still dead. The fact that his nightmares grow to include this family as another group that he is not able to protect shows viewers that Frank's fears have only grown as he has helped the Liebemanns, now believing that he has put them in harm's way by interacting with them. This becomes especially

¹⁷ David Lieberman, who Frank works and lives with through the whole first season, is the ex-NSA analyst who originally sent the video of Frank assassinating an Afghani citizen for the Cerberus operation to Homeland Security. Similar to Frank, David was shot in front of his family for being a traitor, but survived the attack and lived underground, believed to be dead but watching his family through a series of hidden cameras. He helps Frank clear his name and kill the rest of the men related to the death of his family before they are both given their normal lives back at the end of the first season.

relevant when the man in these recurring dreams removes his ski mask to reveal Frank himself — a visual representation of Frank’s belief that he is the reason all of these people got hurt, and which only gives him a further drive to take down everyone connected to the death of his family as a way not only to enact revenge, but to save the Liebermans from further violence.

But this recurring nightmare constantly reminds Frank that his whole family has been brutally taken from him, while also telling viewers more about the inner workings of his PTSD. During his time as a Marine, Frank aided in raids of whole towns, killed enemies, and ended his time in Afghanistan working for a special classified operation where he was basically used as a hitman — all things he regrets, but none of them the center of his PTSD. Instead of being driven by regret for what he did in Afghanistan, he is driven by his need for revenge for what was done to his family. But when he learns that the mob hit was ordered by the very men he worked under in Afghanistan, he sets his sights on them instead, driving his actions for the rest of the first season.

Not everything about Frank’s constant recollections shows a bad side of trauma, though, a way of portraying a more complex representation of PTSD that includes both happy and traumatic memories. On multiple occasions throughout the show, Frank is shown experiencing flashbacks from afar, as if watching them from the sidelines. These flashbacks are not happening *to* him, like the violent nightmares or the moments he recalls the death of his children as described above, but are more like recollections of better times, not really affecting his current actions, but just a way to remember his family. For example, the beginning of episode two, “Two Dead Men,” opens with one of these scenes, where Frank and his children are on the Staten Island Ferry, approaching the Statue of Liberty. He is having fun with them, laughing as he recalls childhood poems, watching them admire Lady Liberty and discussing with them that he

has to go away and fight to protect their liberties — before getting angry at his son when he says, “Dad goes away so he can kill a lot of hajjis. How many have you wasted anyway, dad?” (“Two Dead Men”). He raises his voice, taking Frankie Jr.’s face in his hand for just a moment and almost immediately consoling him, knowing he has gone too far. In just this scene, viewers experience just how close to his children Frank Castle was, understanding that even in moments where he lost his temper, he was quickly able to correct himself, and just as quickly be forgiven by his kids. He has his arms around both of them, looking out at the water, and the camera zooms out to a man on the other side of the ferry, watching them, only to reveal that it is present-day Frank Castle, recalling this event as another family stands in a similar position where he was just visualizing himself with his kids. He is present in this moment, recalling a better, happier time.

With the help of David Lieberman and some of Frank’s old contacts, they learn that though the hit on his family was done by dueling mobs, the order for it came from Frank’s old commanding officer, William Rawlins. He believed Frank was the one who told Homeland Security about their illegal heroin operation, and plans to kill both Frank and his family. Rawlins along with Frank’s ex-best friend, Billy Russo, go after him, capturing him and using the space he and Lieberman were hiding in to torture him. It is here that Frank learns Billy gave into Rawlins’ monetary offer and became a traitor against everything they used to believe in, and here that Billy reveals he knew about the plan to kill Frank and his family from the beginning. Here, as Frank is fading in and out of consciousness, his dreams are filled with memories of his wife Maria: dancing with her at their wedding, waking up beside her in the morning — and one specific recollection of a conversation with her where she makes him choose where he wants to be: living in his mind, drowning in the memories of the things he was forced to do in Operation: Cerberus; or being present in the moment, spending time with her and their kids. She says:

MARIA: You're back, but you're not really here. More and more of you stays there. Where is home, Frank? Is it here, or is it there? I want to hear you say it.

FRANK: It's here, it's with you. Always. You know that.

MARIA: I don't know that.

[...]

FRANK: I'm here, I'm not going back. I'm gonna stay here, I'm done. I'm gonna stay here, stay with you. ("Home")

This conversation, revealed to be from the morning of the massacre of his family, plays over and over in Frank's head throughout the series, and shows that Frank did struggle when returning from war. Even though he was home, he struggled to be there completely, to be able to focus on his current life instead of what he did during Operation: Cerberus. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that his response to his family's death is so severe: because that very morning, he decided he was done with the military and done being lost in the memory of what he did. That same morning, he decided that his family was his priority, and just hours later, they were violently taken from him. Similarly, in the present, still fading in and out of consciousness, Frank needs to choose where he wants to be, just as he had to choose to be present with his family. But here, he is not choosing between going back to the war or staying in New York; here, his choice is between life and death. He is shown swaying between his dream-world and reality as he loses and regains consciousness, both Maria and Rawlins telling him he has to choose which world to live in:

(Dream) MARIA: It's time. You have to choose.

FRANK: Choose? Don't make me do that.

MARIA: Come home, Frank.

(Reality) RAWLINS: Stay with me, Frank. You're gonna want to be awake for this. [...] It was always gonna come down to you and me, Frank. Time for quid pro quo.

(Dream) MARIA: Come home, Frank. Let's go home. ("Home")

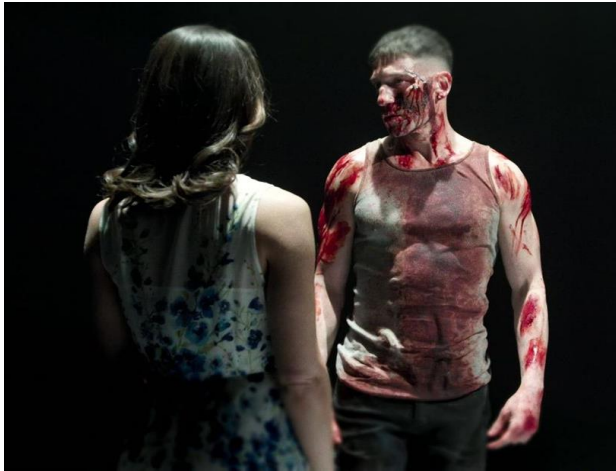


Fig. 13: Frank Bloody in His Dream with Maria, "Home"

Image from [kissthemgoodbye](#)

In his dream, he now appears as the bloodied mess that he is in real life for the first time, covered in wounds from Rawlins' torture instead of the clean Frank from every other dream. This shows the closeness between the two worlds, that Frank is teetering closer to death, where he will be reunited with Maria and his family once again. But, unknown to Rawlins, Billy has all but cut Frank's

restraints, wanting him to retaliate and attack Rawlins himself. He knows that Frank has the strength, drive, and ability to take him down. Frank breaks the restraints, staring up at Rawlins standing over him; in the dream, he lets go of Maria's hand, leaving a trail of blood on her skin where they touched as he tells her, "I am home"; and he stands up, headbutting Rawlins before attacking him with the same ferocity viewers have come to know from the very first episode.

Now that he has learned Billy was knowledgeable about the attack on his family, Frank has a new mission once he is free from being treated for his wounds. After a failed assassination attempt from a rooftop overlooking Curtis' apartment, where Frank knows Billy would start in searching for him, he lets Billy pick the place for their faceoff — and Billy chooses the carousel in Central Park, the place of his family's massacre, knowing how affected he will be in returning to the place he lost his family. And he is right: Billy turns on the carousel to get Frank's

attention, and he is immediately overtaken by memories of that day, of his children laughing and his wife smiling as they all rode on the same carousel. Billy forces him to act, using two innocent teenagers who were working nearby to draw him out of the woods, and even as he concentrates on finding Billy, the carousel music continues to flash his memory back to his family. Even after taking two bullets to his Kevlar vest, Frank is able to overpower Billy and get the upper hand, facing off against him in a gruesome hand-to-hand battle that ends with Frank stabbing him in the stomach with a piece of broken glass before dragging his face down the broken mirror, choosing to let him live, even after he begs for his life, and telling him: “You’re gonna learn about pain. You’re gonna learn about loss. Every morning, I look for ‘em, Bill, I look for ‘em, and then I remember. It’s gonna be the same for you. When you look at your ugly, mangled face, you’re gonna remember what you did. You’ll remember, Bill. You’re gonna remember me” (“Memento Mori”).

Season one ends with Frank getting closure for his family’s death and given a chance to live free from Frank Castle’s past, he sits in a group therapy session run by Curtis. He is speaking to the group, telling them that he is learning how to live “when the gunfire ends” before struggling to find his words. He confides in this group, telling them, “First time, as long as I can remember, I don’t have a war to fight. And I guess, if I’m gonna be honest, I just... I’m scared” (“Memento Mori”). He has taken care of everyone responsible for his family’s murders, has killed everyone but Billy, who is lying close to death in a hospital bed, but still cannot move on with his life.

Most of season two follows Frank and Billy separately, but they come together once more at the episode “The Dark Hearts of Men” when Frank attacks his hideout. Here, Billy uses Frank’s anger towards him to set him up for the deaths of three dead girls, breaking his spirit and

making him believe he is no better than Billy. This effectively stops Frank from going after Billy, and viewers see a side of Frank that has not reared its head since the end of the first season as he begins to have dreams about his family once more, handcuffed to his hospital bed. Here, as he struggles with his identity, his innocence, and the moral compass he has created for himself, his dreams about his wife and children on the day they were killed return. They are the same dreams that he had earlier in the show, memories about their day in Central Park, ending with gunshots as he is violently awoken. Now that he has done something that does not fit with his mission, the memory of being unable to save his family overtakes him, equating the girls he killed with his dead family. After this nightmare, he is unable to control his emotions, and he explains in detail about that day with his family to Karen Page, introduced earlier in this chapter, who is sitting at his bedside¹⁸. Here, he chokes up as he recalls his inability to save his family, even in the moments after they have been shot before they died, and wonders if the girls in the warehouse died the same way, with time between being shot and dying. When Karen tries to talk him down from his anger, she tries to convince him that he did not know what he was doing, trying to tell him that it was all an accident but he tells her, “It’s not that I didn’t know. I didn’t care. I didn’t care. Right then, I would have killed anything that got in my way. You know what that means, right? Now I’m the monster. If any of those pieces of shit that I killed, if they deserved to die, so do I” (“The Abyss”). Here, viewers see a side of Frank that has never been shown before, a man who stutters over his words with tears in his eyes, who has lost his will to live now that he equates himself to the same monsters who killed his family, believing himself to be no better than Billy Russo.

