

Hayden Anhedonia has inadvertently created a trilogy for the Ethel Cain character. The first two installments of the trilogy being [Willoughby Tucker, I'll Always Love You](#) (WT), and [Preacher's Daughter](#) (PD). The former chronicles Ethel's adolescence and the childhood love that dominated and informed the rest of her life, and the latter details how this profound loss of love and innocence has led her down a destructive and deadly path. [Perverts](#) comes in as a reflective epilogue to this narrative, detailing Ethel's sins and traumas after death. As an audience, we gain a glimpse into arguably the most objective descriptions of Ethel's life, where she is free from the need to project love onto others. While traversing the afterlife, she describes the lessons and traumas she had to endure, if only so that another daughter may learn and save herself. [Perverts](#) is not a narrative in the same way WT and PD are; rather, it is an anthology of pain and observation, and through the outlined [12 Pillars of Simulacrum](#), Ethel perverts who she once was.

Tracklist Analysis:

1. [Perverts](#): The song opens with a cover of "Nearer, My God, to Thee." Although just an excerpt, the hymn depicts [the euphoria experienced in proximity to God](#) using the biblical imagery of Jacob's ladder to heaven in [Genesis 28:10-19](#). Ethel hopes to climb into Heaven, believing in the Evangelical lessons of her community. However, it is then revealed that "[heaven has forsaken the masturbator](#)," and Ethel is condemned to an afterlife consumed by suffering. The "masturbator" here is Ethel, drawing parallels to how she has loved in selfish ways and succumbed to sexual degradation. This theme will be further explored in "Onanist." The lyric, "it's happening to everybody," sets the tone for the entire EP. The narrator acknowledges that the cycle that destroyed Ethel is found in everyone.
2. [Punish](#): Detailing how Ethel has been continually hurt by those she trusted to love her. Starting in childhood, Ethel has made references to the abuse and trauma endured within her home. "[Hard Times](#)" alludes to the physical and/ or sexual abuse of Ethel at the hands of her father. Leaving her apathetic, she is "too tired to move, too tired to leave." Love continues to taunt Ethel as she [pushes her oldest friend, Janie, away](#), loses Willoughby, and her projection of escape to an [act of God](#), loses another lover to brutality [and poverty](#), and is finally forced to submit to a [violent man](#) who ultimately [destroys any evidence of her existence](#). Again and again, Ethel is "punished" for seeking and accepting love from others. She is never able to know what healthy love is; thus, she allows her self-destructive nature to prevail.
3. [Houses of Psychotic Women](#): This is the most in-depth look into the depravity dwelling within the Cain household. The narrator, likely Ethel's father or mother, describes how some kind of love or innocence was stolen, and from this point, they have waited for its return,

as a sort of salvation. Furthermore, the narrator asks, “Do you think you understand what it means to be loved?” answering, “You don’t, and you never will/ But I can tell you right now/ It’s [beautiful](#).” Similar to how more radical Evangelicals will reject the notion of an “all-loving God,” instead believing that God will never love those in sin. This idea is then expanded as the narrator states, “It is such a precious thing to be loved... When you were young, you said you wished that someone loved you/ I do.” The narrator explains that God will never bestow the divine gift of love to the listener, in this case Ethel; however, that love can be found in the narrator. Additionally, because of her parents' alleged knowledge of how beautiful it can feel to be loved by God, Ethel may hope to vicariously feel this love too. Underneath the verse, Anhedonia evokes a dark atmosphere and hypnotic trance with groaning, desolate sounds and the line, “I love you.” It’s almost as if Ethel perpetually believes the lie that the abuse dealt is for the sake of love. Hearing “I love you” over and over makes her more apathetic to the pain of her family.