¹⁸ This parallels his first conversation with Karen in *Daredevil* season 2, episode 6, “Regrets Only,” where he tells her the real story of what happened to his family and not the one the police have made up to remove any ideas about Frank being in the right with all of his violent crimes.

However, Dinah and Karen prove that Billy, not Frank, is responsible for the deaths of the three girls, and that he placed them in the office for Frank to find in hopes of causing the same mental spiral he is currently feeling. When they tell Frank that he is innocent, his entire demeanor changes, and he is able to refocus his energy from wallowing in his grief to going after Billy again, finishing their feud once and for all.

Billy Russo: Traumatic Brain Injury and Dissociative Amnesia

“Now... Now, there’s... Something, just — just on the... edges of my mind. It’s like a dark — dark shadow just waiting for me. The thing is, Doc, I deserve to feel the fear. I don’t know why, but I know... I deserve this” (“Scar Tissue”)

Billy Russo is introduced in season one as Frank’s ex-best friend, unaware of the fact that Frank is alive. As Frank learns more about the circumstances around the attack on his family, Billy turns from a side character to the main antagonist of the series, killing a few men and finally admitting that he knew Frank’s family was going to die. Season one ends with a bloody shootout-turned-hand-to-hand-combat fight between Frank and Billy after this revelation. Frank walks away from the battle, but Billy has been badly injured, with wounds from bullets, fists, and cosmetic trauma to his face from the mirror within the same carousel where Frank spent time with his family on the day they were killed; because of these injuries, doctors “have no idea if he’ll ever regain significant brain function, or to what degree. He could wake up tomorrow, or never. Remember everything, or not even his own name” (“Memento Mori”). Given the extent of his trauma, it is not surprising that at the beginning of season two, Billy wakes up from a coma caused by traumatic brain injury (TBI), which also causes him to suffer from amnesia. While it is common in the medical literature for these two diagnoses to appear together, Billy’s amnesia

requires him to spend much of season two remembering not only what Frank did to him at the end of season one, but also that he is the one who pulled the trigger that killed Frank's family.

Billy's struggle with TBI is depicted through multiple symptoms, many of which coincide with medical definitions: "headache; dizziness; weakness; sensitivity to light or sound; cognitive symptoms, including difficulty with attention, memory, or language; and psychological symptoms, including depression, anxiety, or personality changes" (Lentz 49). The first viewers see of this is at the beginning of episode two, "Fight or Flight," where he wakes up from a nightmare, moments of memory from their battle with flashes of the Punisher logo, which cause him to thrash around in his hospital bed. His lack of memory is also revealed here, when he tells Dinah Madani that he does not recognize her, even though they were intimate for a time before she learns he shot her partner, Sam. Dinah believes him to be faking his amnesia, but when she tells this to his therapist, Dr. Dumont replies, "Right now he doesn't have the means to fake



Fig. 14: Dinah Visiting Billy at the Hospital, "Fight or Flight"

Image from [kissthemgoodbye](https://www.kissthemgoodbye.com)

anything" ("Fight or Flight"). Billy and his therapist have been using the metaphor that his injuries "turned his memories and identity into a jigsaw puzzle," something that needs to be unscrambled and put back together, but Dinah still does not believe he forgets anything ("Fight or Flight"). Once she leaves, his therapist reminds him that they have spoken about what he has done recently, and when he cannot

remember even this conversation, he becomes enraged, lashing around his hospital bed in his straitjacket.

The first depicted therapy session in episode two of season two, “Fight or Flight,” has Billy and Dr. Dumont¹⁹ running through his symptoms, which include trouble sleeping, physical pain, loss of memory going all the way back to his deployment, confusion, irritability, and this conversation about his nightmares:

BILLY: I see... the skull. Blood... Breaking glass, always the same.

DUMONT: And they instill feelings of dread?

BILLY: Always the same. They're just dreams, okay?!

DUMONT: Are you scared during the dreams?

BILLY: I don't know, I don't remember.

DUMONT: Do you experience feelings of anxiety when you're awake?

BILLY: You know I do. What — Why? Why do we have to keep doing this?

DUMONT: One day, your answers are gonna be different, and that will matter.

Most of Billy's symptoms are things that cannot be directly treated, so she instead teaches him coping mechanisms, ways to recenter himself when he becomes agitated or scared. The one that seems to work the best, which is continually portrayed throughout his struggles with mental health, is asking him to find “five blue things,” which causes him to focus not on the thoughts overpowering his mind, but on the physical world around him. Though he has no recollection of his fight with Frank, Billy knows that some part of his past has angered him, and he spends a part of season two trying to learn what it is. Dr. Dumont's notes, shown in episode five, “One Eyed Jacks,” show that she believes Billy suffers from a “primal wound” given the fact that his mother

¹⁹ Dr. Dumont's personal history only adds to the overarching idea that everyone can suffer some sort of trauma, and that each person has their own way of facing it. Throughout the second season, it is revealed that her parents had separated, but in episode 11, “The Abyss,” she reveals that her father was a Vietnam vet who struggled reacclimating to society. One night, she tried to console him in the middle of a fight only for him to hold her as he jumped out the window and killed himself, though she lived. This event affected her so strongly that she became a psychiatrist drawn to cases similar to her father and is shown in the series working with other veterans who struggle with post-traumatic disorders.

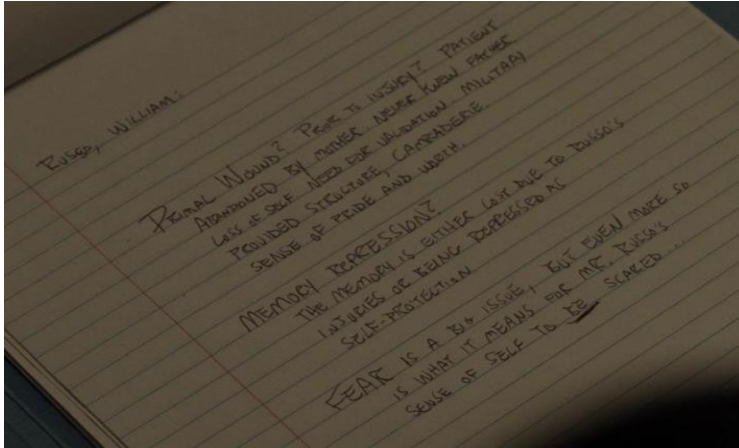


Fig. 15: Dr. Dumont's Notes on Billy, "One Eyed Jacks"

Image from [kissthemgoodbye](http://kissthemgoodbye.com)

abandoned him and he never knew his father, plus the abuse that he experienced as a foster child. He has no memories after his deployment, but can remember some things "clear as day," like the address of Arthur Walsh, one of the guardians he had when he was growing up in the foster system

("Scar Tissue"). Needing somewhere to focus this anger, Billy begins to go after those he knows took part in the abusive childhood that left him so scarred, starting with the brutal murder of Walsh.

Billy's main agitator, though, is his inability to recall not only the attack on him, but much of his life before that. Dr. Dumont is unsure of whether this repression is due to the brain injury or "being repressed as self-protection," according to her notes, but the fact that he has no memory of the traumatic event is obvious ("One Eyed Jacks"). Much like traditional repressed memories, Billy's recollection of the traumatic event comes to him in stages, usually as nightmares. For weeks, he is haunted by the ghost of a memory, a man dressed all in black with a white skull spray painted on his chest, but all connection between Frank and "the Punisher" has been erased from his brain. After he breaks out of the hospital, these visions begin to become more intrusive, happening to him not only when he is asleep, but flashing across his vision as he tries to go about his life. He meets a few other veterans in a bar, and after a few drinks and the high of robbing a tow truck driver, they decide to rob a check cashing business, immediately

after which Frank comes after him to end the violence that has been happening since he left Billy alive at the end of season one.

Here, at the end of episode seven, “One Bad Day,” as soon as Frank calls Billy’s name, brandishing a pistol and the Punisher skull on his chest, everything comes back to him at once. The edges of the scene go blurry, visually showing the viewers the panic attack that hits Billy in the middle of the street, his crew watching from the sidelines. He is struggling to breathe, especially under his mask, and the voices of the others calling to him fade in and out as Billy regains and loses focus on the reality that is moving down the street towards him. Even as his crew begin to shoot at Frank, Billy is struggling to put together the pieces, recalling that the man he currently believes to be his best friend is the one who attacked him in the first place, and he stands in place, breaths still labored, as bullets fly around him and one of his friends pulls him into the back of a car (“One Bad Day”). The beginning of the next episode, “My Brother’s Keeper,” opens with Billy still in the middle of his panic attack, flashing between visions of the skull from his nightmares and Frank moving down the street towards him. But he orders his friend to stop the car so he can face Frank. Fueled with rage, he attacks Frank, needing to know the reason behind his attack; when Frank confirms his fear that he was behind Billy’s attack, Billy’s rage only grows, and he continues to shoot his automatic pistol at both Frank and the policemen who show up to stop the attack.

After escaping from the police, Billy continues to see flashes of Frank and his Punisher vest in his head, constantly remembering the day of his attack. Still enraged, he shoots two of the men from his crew who were arguing, then disappears to find comfort from the only person who has been able to provide him with that since he woke from his coma: his psychiatrist, Krista Dumont, who has hidden him since he escaped from the hospital and has now entered into a

sexual relationship with him. Here, Billy goes off the rails, unable to connect the dots between his memories and what he learned today:

“All this! All this was Frank Castle! Frank. [...] He tried to kill me. I couldn’t see. That skull... That skull that I dream about every night, he wears it on his chest. Every night! Every night, coming at me and coming at me. It was him! It was him! But I couldn’t see! Why? Why? Why would he... Why — why would he do that? Why would he do any of it? I don’t understand. I don’t understand! I mean, I know now that it was him. But I don’t feel it! I mean, I know but I — but I don’t know. I mean, here (gestures to head), but not here! (gestures to heart) And he was my best friend. My best friend. But he was pointing a gun at me.” (“My Brother’s Keeper”)

But Krista is only able to give him comfort, not answers. Since she does not know why Frank attacked Billy, she is only able to try to convince him that now that he knows Frank was behind his attack, he is able to rebuild his life stronger than before. She tells him that now that he knows it was Frank, the nightmares will end, tells him, “Now you understand your pain and you’re gonna work through it” (“My Brother’s Keeper”). However, later in the episode, after Billy continues to have violent flashbacks to his attack, his rage continues to grow, and he goes after Krista, believing her to be another part of the conspiracy that has hidden the truth from him. He does not understand how the man that he still believes to be his best friend has gotten to the point to attack him as he did, and only gets angrier and more physically violent with her when Krista insists that Frank’s name was never part of his file, wreaking havoc on her apartment. She talks him down once more, but is still unable to answer his questions or quell his fears. Instead of calming down, he gives into the violence that has become who he is due to his trauma, and the jobs he puts together for his crew become more needlessly violent, going after gangs more for

the thrill than the outcome, unlike before when they carefully planned the attack on the check cashing business. There is no more planning, only senseless violence led by his rage due to not knowing Frank's reasoning.