4. [Vacillator](#): Ethel is repeatedly doubtful about her inherent ability to be loved by others. She continues to project the love she needs onto others and is let down when they are unable to meet her expectations. In “Vacillator,” Ethel looks back on her time as a sex worker. Surrounded by loveless and transactional sex, she is apathetic to any potential of these acts as an “escape.” The repeated phrase, “[If you love me, keep it to yourself](#),” appears to be a stark contrast to Ethel’s previous need for constant validation. She asked Willoughby, “Are [you angry? Do you hate me?](#)” In “[Gibson Girl](#),” Ethel states, “And if you hate me/ Please don’t tell me,” and finally in “[Strangers](#),” she asks, “Am I no good?” Now in death, Ethel realizes that love has only brought her agony and violence. She would rather shield herself from the world’s lies than continue to be marred in the name of love.
5. [Onanist](#): “Onanist” is a reflection of how Ethel and others use love as a means for self-satisfaction rather than the pursuit of a developed partnership. Ethel has discussed how she has never really known those she claims to love. In “[Waco, Texas](#),” she states, “Yeah, you’ve [Willoughby] changed/ But did I ever know you/ Or did I hold you/ Facing away from me?” Here, she admits to loving Willoughby selfishly, not understanding the nuances of his personhood, instead forcing him to be the projection of Ethel’s insecurities. As “Onanist” crescendos, the lyric, “I want to know love/ I want to know what it feels like,” is sung, followed by the spoken, “it feels good.” Carrying on with the themes of sex work, the spoken line mirrors “[Gibson Girl](#),” “if it feels good, then it can’t be bad.” In a desperate attempt to achieve any sliver of the divine love absent in her life, Ethel seeks to use love as a means to an end. Ethel shows no desire to understand and develop a connection with the men she seeks out. She continues to ignore their individual wants and desires until it leads to her demise.
 - a. Willoughby: She never took his fears of storm seriously, leaving him to die alone in the [tempest](#).

- b. Logan: She continued to ignore his seemingly [insatiable need for violence](#), ultimately leading to his bloody [death](#) and her separation from the town she was born in.
 - c. Isaiah: Despite the numerous reports of violence between Ethel and Isaiah from their first [interaction](#), Ethel decides to romanticize their time together via “[Thoroughfare](#).” However, instead of the loss of her lover, Ethel is now the lamb for [slaughter](#).
- 6. [Pulldrone](#): Divided into two distinct “halves,” “Pulldrone” illustrates the pull of Ethel’s life (her decisions and life events that lead her to her fate) and the drone (the underlying pain and/ or emptiness that follows Ethel in life, making her run towards destruction). Within the “pull half,” Anhedonia outlines her “12 Pillars of Simulacrum,” the process in which one becomes detached from [reality](#). These “Pillars” are inspired by the work *Simulacra and Simulation* by 20th-century French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard’s work expands on the idea that “simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none.” The simulacrum is [true](#). Baudrillard adds to this idea, proposing that an image undergoes four steps in the transition to [simulacrum](#). These are the: sacramental order (a reflection of reality), order of maleficence (reality is masked), order of sorcery (absence of reality), and pure simulacrum (no relation to reality). This then leads to hyperreality, where symbols and simulation take the place of what is real. Similar to how many will shop online as opposed to a physical store, Ethel has constructed a false reality around love rather than seeking true connection. It is through this lens that Ethel’s life can be laid out objectively and chronologically, detailing every step towards depravity.
 - a. [12 Pillars of Simulacrum](#): As detailed through the events of *WT* and *PD*
 - i. Apathy: Ethel is disillusioned with the world after the death of her father and the generational trauma of her family. Referencing this in “Family Tree (Intro), Ethel states, “The fates already fucked me sideways/ Swinging by my neck from the family tree/ He’ll laugh and say, “You know I raised you better than this”/ Then leave me hanging so they all can laugh at [me](#),” the “he” here most likely being her father. This disillusionment begets her need for external validation, which also leads to the departure of Ethel’s oldest friend, Janie. Already, Ethel’s path is marked with a downward trajectory.
 - ii. Disruption: Willoughby Tucker is introduced to Ethel. Thus began the ultimate love story of Ethel Cain’s life. The line, “[There goes a great shudder through the muscle/ A shimmering of bells through the mist](#),” may reference the “butterflies” first felt by Ethel.
 - iii. Curiosity: Through Willoughby’s presence, Ethel’s life is more than the dullness of rural Alabama. She begins to see the world outside of her family. Becoming jealous of neighborhood girls such as Holly Reddick of