After this, Billy goes to the only person that he thinks may be able to give him the truth: Dinah Madani. He has read his file, which includes Dinah's official police report stating she was the one who arrested him after he and Frank fought at the carousel; his psychiatric file also mentions their physical relationship from before she realized that he was responsible for the death of her partner, one of the men Billy kills during season one. He hopes that Dinah will be able to provide him with the answers that the rest of the world has been hiding from him and can finally understand why Frank attacked him. Dinah, who was still skeptical about Billy's amnesia, believes it now, seeing the anguish and anger on his face when he asks her why Frank attacked him, but has no problem telling him the truth:

BILLY: Nobody... Nobody seems to have the answers, but you do. I know you do. So I need to know how.

DINAH: You sold out everything you ever stood for, anyone you ever cared about, and you did it for money and status. Left Frank for dead, covered in the blood of his wife and children. That's who you are.

BILLY: No. No—

DINAH: Yeah. And when he found out, he came after you and he made you pay. [...] Frank wanted you to live with it on your face every day. He put all that ugly on the outside where it belongs. ("Flustercluck")

After this, all of Billy's energy goes to taking down Frank. They have both discovered that they will only find peace by killing the other one, and episode ten, "The Dark Hearts of Men," shows Frank infiltrating Billy's hideout only to find a trap that he barely makes it out alive from.

However, the end of Billy's arc comes mostly through Dinah Madani. The last time he sees Frank, Billy is moments from death, unable to recover from wounds sustained in a fight with Dinah after she pushes Krista out of her apartment window. Billy calls Curtis, hoping to spend his last minutes with someone who cares for him, knowing that Curtis would be the most likely to provide peace instead of judgement. When he realizes that Frank is the one who came to see him instead, he tells him, "Of course it's you. I should have known. If I'm gonna be with somebody, I'm... I'm happy that it's you" ("The Whirlwind"). Frank, bloodied from another battle that he walked away from to see Billy, says nothing, standing over him as he stutters over his words. He has no sympathy for this man who was once his best friend, even as he lays dying — even as he shows remorse, trying to apologize for everything he did to Frank, only for Frank to pull out his pistol and shoot him in the chest, effectively killing him and ending their feud.

Conclusion

One of the strongest themes that runs through both seasons of *The Punisher* is the idea that everyone can suffer some sort of trauma, and that each person manifests it differently. Every character that crosses Frank's path is suffering in some way, no matter their age, profession, or military service. Even minor characters, like Dinah Madani, Dr. Krista Dumont, and the man searching for Amy through season two, John Pilgrim, have things in their past or events within the narrative that affect them. While the first season focuses mostly on military trauma with Frank, Curt, and Lewis, season two takes a step back from Frank and focuses on characters

fighting more personal wars, especially Billy Russo as he comes to terms with his traumatic brain injury and his memory loss. Season two also includes connections between each of the characters, pulling each of the storylines together. It is within these connections that characters are able to find peace, even if it does not last very long. Every character is driven by their trauma in their own way — even Frank, as he searches for a new mission, but that trauma also aids in bringing each of them together.

Lewis' story is only one piece of the progressive way *The Punisher* depicts trauma, especially in that not many characters, not only the main character, suffer from a post-traumatic disorder. In the second season, after closely examining Frank's trauma in the first, the creators of this show expanded their depictions to include other characters who suffer from some of the same manifestations as Frank and Lewis, but whose trauma comes from personal attacks. Billy's derives from Frank's attack on him at the end of season one; Amy witnessed the aftermath of the brutal attack on her friends by the man Frank protects her from and does not feel safe sleeping in open areas due to her consistent nightmares; even Billy's therapist, Dr. Dumont, suffers from an intense fear of heights after a childhood accident; and Dinah Madani, whose story intertwines with every other character in the series, suffers from night terrors and intrusive flashbacks after being attacked by Billy in season one, plus the trauma of knowing she was unable to protect two of her partners the way she was supposed to. Each character has their own event in their past that affected them, whether it be from childhood, a recent assault, or from combat, and each character also experiences their trauma differently. Many depictions of PTSD and other disorders are flat, showing only the most basic symptoms, usually nightmares or flashbacks, but *The Punisher* includes depictions of panic attacks, a need for revenge, suicidal tendencies, and repressed memories alongside the nightmares and flashbacks. But, as discussed throughout this chapter,

each of these characters struggles with their own trauma in a different way. Some of them, like Curtis, find peace by talking with other veterans, while Lewis only seems to be triggered by some members of the group but finds peace in moments spent with his father. Frank is driven by both a need for revenge and the hope that by finding it, he will feel less guilty for being responsible for their deaths, just as Dinah wants to find justice for her late partners, but the two of them search for it in vastly different ways. Even Billy, who spends half of season two trying to remember who attacked him, only grows more traumatized when he learns it was Frank, finding anger in the truth instead of peace. It is because of these varied depictions that *The Punisher* is a progressive depiction of trauma and the different ways that it can manifest itself in different people, as well as the lengths some will go through to find peace.

Chapter Two: “Main Street, Birch Street, Higgins Drive, Cobalt Lane”: Depictions of Post-Traumatic Coping Mechanisms in *Jessica Jones*

JESSICA: He’s back.

TRISH: It’s been a year, Jess. You watched him die. You saw his death certificate. It’s just your PTSD.

JESSICA: It’s not my goddamned PTSD.

TRISH: Are you still having nightmares? Flashbacks? ... You need to go back to that therapist.

JESSICA: That quack that had me reciting street names from back home?

TRISH: A proven method for managing PTSD. (“AKA Ladies’ Night”)

While reminiscent of the dark detective drama that any avid television watcher knows intimately, Marvel’s *Jessica Jones* adds another, much deeper layer to the stereotypical down-and-out detective. Just as fans of televised detectives and private investigators have come to know as a type of normal, Jessica is an avid drinker with a sailor’s mouth and a negative view on the world — but it is her backstory that sets her apart from the other detectives and private eyes who have come before her. Like most of her predecessors, Jessica is a woman with a history that she is trying to move past, but unlike the break-ups or job losses in the stories that came before her, her’s is a past filled with abuse and trauma that she confronts throughout the course of the series. By placing Jessica not only in a role usually known to be masculine, but giving her a back story which focuses on trauma and abuse familiar to too many women, the writers of this dark Marvel series use their platform to open a space for conversation about facing abuse and healing in the aftermath, especially for women.

Jessica Jones is no stranger to the traumatic backstory. Because of this, her story fits in well with the other anti-heroes that Marvel has focused its TV-M-rated shows on, fitting much better among them with her alcohol dependence, penchant for curse words, and traumatic past than as the centerpiece of a blockbuster movie. Krysten Ritter, the actress who plays Jones, even called the show “an intimate, grounded psychological-thriller, [...] the kind of part that you’d

only find in a dark, weird indie film that no one would see” (Hertz). Similarly, *The Vulture* called the show a “psychological thriller that was gripping from the very beginning and was unabashedly about misogynist culture and surviving trauma.” From the beginning, *Jessica Jones* sets the scene for a main character burdened with trauma, even going so far as to include it within the cinematography of certain scenes, like using lighting and scene changes in order to depict the ways Jessica relives her trauma.

Jones’ grief began when she was thirteen and inadvertently caused the car accident that killed the rest of her family on their way home from a Disney vacation by distracting her father as he was driving. For seventeen days, she was in a coma and experimented on by a company called IGH, and the gene editing therapy tested on her would lead to the development of her powers shortly thereafter: super strength, super healing, and the ability to “fly,” though it is more like leaping through the air. Because she was experimented on without her consent, given powers with no thought for her agency and learning of both this and the death of her family at the same time, she begins to connect her powers to her past trauma, always linking what she is now able to do with the fact that she is an orphan.

When she woke from her coma, she learned that she had been adopted by Dorothy Walker, mother of childhood TV star Trish “Patsy” Walker as a publicity stunt. It did not take Jessica long to realize that Dorothy Walker was rude, as well as both physically and emotionally abusive towards her biological daughter. Jessica discovered her powers after locking herself in



Fig. 16: Jessica Discovers Her Powers, “AKA I’ve Got the Blues”

Image from thetvshows.us

the bathroom during an argument between Trish and Dorothy, and purposefully used them for the first time when she threw Dorothy across the room after catching her forcing Trish to vomit after eating a meal (“AKA I’ve Got the Blues”).

Her trauma did not end there, though.

After dropping out of college and moving in with her boyfriend, Stirling Adams, she returned home one day to find him murdered. She found

and attacked the men responsible, but unable to cope with the grief, she left their apartment behind and moved back in with Trish, who she grew distant from during her relationship with Stirling. She lived a quiet life in New York City for a while, working odd-jobs and taking out her anger on rude men and misogynistic bosses. Trish tried to convince her to use her powers to fight crime, to become a superhero, but Jessica refused — though, after saving the life of a little girl, she realized she does like the feeling that comes from saving others.

And this is how Kilgrave²⁰ found her: using her strength to save a college student who was about to be killed by muggers (“AKA The Sandwich Saved Me”). Kilgrave, obviously impressed by her strength, quickly captured her within his own power — making anyone who hears him do as he says. He kept Jessica near him, ensuring that she continued to be under his control while forcing her to have a physical relationship with him. If he uses Jessica’s powers for his own bidding during the time she spends under his control, she never reveals it — until he

²⁰ This man is referred to in the comics as “the Purple Man,” and while the show includes small callbacks to this nickname, having him always wearing purple and using purple lighting in scenes where he is important; however, he is never referred to as such throughout the course of the show. Further, in the comics, his name is spelled “Killgrave,” but in the show, it is “Kilgrave,” which will be used throughout the course of this paper.

forces her to kill another person. This action affected her so strongly that she was able to break free from Kilgrave's control and escape, causing him to chase after her and get hit by a bus ("AKA You're a Winner!"). She received confirmation about his death and began to return to the life she knew before being manipulated, returning to her friendship with Trish Walker, who offered her a home, recalling the friendship that grew out of Jessica's protection of her from Dorothy. For a few months, she lived with Trish, went to therapy, and tried to heal her trauma — until one day, she left it all behind, telling Trish that she just needed "some breathing room." While she was able to break free from his control long enough to leave Kilgrave behind and able to live peacefully for a few months with the knowledge of his death, he still returns to her in violent flashbacks and unsavory nightmares, as well as a manifestation of him within her subconscious, manipulating her with her deepest fears.

After this, Jones effectively shut herself away from the rest of the world, moving to her own secluded apartment. She no longer chased the thrill of saving others, ruined by the feeling of being used by Kilgrave, and instead opened a small private investigation firm, mostly going after cheating spouses. In her loneliness and grief, she only found escape at the bottom of whiskey bottles, and spent six months as secluded and alone as possible, which is where viewers find her at the beginning of the series.

Jessica knows that her life has been one catastrophe after the next, and it has certainly not left her unscathed. She has tried to understand this trauma through therapy, where she has picked up a few coping mechanisms — some backed by therapy, like reciting street names, and some wholly unhealthy, like constantly drowning herself in bottles of whiskey. While viewers never see her going to therapy, Trish mentions her history with it a few times, reminding both her and the viewers that she has tried to face her demons and manage her complex post-traumatic stress

disorder (CPTSD), as defined in the introduction of this thesis. After saving one of Kilgrave's victims, Hope Schlottman, Jessica even teaches her this technique, hoping to calm her down before Hope spirals into the memories of what Kilgrave made her do. But because Jessica feels such intense guilt over everything that has happened in her life — inadvertently causing the car accident that killed her family by distracting her father, not being there to protect Stirling, and being helpless against Kilgrave's commands — she does not feel strong enough to heal from her trauma, stepping away from therapy and the people who care for her, believing that hiding from everything and keeping herself secluded is the best way to protect the people she cares about. During this time, she can only silence the memories that flood her with seemingly unending bottles of whiskey, sometimes using the street name recollection technique taught to her by a past therapist during panic attacks, until Kilgrave returns and forces Jessica to act in order to save another innocent girl from his grasp. As the first season progresses, viewers experience alongside Jessica as she faces her guilt and her abuser, watch as her repressed trauma is brought to the surface and she comes to terms with what happens to her. In the climax of her fight against Kilgrave, she is able to prove that she has become stronger than his powers over her even at his most strengthened state, and is finally able to defeat him once and for all because she has faced her trauma and come out stronger because of it.

Though Jessica is the prominent heroine of the series, even her supporting characters have histories that have scarred them in some way, similar to the trauma-filled backgrounds of many characters within *The Punisher*. She and Trish Walker share the same abusive mother; similarly, Luke Cage has a backstory reminiscent of Jessica's, experimented on without his consent while imprisoned only to come out with impenetrable skin and mourning the death of his wife Reva when Jessica meets him. By surrounding Jessica with others who are struggling to

cope with their own pasts, she is able to connect to these characters in much needed ways, building and strengthening relationships with them. Without her friendship with Trish or her relationship with Luke, Jessica never would have learned to forgive herself for the things in her past, an important step of the growth that she experiences throughout the first season. Even her connection to Malcolm, her college-aged neighbor, teaches her that she is capable of helping others, a fact she struggled with for most of her life, especially as a powered being.

Throughout the course of the first season, Jessica is forced to face her trauma in ways that help her ultimately move past everything that happened to her and begin to live a life where she can build connections to others, no longer believing she is a threat to everyone around her. Suffering from panic attacks and nightmares, akin to the way many victims of post-traumatic stress disorders have been portrayed on screens in the past, is the very surface of the depictions of Jessica's disordered state. By including other manifestations of trauma in their characterization of the heroine, by physically putting the viewers in Jessica's mind as her intrusive memories get the best of her and as she faces memories that have been repressed, the writers of this series give Jessica a well-rounded, deep, and complex portrayal of the long-term effects of trauma.

Substance Abuse

Many down-and-out detectives in the history of the cop drama have turned to alcohol to get through the day, and a reliance on a substance like alcohol to manage a disorder like Jessica's is common; even Tony Stark has a history of alcoholism in the comics. Jessica's constant dependence on whiskey is more than just a coping mechanism, it doubles as the strongest visual reminder of Jessica's past trauma throughout the series. Almost every scene that takes place

within her apartment includes a shot of a liquor bottle or a whiskey glass, and most include her drinking at least one glass, visually reminding viewers of a trauma that Jessica is unable to repress. In the very first scene of the show, she fills a water bottle with whiskey to take with on her stakeout of Luke Cage, and she falls asleep at her desk with her hand still wrapped around a glass after returning home. Jessica's turn to whiskey follows one of the conclusions from Olff's study "Gender Differences in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,": given the scope of her trauma, she is at higher risk for comorbidity,



Fig. 17: Jessica Drinks, "AKA It's Called Whiskey"

Image from thetvshows.us

including alcohol dependence and substance abuse. It is a dependency that she is very aware of; in season one, episode three, Trish asks her how she handles the knowledge of what she has done, and her response gives the episode its title: "It's called whiskey."

Many characters, from Malcolm to Luke to Trish, make comments about her drinking, but it is not until Kilgrave himself mentions it when they are back together that Jessica outwardly makes the link between her trauma and her drinking:

KILGRAVE: You ever think you might drink too much?

JESSICA: It's the only way I get through my goddamn days after what you did to me.

Kilgrave: You blame me for your drinking problem?

JESSICA: It's the truth. ("AKA WWJD?")

Janis Breckenridge, associate professor of Spanish at Whitman College and author of the essay "Sobriety Blows: Whiskey, Trauma, and Coping in Netflix's *Jessica Jones*," cites this conversation as the moment Jessica confirmed the connection between her alcoholism and the

constant depiction of alcohol in the shots, which “unequivocally links the enduring impact of physical rape and psychological torment — complete and total violation — with her maladaptive, albeit vital and indispensable, coping mechanism of drinking to excess.” When she is not drunk, she is unable to stop fixating on the traumas she encountered during her previous time with Kilgrave, and by being with him again there is nothing she can do to quiet her deepest fears, because she faces them every time she looks at her abuser.

Jessica’s dependence on alcohol is the piece of her coping shown most obviously and most often on the screen. While she knows that it is not a healthy way to treat her anxiety and trauma, she also knows that it is the easiest, suppressing her feelings of fear and hopelessness faster and feels as if it is more successful than anything she ever learned in therapy. She has tried healthier options, one of which has stuck around even after she stopped attending therapy, but she knows that none of them are as effective — or as numbing.

Running Away (But Choosing to Stay)

After speaking with Hope’s parents and learning Kilgrave’s death was a lie, Jessica begins to spiral. Until this point, she was content in the knowledge that she had killed her abuser, but when she realizes that Kilgrave is not actually dead, she tries using all of her resources to try to secure a flight to Hong Kong. She tries Hope’s credit card, tries to get an advance on her paycheck from the lawyer she freelances for, but when everything fails, she tries her last resort and returns to Trish’s apartment for the first time in six months. Her desperate need to put as much room as possible between herself and her abuser makes sense, given the depth of her trauma and the fact that she truly believed her abuser to be dead. She is already struggling with

the symptoms of CPTSD, but the thought of being back in Kilgrave's presence, not to mention the threat of being back under his control, is too much for her already-troubled mind to handle.

However, her conversation with Trish makes her realize that running is *not* her only option, at least in Trish's eyes. She has only heard of the trauma Jessica experienced under Kilgrave's control, and at first thinks that Jessica is overreacting, that it is "just [her] PTSD" making her believe Kilgrave has returned. Even though she reminds Trish that she has failed in the past to save others, Trish still believes she is "far better equipped to deal with that animal than some innocent girl from Omaha. You're still the person who tried to do something." "Tried and failed," Jessica reminds her — but decides to face her trauma anyway, returning to the hotel where she believes Hope to be staying and rescues her ("AKA Ladies' Night"). At this moment, Jessica chooses to help others instead of giving in to her fear, and shows her first real moment of strength in the first season. While it is common for survivors of abuse to do all they can to separate themselves from their abusers, Jessica proves herself stronger than her trauma and decides to stay instead, able to use her powers to save someone else from Kilgrave, hopefully before it is too late. Despite her own weaknesses, the intrusive flashbacks of her abuser when back in the same hotel he took her to in the past, she is able to remove Hope from the hotel room, getting her to safety back to her own apartment.

Her plan from here is simple: return Hope to her parents, get the whole family back to Omaha and far from Kilgrave's grasp, and follow them out of the city, saving both of them from being back under his control — both Hope and Jessica's worst fear. But what she does not expect as she follows the Schlottmans down the hallway towards the elevator is for Kilgrave to have given Hope one last command, knowing that his powers still hold for twelve hours after being given, and Jessica watches, unable to help, as Hope pulls out a gun and shoots both of her

parents behind the closed elevator doors. Hope is arrested for their murders, though she shows obvious remorse as soon as she realizes what she has done, and Jessica’s plan changes, knowing now that she is not the only victim that is suffering after being under Kilgrave’s control. The end of episode one starts with Jessica repeating the same advice she gave at the beginning, though that time it was in regards to her *Alias* clients, and viewers know that her plan is no longer to run away: “Knowing it’s real means you gotta make a decision. One: keep denying it. Or two: do something about it.” Jessica knows that she has been running from it, denying it, for too long now, and the only way to save herself, Hope Schlottman, and all of Kilgrave’s other victims is to *do something about it*.

Intrusive Memories and the Recollection of Trauma

Like both Hawkeye Pierce and Billy Russo, much of Jessica’s past is buried in repressed or forgotten memories that she must face as she begins to face her trauma. Jessica Jones suffers her first panic attack ten minutes into the first episode of the series; she hears a voice in her head. Obviously upset by the man she is currently tracking, she closes her eyes, takes a swig from her



Fig. 18: Jessica’s First Intrusive Flashback, “AKA Ladies’ Night”

Image from thetvshows.us

Jim Beam-filled water bottle, sets her head back against the railing behind her — and the neon behind her head turns purple, a man’s silhouette appears, and he whispers in her ear, “You want to do it. You know you do” (“AKA Ladies Night”). Through labored breaths, she whispers to herself, “Main Street, Birch

Street, Higgins Drive, Cobalt Lane,” which viewers later learn to be a grounding technique taught to her by a therapist. These are signs of trauma left behind from Jessica’s time under the control of Kilgrave, which has left her impaired, suffering, as portrayed in the very beginning of the first episode through a panic attack, a common symptom. A few scenes later, she has a nightmare which is portrayed in the same way: the lights turn purple, and the man’s silhouette returns, this time licking her up the side of her face. She wakes up in a panic, jumping away from the desk she fell asleep on, and uses the same technique as before to keep herself from spiraling further.