- “Fuck Me Eyes,” or fantasizing about “A House in Nebraska,” Ethel is becoming wise to the world beyond.
- iv. Assimilation: Ethel begins to accept the possibility of a happy life with Willoughby. Outlined in songs such as “Nettles” and “Dust Bowl,” where Ethel imagines their wedding, or gushes about the adolescent allure of a drive-in. She is now on the path towards “good Christian living,” believing she can maintain it. In “Pulldrone,” the narrator finds the “wellspring of knowledge/ of feeling, of sensation./ Beauty, overwhelming;” perhaps this is God’s love itself. Upon its discovery, the narrator states they “will dislocate [their] jaw to fit it all in.” Similar to how Ethel may be desperate to gorge herself on domestic bliss, or at least the dream of it.
 - v. Aggrandization: Now that Ethel has placed all of her faith in Willoughby, she begins to inflate his capabilities in her mind. Believing that he is the embodiment of strength and love she has been searching for. We can see this in the repeated phrase, “[you’re not scared of no knock on the door.](#)” However, by the end of the song, she doubts her ideals of Willoughby, stating, “or maybe you are.”
 - vi. Delineation: Ethel has been unaware of the realities of her relationship. Heard in “Waco, Texas,” Ethel concedes the fragility and hardship endured by Willoughby. She says, “My [baby acts cool but/ they all know something ain't right./ Only acting this cool when he's walking with me,](#)” and “[To be known the way you should/ Is to put yourself through hell.](#)” Ethel knows that Willoughby is just as broken as she, but she cannot save him, as she cannot save herself through Willoughby alone. She wants to know “[what God knows,](#)” hoping they can both be saved.
 - vii. Perversion: The death of Willoughby in the tempest has permanently perverted Ethel’s life, severely damaging her trust and exasperating her need for love. In so doing, clouding the “truth” of love. In “Pulldrone,” the narrator describes lying as “the [sinner's errand,](#)” possibly alluding to a task that will lead to the destruction of one’s soul. Ethel continues to accept lies from others as well as lie to herself about the reality of love, leading to her damnation.
 - viii. Resentment: With the death of Willoughby, Ethel becomes much more outwardly destructive. She starts abusing [alcohol](#) and engaging with a [violent](#) partner. She is also once again caught up in her familial trauma, recontextualizing the abuse of her childhood in “Family Tree” and “Hard Times.” Ethel almost directly references her resentment in “Hard Times,” saying, “I’m tired of you, still tied to [me,](#)” and that her need to still be like her father “[scares](#)” her.

- ix. Separation: After the failed bank robbery and Logan's subsequent [death](#), Ethel flees Shady Grove, afraid of what consequences await her at home. While on the lam, Ethel meets Isaiah in [Texas](#). This new stranger offers a genuine promise of escape for Ethel. Now, she sees a future out west, saying that Isaiah's "[pickup truck with all of \[his\] dumb luck is the only place I think I'd ever wanna be.](#)" Back to "Pulldrone," the narrator states, "I was an angel, though [plummeting](#)." Ethel's elated state after freeing the banality of Shady Grove and discovering an enticing stranger gives her a glimpse into the divine knowledge of love, but it is fleeting.
 - x. Degradation: Ethel is now fully in the clutches of Isaiah. He pimps her out, keeping her [drugged](#) and placid. Not only is Ethel sexually degraded, but also physically and spiritually. Isaiah taunts her in her drug-fueled psychosis. He says, "[You love blood too much/ But not like I do](#)" and "[You poor thing/ Sweet, mourning lamb.](#)" These are references to the blood of Christ and Abraham's sacrificial slaughter, respectively. Isaiah throws the only comfort Ethel has, her religion, right back at her. Hammering in the lesson that "[God loves you, but not enough to save you.](#)" Ridiculing her beliefs until she is fully [broken](#).
 - xi. Annihilation: Isaiah shoots and kills Ethel, storing her body in a basement freezer, where he slowly [consumes](#) any trace of her. In "Pulldrone," the narrator states, "[This agony/ Such is the consequence of audience/ I will claw my way back to the Great Dark/ and we will not speak of this place again.](#)" Anhedonia describes "The Great Dark" as "everyday life...the banality, the muck and the mire of the human [experience](#)." In death, Ethel realizes that living for others has led to agony; she wishes she could return to the humdrum of Shady Grove. She echoes this in "Sun Bleached Flies:" "[What I wouldn't give to be in Church this Sunday/ Listening to the choir, so heartfelt, all singing.](#)"
 - xii. Desolation: Ethel has reached the afterlife. She fully sees her life as it was, and how her need for external love spiraled her down a dismal and empty path. The narrator discusses the "[sacred geometry of onanism/ Of ouroboros/ Of punishment.](#)" Ethel comes to terms with her cannibalistic nature; however, it is only after she is fully destroyed physically and spiritually. "Amber Waves" [apathetic](#) ending reinforces the final transformation of Ethel Cain.
7. [Etienne](#): Despite the ambiguity of the track, the titular source and closing passage give the most insight into its place in Ethel's reflection of her life. Anhedonia has [confirmed](#) the title "Etienne" is a reference to 18th-century French architect Étienne-Louis Boullée. Anhedonia added on NTS radio, "Thematically, I wanted to build a temple. I had visions of a grand one carved from stone, rising up from the bleak rocky landscape of the [Great](#)

[Great Dark](#), and I could only imagine what was inside. I was extremely curious and I had to know, but I am by no means the original [architect](#).” Known, “as a megalomaniac, because of his tendency toward grand proposals without consideration for reality... [Boullée’s work] should be regarded simply as visionary schemes rather than as practical [projects](#).” Specifically, such schemes that detailed a cenotaph (a funerary monument honoring a figure laid to rest elsewhere) for Isaac [Newton](#). Anhedonia creates a sonic cenotaph for Ethel, honoring her memory while Ethel is interred via Isaiah’s digestion. Similar to Boullée’s tendency towards the magnificent, Ethel displays a similar detachment from reality in “Waco, Texas,” describing, “I’ve been picking names for our children/ You’ve [Willoughby] been wondering how you’re gonna feed [them](#).” In this way, Boullée’s philosophy mirrors Ethel’s impracticality. Just like Boullée, Ethel is grandiose in her ideas of the future, romanticizing the simple pleasures of domestic life, while Willoughby is awake to the reality of their poverty and instability. Moreover, the song closes with a passage from an “old box of sermon tapes from the 70s and [80s](#)” that Anhedonia had bought the previous year. With this context, it can be imagined that Ethel herself may have been exposed to this sermon or at least similar ideas. Perhaps in death, she reflects upon this sermon, wondering if she had embraced the physicality of reality instead of living “[in the clouds](#),” maybe she would have realized that she “felt so good that [she] didn’t want to kill [herself] [anymore](#).”

8. [Thatorchia](#): Described by Anhedonia as, “a word that popped into [her] head... [meaning] the bitter acceptance of the knowledge that god will let you near but he won’t let you [stay](#).” This alludes to Ethel’s acceptance of her proximity to God. Willoughby was the closest Ethel had gotten to God. In “Dust [Bowl](#),” despite the constant absence of healthy love in her life, she was never unsure of Willoughby’s. This is when God allows Ethel to be near. But this love would eventually be ripped from her by God when Willoughby died in the Tempest. With this realization, Ethel finds some peace and acceptance in Willoughby’s demise. Knowing that even if he had not died in that storm, his presence in her life would have always been temporary. With that, it’s as if Ethel can finally move on from Willoughby, if only too late. Moreover, the swelling of this song is reminiscent of “[Willoughby’s Theme](#),” almost as if it is coming back to Ethel, distorted through time and death.
9. [Amber Waves](#): *Perverts* ends with Ethel’s reflection and acknowledgement of how her addiction to love and validation has left her destroyed and alone. Opening on a skit, a doctor informs his patient that she should take “as much as you need to feel good,” again a callback to “Onanist” and “Gibson Girl.” Anhedonia has explained that the titular Amber is “the personification of love cast aside to get [high](#).” While this may also be a reference to the drugs literally taken by Ethel in life, it is more likely a reference to Ethel’s addiction to love. Directly referencing this in “Western Nights,” Ethel says she will be “clinging onto [Logan] like some love blind [addict](#).” Throughout her life, she cycles through an addiction to validation from those around her. Now with the clarity of

death, she can fully recognize how destructive her choices have been. Leaving the audience with the ultimate lesson of Ethel Cain: break the cycle and escape the need for love from others. Ethel echoes this sentiment with, “maybe it's true/ you were nothing to [me](#),” the “you” here being love itself. The album ends with a haunting, “I can’t feel [anything](#),” punctuating the emptiness of her desolation, thus completing the 12 pillars. Her final apathy mirrors that of her childhood disdain for herself and her family, but has become unrecognizable due to the decisions made in her life. Moreover, this could also be a reference to Ethel’s freedom from pain. Now that she has recognized the truths from her life, she may finally know peace.

Conclusion:

Although originally inspired by Donald Ray Pollock's anthology of perverts in *Knockemstiff*, Anhedonia had planned for the original “concept [for *Perverts*] was a character study about different [‘perverts.’](#)” The anthological tone of the album remains intact; however, through this understanding of the EP, it is now Ethel who perverts her soul.