While these scenes give viewers a glimpse into the heroine’s backstory, the portrayal of these moments is also filled with visual clues towards her trauma, nudges towards what psychologists refer to as “intrusive memories,” different from flashbacks in the fact that they manipulate the present moment instead of taking the person out of it. They are known to happen at the drop of a hat and could possibly disrupt “the survivor’s efforts to carry out daily routines, establish or maintain relationships or even sleep” (Breckenridge). They are also called “unclaimed” memories because they do not always immediately make sense to the victim, and can sometimes be pieces of that person’s “history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (qtd. in Breckenridge). They do not necessarily depict a solid memory that the victim recalls, usually due to repression of these specific memories. As Anne Whitehead explains in her introduction to *Trauma Fiction*:

Insufficiently grasped at the time of its occurrence, trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or possessive

influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition. (qtd. in Breckenridge)

Set apart from reality, the scenes that take place inside Jessica's mind haunt her, passing "in front of her often without demarcation or acknowledgment of their place in her chronology," not necessarily tied to a specific event, and either a suppressed or forgotten memory (Wehler). This depicts the same sort of work described in the scene from *M*A*S*H's* "Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen" in the introductory chapter, where Hawkeye "remembers" what happened on the bus in stages instead of all at once, slowly coming to terms with the death of the infant, the event that led to his being sent to Sidney Freedman's care. For Jessica, these moments enter the narrative, becoming real on the screen as if in Jessica's mind, they begin to work simultaneously for Jessica and the viewer: both have to piece together the momentary glimpses and disjointed recollections as they come up to try to place them in a chronology (or a backstory) filled with holes and questions.

Another of these moments happens a few scenes later in the first episode: while searching for the girl she was hired to find, Hope Schlottman, a waiter tells her the story of a man that was with Hope earlier that week, who requested a table in the back, though there was a couple already seated there. The waiter tells Jessica, "I lost my mind or something, told [the seated couple] to leave," and also recalls how this mysterious man made the employees do things completely out of the ordinary, as if forced, but only with his words ("AKA Ladies' Night"). Jessica is not focused on the waiter anymore as a flashback takes her to the back of that very restaurant, the very table Hope Schlottman and her companion were seated at; but in her mind, *she* is the one at that table, celebrating an anniversary with a man that viewers only see the back of. Jessica leaves in a rush, needing to separate herself from the flashback and the restaurant. She

has trouble breathing, her vision is blurred, and she returns to her mantra: “Main Street, Birch Street, Higgins Drive, Cobalt Lane.” Viewers are still not quite able to piece the story together, since they do not have all the information they need to understand Jessica’s trauma, but Jessica is also experiencing these moments in the same jarring manner that viewers of the show are. The disjointed nature in the way these moments are portrayed are a visual reminder of Jessica’s struggle with CPTSD, depicting just how panicked and disconnected Jessica feels within this moment. Neither Jessica or the viewers really understand the scope of what is happening, but after what Jessica discovers at the restaurant, it is obvious that it is all tied back to her — and the mysterious man that was with her at the restaurant in her flashback, assumed to be the same man that has taken Hope Schlottman. Instead of simply showing the viewers how Jessica is affected by her trauma, the cinematography of the series puts the viewers in Jessica’s shoes, giving them as close to a first-hand experience as one can get from simply watching. Blurred vision, inability to focus, a pounding heart, fighting for a breath — viewers not only watch as Jessica suffers from this panic attack, but are made to feel like they are within her body, experiencing it with her. By doing this, the creators have actively chosen to make the viewers a part of Jessica’s trauma, going a step farther than simply portraying it. This makes her trauma more than a character trait and brings a feeling of authenticity to the depiction of Jessica’s trauma that many other cinematic depictions fail to include. It makes viewers uncomfortable by making them experience things that may not be part of their regular experiences, placing them in the shoes and the mind of a character so wrought with trauma that it seeps into every aspect of her life.

The most jarring of these moments happen when Jessica is just beginning to come to terms with the fact that her abuser is still alive and has kidnapped another young girl. Near the end of episode one, she returns to the same hotel that she and Kilgrave stayed in, the final piece

of the one-month anniversary celebration confirmed by the waiter earlier that day. Recognizing her, the doorman lets her in, and she makes her way to the same floor that she stayed on with Kilgrave, her focus on the door at the end of the hallway. She pulls the fire alarm to get everyone out of their rooms, both searching for Kilgrave and keeping others from harm, and slowly begins to make her way down the hallway. But as she takes deep breaths and slow steps, flashes of dark purple, lighting a man's silhouette, break into her vision, happening on the screen and in Jessica's mind as if part of a horror film, and she shakes them off each time she is pulled back to the present. It happens again inside the hotel room, the silhouette paired this time with a voice: "You miss me?", a jump scare as Jessica passes through a doorway ("AKA Ladies' Night").



Fig. 19: Kilgrave's Silhouette in Jessica's Mind, "AKA Ladies' Night"

Image from thetvshows.us

The framing of these scenes is done in a pointed, specific way, necessary to ensure the viewers know that they are seeing a traumatic moment in the past, and are a definite change from the filming of the scenes that take place in the present. The filming of these scenes is jarring, the ones regarding Kilgrave always using purple lighting in some regard, sometimes flashing between the present and the past when Jessica is in the same physical space as the memory. Many times, these flashes move between present-day Jessica, her face obviously pained with what she is experiencing, and the scene that her flashback makes her return to, giving viewers the same debilitating feelings as Jessica as she experiences these flashbacks. The shaky, rough-cut nature of these traumatic flashbacks also differs from the framing used when these flashbacks

serve to give viewers a backstory of the characters, like in episode 5, when Jessica recalls her first meeting with Malcolm (“AKA The Sandwich Saved Me”). The transitions between the present and the past in this situation are soft, the scenes fading from one to the next instead of the quick jumps from past to present in the more traumatic recollections, because these memories have not been repressed in any way.

Finally, after all the time she spent under Kilgrave’s control, and all the time she spent after thinking she killed him and coming to terms with the fact that she did not, she is able to confront him. Like everything else he does, the way he convinces Jessica to come with him is under the guise of giving her a choice — but the alternative is for people to die, and that is something he knows Jessica will do what she can to stop. He tells her that she is not his “prisoner,” reminds her that it is her own agency and not his “gift” of mind control, but he threatens to kill others if she does not “choose” to come with him (“AKA WWJD”)²¹. What he does is no better than using his powers to command her to come with him, because it still leaves her no choice but to listen. Kilgrave knows that memories of the abuse she underwent because of him have led her towards suicide and that she would sacrifice herself if it meant defeating him. But he also knows that she will do all she can to keep him from hurting other people, especially if she can also make sure no one else has to endure his torture.

So she comes with him, choosing to face her trauma instead of having the deaths of more innocent people on her already guilt-ridden conscience. And facing her trauma is exactly what she does, finally able to discuss with him what he did wrong and explain to him why exactly it was so traumatic, since their memories of the time they spent together vary dramatically. While Kilgrave remembers that time as “staying in five-star hotels, eating in all the best places, [and]

²¹ Quotes taken from dialogue from the episode.

doing whatever the hell” Jessica wanted to do, Jessica only remembers the time as traumatic, telling Kilgrave that what they did was rape, because to her, it was (“AKA WWJD?”). His powers, his ability to make her do whatever he said without question, removed her ability to consent to his actions, though there was nothing she could have done in the moment to fight against him.

However, after following his command and killing Reva, she was able to break from his power and push him in front of a bus. After that, even though she believed she killed her abuser, the memories of the past haunted her; when she learned that he was still alive, it broke her more, opening up new repressed memories of her trauma and forcing her to come to terms to what happened in a way that was not happening when she believed him dead. As she has made quite clear in the seven episodes before she finds herself back in Kilgrave’s grasp, almost everything in her life has been affected by the trauma induced by her time under Kilgrave’s control, and once she is under that control once more, she can no longer hide from the memories of the time she spent with him, as she has been trying desperately to do.

In coming with him, Jessica also learns that Kilgrave has purchased her childhood home, which he returned to exactly the way it was the day the Jones family left on the vacation they never returned home from. This intrusion on her childhood home cuts her so intensely; however, because her coping mechanism that has grounded her time and again throughout the first seven episodes are the streets leading away from this very house, he has taken possession of her safe haven, both physically and mentally, and now every piece of her life is tainted by her abuser (Breckenridge). Not only has he corrupted the physical space of her childhood, but he has subsequently taken away her only healthy coping mechanism, forcing her to further rely on alcohol to cope.

Survivor's Guilt

Just as Frank Castle suffers from the guilt of surviving the attack on his family, Jessica regrets living when the rest of her family died. Her survivor's guilt builds throughout her life, growing as she is unable to save Stirling and when she survives Kilgrave's control when so many others died because of him. After Jessica returns to Kilgrave's presence, she begins to lose control of other pieces of her life, resulting in her seclusion from the rest of the world (the very little of it she allowed herself to be connected to), taking a further toll on her mental health. With nothing left to save her from her inner thoughts, she is forced to face what has happened to her in a way that she never has before and she begins to drown in her guilt: her survivor's guilt over living when the rest of her family died, brought to the forefront of her mind by being in the physical space of her childhood memories; as well as the guilt that rises to the surface by being in Kilgrave's presence. Not only does she feel responsible for Reva's death, carried out by his command, but she also feels responsible for each person Kilgrave has used since then, for Malcolm's addiction and Wil's actions and his corruption of Hope Schlottman — none of which would have happened had she succeeded in killing Kilgrave before.

Facing her abuser helps Jessica understand what happened to her and ultimately find closure. Each time she relives these memories, she learns a little more about them, piece by piece until they form a complete and cohesive memory, both for the viewer and Jessica. As the season progresses, pieces of the same memory are introduced at different times in much the same way as they would return after being repressed. As memories like Reva's death, her failed attempt to kill Kilgrave, and the accident that killed her family become more and more coherent — full scenes instead of mere moments — it demonstrates to viewers that she is facing these memories along with her own guilt. In comparison to how they are portrayed in the beginning of the series, once Jessica comes to terms with that has happened to her, these moments become less jarring,

happening not in an intrusive way as before, but instead in a way that shows Jessica watching from within, present in a moment from her childhood as it happens around her, occupying the same physical space as she stands in her living room. This also resembles the portrayal of non-repressed memories through the beginning of the season, the memories moving away from being physically intrusive as she comes to terms with them. Though she is now an adult, only back in her house because of Kilgrave's manipulation, being in that space once more helps her understand the trauma that has happened to her. Instead of breaking violently into her consciousness to show her memories, she is standing in her living room physically in the present, watching a scene from the past happen *around* her instead of *to* her.

Everything that Jessica has done in the first half of the season has aided in building the strength she needs to face Kilgrave. She overpowers and drugs him, escaping from his capture and now having him as her prisoner. While those that are helping her insist they just kill him while they are able to, Jessica refuses ("AKA WWJD?"). She thinks that if she can get proof of Kilgrave's powers, especially a recording of what he is able to do, that others will believe her and she can take him down in court, giving him what he deserves. She knows that she is immune to his control, and that this is what makes her the only one able to go against him. A whole band of people, both super and non, help her throughout the series, but coming to terms with the fact that she must, ultimately, face him alone drives her actions for the latter half of the first season. She has Hope's testimony, the testimonies of those brought together when Trish created a group for survivors of Kilgrave, she even gets so far as to have Kilgrave locked in a room where she can electrocute him if he tries to use his powers, hoping to get one more powerful testimony of his powers before they take him to court. But he escapes her again, this time with his father in tow, and forces him to continue to experiment on him to find a way to make him stronger —

strong enough to control Jessica once more (“AKA Sin Bin”). By coming to terms with what happened to her, realizing her abuse and forgiving herself for being under Kilgrave’s control, Jessica continues to be stronger than Kilgrave, even as he becomes more powerful. Because of the strength she gains by facing and accepting her trauma, she has everything she needs to finally go up against him at the end of the last episode, a move that has her defeating both her abuser and her trauma with one snap of the neck (“AKA Smile”).

Post-Kilgrave

After Jessica defeats Kilgrave at the end of the first season, she also overcomes the recurring recollection of the trauma that happened to her under his control, but the memories of the time she spent with him and the things he made her do never really disappear completely. Season two sees Jessica taking on other, unrelated obstacles with the very rare mention of the events of the first season, save for a few people thanking her for what she has done. He is not present in her memory, is not shown to appear in her nightmares, and has no hold on any part of her life, though she is facing the memory of her family’s death after learning her mother is still alive and has been experimented on just as she has. Over the first half of the season, she struggles with the conflicting memories of the car crash and struggles with being lied to about the death of her mother, but still builds a relationship with the “new,” powered Alisa Jones. Their relationship



**Fig. 20: Jessica Snaps
Kilgrave’s Neck, “AKA Smile”**

Image from thetvshows.us

continues even after her mother is sent to jail, and Jessica takes it upon herself to face the prison guard who has been harassing Alisa and who has killed at least three other inmates before, which leads to a fight that ends in his death (“AKA Pork Chop”). The beginning of the next episode — titled “Three Lives and Counting” after the number of lives she has taken now that she has killed Dale Holiday — opens with Jessica still on the floor of the prison guard’s house, staring at his mangled body and obviously upset by her actions: she is seated on the floor, her legs pulled up against her chest, eyes wide with fear and brimming with tears. We hear what is going through her head: “You killed him. He’s dead. You took a life. You’re going to jail” (“AKA Three Lives and Counting”). She continues to argue with herself, swaying between blaming herself and knowing that it was self-defense, between turning herself in and running away — and then the lights on her face flash purple, that same sign that viewers remember from season one, and Kilgrave’s voice is back, mangling with her own inside her head: “You killed again,” he whispers, before their voices join together to say, “You have to make it look like a suicide” (“AKA Three Lives and Counting”). He is *back*, proving in a way that he never really left, only sat dormant in her memory until something triggered his return. Inside her head, the memory of him and his manipulation of her is taking advantage of her post-traumatic stress and of her desire to prove that she is someone other than the murderer Kilgrave always wanted her to become, resurfacing with the killing of Dale Holiday. When she leaves the apartment after making it look like a suicide, he is there, dressed in his purple suit and bathed in a harsh purple light, smiling at her as he applauds, but when she tells him to stop, he disappears, but continues to pop back up in her thoughts as she tries to return to a normal life. As much as this manifestation of Kilgrave inside her head is part of her own consciousness, though, it is also *not* a part of her, but just a piece of her trauma left behind, voicing not her desires, but the very real fears that she feels with

the memory of her trauma and using the voice of her abuser. Stemming from the knowledge that she is capable of murder, she lives with the memories of what Kilgrave made her do every day, even if they have stopped haunting her through every moment.

When Kilgrave appears in front of her again, this time as she sits in her office looking over paperwork on Dale Holiday, berating her for what she has done, she returns to the same mantra that viewers became very familiar with during the first season: “Main Street, Birch Street, Higgins Drive” — but now that Kilgrave is no longer real and lives within her mind, he says the streets with her, telling her he knows “all the quaint side streets of [her] mind, every dark little alley... I’m inside you forever” (“AKA Three Lives and Counting”). She tries to convince herself that she is just tired, seeing visions because she needs sleep, but the pain on her face gives her away. When Trish betrays her by joining with Karl Mulus, the doctor who experimented on



Fig. 21: Jessica Hears Three Kilgraves, “AKA Three Lives and Counting”

Image from thetvshows.us

Jessica and her mother in hopes of becoming a super herself, Jessica begins to spiral once more, losing control of her subconscious just as she believes she has lost control of her life.

Instead of just one Kilgrave, he becomes three, speaking her biggest fears out loud: “[Trish] can be the hero, you can be the villain you already are [...] You’ve killed for far less. Just embrace it. It’s who we are” (“AKA Three Lives and Counting”). She becomes angry with

him, unable to handle her anger, and pins him against a building by the throat before realizing the man she attacked was not Kilgrave.

When she lets her anger get the best of her, fueled by Kilgrave's yelling inside her head, the camera goes shaky, quickly cutting from one close-up angle of her face to another. Not only is this reminiscent of the jarring depiction of Jessica's muddled thoughts as she worked through her trauma throughout season one, but it is also no accident that this is the first time this has happened since she killed Kilgrave, since she did not *want* to kill Dale Holiday. Just thinking of the person Kilgrave made her, remembering Reva's death, takes her back to the state of mind she spent the first season in, and because of the specific cinematography of this scene, viewers are easily able to parallel those feelings of both rage and hopelessness with how Jessica feels as she threatens Karl Mulus' life eleven episodes into season two. She does not give into her rage, though, and leaves Karl behind when she rescues Trish, and even though Karl killed himself, Jessica has nothing to regret.

By letting Karl go, she proves that she is stronger than Kilgrave in her head, stronger than her biggest fears. In her head, Kilgrave still brings her memories back to what she has done, what she almost did to Karl, but she still tells him that she is "enough":

KILGRAVE: Because you didn't kill today? Because you sure did yesterday. And you will again. I felt you shudder when you were so close. You wanted it, and that terrifies you.

JESSICA: It should. Because I'm not a killer. I'm not you. I'm not my mother. I can control myself, which means I'm more powerful than you ever were. ("AKA Three Lives and Counting")

Kilgrave remains seated beside her, looking out over Hell's Kitchen, and the last thing he tells her is, "I'll always be here if you need me" — so all she has to do is continue to be stronger than

the voices inside her head, voices which constantly barrage her with memories of what she has done, the long-lasting implications of her time under Kilgrave's control.

Kilgrave does not leave. Even when she kills him, gets rid of his physical presence and his hold over her, Jessica is unable to continue without the guilt not only of what she has done to him, but of what she has done because of him. Even when she continues to choose her own strength over the constant state of paranoia and anxiety that her actions have ingrained into her mind, her fear-driven mania manifests as Kilgrave despite his death, given that the main source of her trauma is the time she spent under his control.

Conclusion

On the surface, the story told throughout the three seasons of the show is reminiscent of other detective dramas, with Jessica as the whiskey-drunk protagonist who uses her skills as a private eye to find people and serve summons. But when examined to focus on the portrayal of Jessica's post-traumatic disorders, the show provides a more in-depth discussion surrounding Jessica's trauma by including long-term effects that would be expected given the extremity of the trauma she underwent while under Kilgrave's control. Jessica's story includes important aspects of trauma therapy, like coping mechanisms and community, but also includes the darker pieces of trauma, like Jessica's turn to alcoholism when she sees no hope for her future — all of this even more progressive given the main character is a woman. But as Jessica's story unfolds, viewers are able to experience alongside her as she comes to terms with the trauma she underwent, from the death of her family to her experimentation by IGH to the time she spent with Kilgrave. Because of the strength that she builds throughout the first season, she is able to finally overpower her abuser and the marks he left on her life and defeat him physically — only

for him to return as a voice in her head in the second season. Even after Jessica kills her abuser, the writers of the series continued to use Jessica's trauma as a driving force behind her decisions, portraying the very realistic idea that even after the survivor has faced their trauma, even after they have faced their abuser, the long-term effects of that trauma can stick around. But perhaps the most important part of Jessica's healing is the small community of friends she finds as she faces her trauma and prepares to face Kilgrave.

Even though the long-term memory of Kilgrave will never go away, when Jessica realizes that she is strong enough on her own to be who she wants to be, stronger than the memories of what he made her do, she is able to overcome him again — a realization viewers can assume does not only happen once, but and again, and again, and again as she continues to recover from the trauma suffered under Kilgrave. This is a strength she never would have discovered without the events of season one, and viewers experience this realization with her both times, through the changing and acceptance of her intrusive thoughts and flashbacks, standing beside her as she came to terms with her survivor's guilt, cheering her on as she defeated her abuser, and watching her prove she is stronger than the post-traumatic memories and fears he implanted in her subconscious.

Unlike most of the portrayals of post-traumatic disorders in media, the creators of Marvel's *Jessica Jones* wrote Jessica's struggle with trauma as a multi-faceted and complex mental disorder that Jessica works her way through in the first season and beyond. While many shows and movies have included characters struggling with the long-term effects of trauma and versions of post-traumatic disorders, the writers of *Jessica Jones* used every aspect of the show to portray Jessica's struggle as more than just the flashbacks and nightmares used in other portrayals. Her emotional dysregulation, her anxiety about the world around her, and her

substance abuse are all important to who she is as a character, and play a large part in how she is portrayed by the *Netflix* series. The writers and performers who came together to make *Jessica Jones* knew that she was a character filled with each of these flaws, each portrayed in their own way. Krysten Ritter's performance of the female anti-hero, Jessica Jones, shows a type of trauma response that goes deeper than just nightmarish flashbacks and bouts of anxiety; each episode of *Jessica Jones* adds another layer to Jessica's trauma, depicting a realistic representation of the very real trauma response that fits Jessica's fictional experience.

From the dialogue to the cinematography, using lighting, framing, and transitions, the creators of this show place its viewers in Jessica's mind, and in her shoes. Since the introduction of her character, Jessica Jones' backstory has been riddled with pain and grief, so to create a show about her and not include these dark depictions of mental health would be to do a disservice. But by giving her the struggle that she deserves, the creators of this show, and of Marvel media as a whole, have used their Netflix platform to begin to discuss the deepest parts of these important conversations, which will hopefully continue to be included as their stories move to platforms beyond large, family-friendly box office hits.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

The Stigma of Mental Disorders

Ever since the first manifestation of PTSD was diagnosed during the American Civil War and Industrial Revolution, the process of being diagnosed and seeking treatment has been fraught. Seeing men who have suffered trauma as frauds or cowards was a widespread belief with “soldier’s heart” and “railway spine,” and though a lot of progress has been made since those days, seeking treatment is still often viewed as weak or unmanly, especially with males in military communities. After World War II, officers continued to believe these men were simply trying to avoid combat, and many spoke against psychiatric treatment, including a 1943 report by Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall which called combat neurosis “nonexistent,” stating that a man who claims it “escapes from those duties which he seeks to evade” by seeking treatment (Horwitz 73). Many of these beliefs still exist today, both in and out of the military.

According to a chapter of *Beyond Post-Traumatic Stress: Homefront Struggles with the War on Terror* titled “PTSD = Pulling the Stigma Down,” most of the American military still views PTSD as something that can be “dealt with” in preparation for war, something that they will one day be able to “solve” so no more soldiers will suffer from it (Hautzinger, et al.). For this book, a group of soldiers were interviewed about their views on PTSD and other disorders common after deployment, both mental and physical. In this same chapter, the authors recall the soldiers’ ability to differentiate between PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI), though they often come from similar experiences. In each of their definitions, there was a dichotomy between the two disorders, as one is “something for which reliable medical tests exist” whereas PTSD is “more of a mental thing, still in your head but you can’t really do an MRI to see PTSD” (43). Soldiers also view TBI as “an inevitable and natural consequence of a head injury,” unlike PTSD, and many soldiers who attempt to go to therapy for this mental disorder are ridiculed

(44). The difference between what can be physically seen and what cannot remains, just as it did for post-American Civil War soldiers and victims of early railway accidents searching for monetary assistance after their accidents in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The stigma against mental disorders is not only present in the military, but even for civilians, it is just as gendered as with soldiers, with women being diagnosed and treated for PTSD twice as often as men (Hu et. al). For these females, their trauma is oftentimes a personal attack, either physical or sexual, though recent definitions of PTSD have expanded to include the death of a loved one, a large natural event, or a manmade disaster, none of which are gender-specific (Horwitz 99). This stigma does not exist by itself, but causes a second, and perhaps more detrimental, to exist: the stigma against *therapy* for mental health. In the military, it can be cause for judgement, like one of the soldiers interviewed for Hautzinger, et al.'s book recalls after seeking treatment for his anger at his wife's request: "Well, I went to go talk to somebody, and I kind of got ridiculed for that by my whole company" (44). But it goes deeper than judgement from peers, whose acceptance can become incredibly important. The authors describe the difficulty that soldiers who undergo trauma might face in trying to get diagnoses, nonetheless treated:

A soldier must secure his or her superior officer's permission for time off for medical appointments, where a field officer can override the confidentiality between health care provider and patient if she or he needs to determine the soldier's risk to the unit. Medical officers, in turn, can override a field officer's need to deploy a soldier and declare them unfit for duty. All of these decisions can affect a soldier's retention and promotion. In addition, soldiers spend long periods of time with the other members of their unit,

especially during deployment, so it can be very difficult to keep health concerns private.
(46).

Even in a world where PTSD is treated as a valid real diagnosis, the stigma against receiving treatment for it in the military still exists, and most veterans live with untreated symptoms.

This is why it is incredibly important for mainstream media to continue to include portrayals of not only characters struggling with post-traumatic disorders, but seeking treatment for them and overcoming them. When these things are normalized within blockbuster movies and hit television series, the men and women who suffer from these disorders are able to identify with characters and hopefully understand that there is nothing wrong with needing treatment. And though these portrayals have existed since the invention of cinema, in movies as old as 1946's *The Best Years of Our Lives* and television shows as timelessly popular as *M*A*S*H*, continuing to include characters who suffer from PTSD and similar disorders in popular, box office-topping stories like those written by Marvel only makes these portrayals more normalized.

The Punisher stands out with its array of portrayals of mental illness in its characters, especially post-traumatic stress disorders, in both good and bad light. By including multiple portrayals of post-traumatic stress disorders, the writers and stars of *The Punisher* are assuring that it is being brought into the conversation surrounding the show. It is impossible to talk about the reasoning behind any one character's actions without mentioning their struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, which many times includes their treatment for it. Considering the mostly male fanbase that *The Punisher* has always had, the fact that Bernthal and the rest of the team spent so much energy bringing to light the importance of therapy opens up a conversation around the same thing in a real-life setting. The stigma around mental health, especially in men, has been harmful for too long, and the vast array of portrayals of mental illness and characters

getting treated for it are bringing its importance to light, hopefully allowing these same men to see that there is nothing wrong in seeking treatment for their own struggles. But these viewpoints are exactly what makes the work the creators discussed in this thesis important. By showing characters like Frank Castle taking part in a therapy group, Billy Russo's therapy sessions after his attack, and Jessica Jones using her connections to the people around her to treat the symptoms of their own post-traumatic disorders, they are showing the audience of these shows that there is nothing wrong with needing therapy and nothing to be ashamed about if they suffer the same sorts of disorders as the characters in these shows.

Connections to Other People

The inclusion of veterans' rap groups in *The Punisher* is a fitting way to call back to the roots of PTSD portrayals in media and the work done by the VVAW²² in the post-Vietnam era to fight for an appropriate diagnosis for survivors of trauma. Rap groups were created by VVAW and were run for and by veterans, following a similar idea created in the women's movement of the time. These meetings took place away from psychiatrist's offices and separate from those which were run by the VA, and were simply places for veterans to bring their troubles and to talk about their wartime experiences with others who would understand, including "estrangement, mistrust, and anger toward the American military and government" (Horwitz 90). Importantly, these groups rejected age-old ideas of masculinity and desired to be places where these men could come and openly discuss their feelings, understanding that not everyone shared the same pride and fearlessness as veterans would have in previous wars. Here, they understood the effect trauma could have from their wartime experience, especially one that was forced so violently on

²² Discussed in the introductory chapter, the work done by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War helped advocate for an appropriate diagnosis.

them and that often included inflicting types of brutality not only on enemy soldiers, but often on civilians.

These same ideas are still present in the rap group run by Curtis Hoyle. On multiple occasions, the men in his group (Curtis included) discuss the fact that they feel alone upon their return stateside, missing the camaraderie they built with others in the military. Every character in



Fig. 22: Frank Castle Attends Curtis' Therapy Group, "Memento Mori"

Image from *kissthemgoodbye*

the group that voices they feel the government has left them behind, giving them no help to assimilate back to society. One character, Jimbo²³, is living out of his car and cannot afford to get new glasses, getting no help or financial aid from the government, even after his car was towed.

Curtis always makes sure that the people in his group know that he can be trusted and

that he is always there to help them; in "Flustercluck," he even tells the group, "You ever known me to miss a meeting? Not be there when any of you guys called? Share a secret that you've shared? No. I got you. And you know why? Because of what we shared. Because of what we have in common. Because we know what it means to have someone you can put your faith in." Curtis knows not all of them have someone else in their life that would do the same, so he tries to be that person for as many people as possible.

²³ Seen in season 2, episode 6, "Nazakat"

In season one, Curtis even tries to be that person for Lewis, doing his best to be available when he needs it. Lewis struggles immensely with returning to life as a civilian, trying his hardest to connect with other veterans, and is depicted multiple times trying to build connections with them, but they continue to be taken away from him. He connects with others in the few scenes he spends at ANVIL, discussing military tours and helping others with the fitness tests, but is not allowed to continue there after Curtis told Billy about his fragile mental state. Curtis tries his best to be available for Lewis, but Lewis views him as a traitor after being turned



Fig. 23: Lewis Tries to Connect with Others at ANVIL, “Resupply”

Image from [kissthemgoodbye](https://www.kissthemgoodbye.com)

down by ANVIL because he believes the only thing he is good at is being a soldier, and this only makes him angrier, so he turns his rage towards the man. Instead of Curtis, though, Lewis puts his faith in O’Conner, who only makes his problems worse. He plays off of Lewis’ worst fears and drives him to anger, first attacking O’Conner himself before turning to more serious crimes, including attempting to kill Curtis. Perhaps most of all, his father wants to be there for him, but Lewis is not able to connect on an emotional level with him, seemingly because he has no prior military service and cannot understand the mental turmoil Lewis struggles with. He begins to believe that everyone is against him, turning to violence as the only way he believes he will get his voice heard, and when he realizes that he has failed once again, he believes the only way out is to take his own life. When asked about Lewis’ story, written specifically for this series, showrunner Lightfoot expressed that it was written to be a tragedy, saying, “if someone had just gotten an arm around him at the right time or if certain things hadn’t gone the way they had gone

[...] he may not have lashed out. What’s interesting to me is the psychology of when people are hurting, they lash out, and I think Lewis is a very extreme example of that. When people get in a hole that deep, it’s incredibly difficult to see your way out” (Li). Lewis’ story was written to be one of anguish, one that depicts what happens when someone sees no escape from the manifestations of the trauma they endured. For Lewis, this story ends the way far too many of these stories do, with suicide seen as the only way for it to end.

Billy’s relationship with Krista Dumont is another connection that affects his ability to heal from his trauma, and another story that ends in tragedy when he has lost all hope in the world. Their relationship begins as a professional one, with Krista as his therapist, but as the symptoms of his TBI become more severe, he turns to her for comfort, and their growing connection to each other becomes the most important thing in Billy’s life²⁴. Curtis also stands as



Fig. 24: Curtis and Billy Drink at Frank’s Grave, “Kandahar”

Image from [kissthemgoodbye](https://www.kissthemgoodbye.com)

an important friend in Billy’s life, mostly in the first season, before Billy views him as a traitor for keeping the secret that Frank is not really dead. Before this, though, they are shown together a few times, celebrating the anniversary of Frank’s death by his fake grave — but after Frank attacks him again, Billy’s connection to both Curtis and Frank is shattered, broken by the

²⁴ This relationship quickly becomes difficult to analyze in a positive light, though, as Krista uses Billy in a way that viewers are led to believe she has used others in the past. Billy relies on her to silence the voices in his head, believing that they can escape everything around them and start a new life, but Krista’s belief in this sentiment is unclear. Their relationship is also not a healthy one, their sexual connection built on causing the other physical pain, with viewers unsure how much of Krista’s affection is real and how much is a facade put on to trick Billy to continue to be violent instead of overcoming his trauma.

fact that they did not trust him enough to tell him the truth. He dies knowing that he has no one left, another tragic ending.

Each character that successfully battles their post-traumatic disorders is only able to do so because of the support systems they build around themselves. Even when the rest of the world believes Frank to be dead at the beginning of the series, he still has two people in his life that he trusts enough with the truth, and that he turns to when he needs help: Curtis and Karen. Though Karen does not play as much of a role in the series as she did in *Daredevil*, the relationship that began with her seeing him as something other than the monster the media was portraying him as follows them into this series. In the few scenes that they share, it is obvious that Frank is able to share parts of himself with Karen that he hides from the rest of the world, revealing his anger, loneliness, sadness, and regret with her when they are together. Similarly, Frank is able to find friendship in Curtis, who continues to stand by him as he does things the rest of the world rejects him for, even daring to be a voice of reason in moments when Frank is about to snap.

Though Jessica Jones spends next to no on-screen time in therapy, the minds behind her story focused on the same link between healing and building connection to other people. In spite of the series' insistence that the effects of trauma never fully disappear, hope can be found in Jessica's connection to other characters throughout the series, illustrating that healing can come from one's community, even if traditional forms of therapy prove unhelpful. Through season one, Jessica continually struggles with an internal fight between knowing she cannot take down Kilgrave alone and knowing she is the only one able to face him. Her reliance on other people is integral to her ability to face her trauma and the memories that it has left behind, and viewers can assume that her reluctance to connect with others in the time between when she leaves Kilgrave and the beginning of the series is part of why she is unable to face her trauma. She refuses to

build relationships with those around her because she is so weighed down by her trauma and believes that she is unsafe to be around, since everyone she has ever grown close to has died or gotten hurt in some way. However, without the connections she is able to build once she begins to face her trauma — her working relationship with Jerri Hogarth, her relationship with Luke Cage, and her friendship with Trish — she never would have found the strength that she needed to overpower Kilgrave once and for all.

Though Jessica and Jerri Hogarth are far from friends, they still stand up for each other and help when they are able and when it is mutually beneficial. Their working relationship relies on Jessica's superpowers, the only time she uses them purposefully, delivering summons for her and taking on some of her sketchier cases as a P.I. Jerri serves as Jessica's connection to the real world, an acting attorney in New York who defends Jessica when she is arrested, protecting her from taking the blame for Kilgrave's crimes. Without Jerri, Jessica never would have felt able to collect the evidence she needed from Hope to send Kilgrave to prison, even though Jerri uses Hope's position to her own advantage and does not necessarily believe everything Jessica says about Kilgrave until she sees it first-hand.

When Jessica meets Luke Cage, she has no idea that he is a super like her or that he was married to Reva, the woman that Kilgrave made her kill. But as their relationship grows, she finds herself able to relate to someone in a way that she has been unable to for a very long time. Their relationship becomes fraught after Luke is used by Kilgrave, then manipulated by him to have her believe Luke is free of his control, forgiving her for Reva's death, which she learns was a lie. But as he lays in her bed in a coma after she shoots him in the head with a shotgun, the only way Jessica could defend herself without killing him, she tells him, "I thought about you. I mean, I knew it would never happen, but I couldn't help... picturing us. Like, on an actual date.

Bowling. Normal shit. You're the first person I ever pictured a future with" ("AKA Smile").

Knowing that she has to go after Kilgrave, she cannot be sure that she is even going to have a future, ready to sacrifice herself to save the rest of the world from him, but with Luke, she was able to imagine a life after Kilgrave, a time when she is no longer weighed down by grief and guilt



Fig. 25: Jessica Confides in Luke, "AKA Smile"

Image from captoit.sosugary.com

and is able to live as normal a life as people like them are able to live. Though he does not reappear before Jessica confronts Kilgrave, his presence in her life as she tries to move past what she has done is integral to her healing, proving to her that she is able to love someone the way she once loved Stirling, and that she deserves to be loved back.

Most importantly, though, is her friendship with Trish, rooted in years of reliance on each other since they were both teenagers. Trish knows about what happened to her when she was under Kilgrave's control more than anyone else and stood beside her through years of abuse under Dorothy and years of therapy. She truly is the only friend Jessica has, and it is their connection that gives Jessica the strength she needs to overcome Kilgrave once and for all.

Though she first turns to Trish in hopes of running away from Kilgrave and Hell's Kitchen, she maintains their friendship as she goes after her abuser. They go after him together, much to Jessica's reluctance, since she knows that Trish is not immune to Kilgrave's powers, but decide on a safe word, something Jessica would never say on her own, and they agree on "I love you."

Knowing that Jessica would never allow it, Kilgrave coerces Trish to come with him, to kiss him, and when Jessica does not react, he believes that he has truly become more powerful than

her. He pushes Trish away, moving towards Jessica, and she obliges, smiling when he tells her to before commanding her to tell him that she loves him. Here, viewers witness a large sense of dramatic irony: they know that Jessica's safe word is "I love you," and when Kilgrave tells her to say it to him, viewers may believe that she is back under his now-strengthened grasp. She says the words, and it could go either way: he *did* just tell her to say them. But when she looks Trish in the eye as she says it instead of Kilgrave, viewers know she is safe.

Her relationships with others have proven stronger than Kilgrave's powers, her friendship with Trish the most important to her healing, and without them, she never would have been able to grow strong enough to face her trauma. Unlike the other coping mechanisms discussed throughout this chapter, the connection to other people is not something easily researched in conjunction with survivors of trauma, but a few studies have been done in relation to the use of group therapy, where survivors are able to share their stories with others who have experienced similar traumatic events in their lives. As discussed in the previous chapter, these types of therapy are especially helpful for survivors of combat-related traumas, but have also proven helpful for survivors of sexual trauma. In a study done in 2016 by Sripada, et. al., PTSD patients who initiated their treatment in a group therapy setting were about twice as likely to continue their treatment than those who were initiated in an individual therapy setting. While Jessica rejects traditional forms of therapy, they still find ways to seep back into her healing: first the street name mantra, and now turning towards others to help fight her trauma and her abuser. Frank was never shown as taking part in any forms of traditional therapy until the end of the first season, when he sits in on one of Curtis' group sessions, but that also does not continue through the second season. Just as Jessica does, though, the connections he forms with Curtis, Amy, and

the others who cross his path help him find a place in the world separate from his identity as the Punisher and separate.

Both Jessica and Frank physically defeat the cause of their trauma during the course of the show. But even though the cause is gone, even though everyone responsible has been handled, the effects of the trauma still linger. Kilgrave returns as a voice in her head and Frank's innate desire to find closure for those who cannot leads him to continue to wear the Punisher skull long after those responsible for the death of his family and responsible for Kandahar are gone. It is important for these portrayals to include the idea that even if trauma is treated, even if you overpower what has been done to you — in Jessica and Frank's case, quite literally — the after-effects of said trauma linger. Many portrayals of PTSD flout the idea that treatment and closure can make all symptoms of post-traumatic disorders disappear, but every character discussed in this thesis still suffers in some way from the memory of what has been done to them. Even after Frank kills every person responsible for the death of his family, he still suffers from the survivor's guilt left behind when he survived the attack that took the rest of them. He still grieves, still feels the overwhelming need to protect people he knows cannot protect themselves, just as he wishes he could have protected Maria, Lisa, and Frankie that day in Central Park. Curtis, though he has made peace with what he has done, still carries the physical reminder of his combat tours, but uses the peace he has found in order to help others find the same. Jessica Jones, even though she was able to overpower her abuser and kill him with her own hands, still hears his voice in her head, a manifestation of her deepest fears, long after his death. Each of these depictions further proves that trauma is not necessarily something that can be treated entirely, something that will go away after a certain amount of therapy sessions or confrontations with abusers.

Looking Forward: *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*

On March 19, 2021, *Disney* released *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, its second TV mini-series released on its streaming platform, *Disney+*. In this, Sam Wilson/The Falcon and James “Bucky” Barnes/The Winter Soldier team up in the aftermath of Steve Rogers/Captain America’s death in the time between *Avengers: Endgame* and this series. The fact that Barnes has struggled with memories of his past is made obvious once it is revealed he is alive after Steve spends decades thinking him dead, and by including him in this mini-series, *Marvel* has the opportunity to look more deeply at the trauma he has incurred during his years as a Soviet



Fig. 26: Bucky Barnes in a Therapy Session, “New World Order”

Image from [homeofthenutty](https://www.homeofthenutty.com)

assassin. The very first episode, “New World Order,” introduces him through an incredibly violent scene where he is back killing people as the Winter Soldier, only to wake up immediately before the scene cuts to him in therapy. Given his rapport with the therapist and the incredibly tense, awkward feeling of the room, this is not

his first therapy session, further confirmed by his therapist reminding him that he is supposed to be making amends.

In episode 3, “Power Broker,” Barnes goes to visit Arlon Zola, one of the German scientists that was responsible for making him the Soviet super-soldier that he spent much of the twentieth century as. Previous movies, especially 2014’s “Captain America: The Winter Soldier” included scenes where Barnes’ “Winter Soldier” mode was activated using a string of Russian words, and when Barnes sees Zola again in 2021, Zola attempts to use these words just to see what would happen, telling him, “I just wanted to see how the new you reacts to the old words.

Something is still in there” (“Power Broker”). Zola’s words prove that Bucky cannot — and perhaps will never be able to — get rid of the pieces of the Winter Soldier that lie deep within his subconscious. In a way, he will always be the Winter Soldier, if only deep down. No matter how much therapy Barnes experiences and no matter how long he spends trying to bury the man he was made to be, even a hundred years before, there will always be pieces of him that react to certain aspects of the environment because of all the time he spent as a Soviet assassin.

But this is not the first time a piece of mainstream *Marvel* media has discussed therapy. When Steve Rogers/Captain America meets Sam Wilson in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Sam runs a group therapy group for veterans, just like Curtis Hoyle does in *The Punisher*. Does Cap go to these meetings off-screen? It is no secret that he has his own traumas in his past, from watching Bucky die to sending himself into the water to save the world, only to wake up 70+ years later to find everything has changed around him. Glimpses of Steve Rogers in group therapy was the first step in 2014; Curtis Hoyle running group therapy in 2017 was the next; and James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes, the ex-Winter Soldier, attending therapy as part of his presidential pardon, is just the newest aspect of this theme of portrayals of therapy for mental disorders. The inclusion of Bucky’s therapy within *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* shows that Marvel is still planning on discussing characters’ traumas in the future.

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