In the creation of the EP, Anhedonia discusses the concept of the “Ring.” She explains it as: “a portal of elevation and enlightenment,” adding, “I think that everyone looks for a ring in their life in a [way](#),” as it pulls on one’s soul. Anhedonia builds on the addictive allure of the Ring: “I think a lot of people can experience [the pull] through drugs... I don’t want to call it a vice, but maybe you would.” Throughout *Perverts*, Ethel revisits her attempts to be close to God through love. First experiencing the pull with Willoughby with their dream of Nebraska, Ethel’s “Ring” in this case would be the love she cannot attain from others. This drives her through the 12 Pillars, hoping to reach the [Divine Theater](#) (where God resides, separated by the Veil/ an enlightened state of mind/ euphoria). Conversely, Anhedonia also explains the “Hole” as a state of misery and extreme darkness, warning: “one can venture into the hole, but will enter a perpetual sinking. If one neglects to exit in time, they will enter the maze and become stuck forever.” In the Ethel narrative, one can argue that Ethel slips into a Hole after Willoughby’s death. From there, she continues to engage with abusive partners and slides deeper into the hands of addiction. “[Darkness](#) is inviting, and it will continue to pull you down,” Anhedonia says. The aforementioned “Maze” is a place of “extreme confusion, of unreality. A detachment from [reality](#).” This parallels the final events of Ethel’s life as described in the psychosis of [Ptolemea](#) as well as in-universe [media](#). Ethel has sunk through her Hole and is now lost in the Maze, awaiting desolation.

In a Reddit post [endorsed](#) by Anhedonia, user [LYN0006](#) speculates on her intentions behind the 12 Pillars of Simulacrum and its relation to the Ring and similar concepts. They explain each Pillar as follows, after which I relate it to the Ethel Cain narrative of *WT* and *PD*:

1. Apathy: “becoming numb and disinterested in the great dark (reality).”

- a. Ethel is disillusioned with the world after the death of her father and the generational trauma of her family. This disillusionment begets her need for external validation.
2. Disruption: “realizing that you can escape the great dark, and becoming aware of the ring and transcendence.”
 - a. Willoughby Tucker is introduced to Ethel. Thus began the ultimate love story of Ethel Cain’s life as Ethel begins to feel the Pull.
3. Curiosity: “wanting to feel the pull of the ring for yourself and to know what it feels like.”
 - a. Through Willoughby’s presence, Ethel’s life is more than the dullness of rural Alabama. Straying to thoughts of impressing boys or a fictional home with her love. Ethel wants to know what it means to be loved.
4. Assimilation: “feeling enlightenment and the connection to a higher power and trying to chase that feeling again.”
 - a. Ethel begins to accept the possibility of a happy life with Willoughby. Ethel imagines their wedding, or gushes about the adolescent allure of a drive-in. She is now on the path towards “good Christian living,” believing she can maintain it.
5. Aggrandization: “beginning to try to demand that feeling instead of the slow pull in the ring.”
 - a. Now that Ethel has placed all of her faith in Willoughby, she begins to inflate his capabilities in her mind. Believing that he is the embodiment of strength and love she has been searching for, and that he can provide her the transcendence she desires.
6. Delineation: “realizing the veil between the divine theatre and the great dark but becoming unsure of reality.”
 - a. Ethel has been unaware of the realities of her relationship. Ethel knows that Willoughby is just as broken as she, but she cannot save him, as she cannot save herself through Willoughby alone. She wants to know “[what God knows](#),” hoping they can both be saved.
7. Perversion: “transcendence is no longer a pure thing and becomes tied to unfavorable vices.”
 - a. The death of Willoughby in the tempest has permanently perverted Ethel’s life, severely damaging her trust and exasperating her need for love. Ethel continues to accept lies from others as well as lie to herself about the reality of love, leading to her damnation.
8. Resentment: “anger about the limitations of the flesh as you are unable to stay permanently in the divine theater.”
 - a. With the death of Willoughby, Ethel becomes much more outwardly destructive. She starts abusing [alcohol](#) and engaging with a [violent](#) partner.

9. Separation: “beginning to feel detached from the inescapable reality of the real world as you only seek to feel the proximity of god again.”
 - a. While on the lam, Ethel meets Isaiah in [Texas](#). This new stranger offers a genuine promise of escape for Ethel. Despite any warning signs, she is desperate to feel God again.
10. Degradation: “feeling split between the great dark and the divine theater, you begin to sink into wallow and self-pity, entering the hole.”
 - a. Ethel is now fully in the clutches of Isaiah. He pimps her out, keeping her drugged and placid. Not only is Ethel sexually degraded, but also physically and spiritually.
11. Annihilation: “You become completely lost and detached from reality with no groundings left to connect you back to the great dark and enter the maze.”
 - a. Isaiah shoots and kills Ethel, storing her body in a basement freezer, where he slowly [consumes](#) any trace of her.
12. Desolation: “reality and divine have been lost. You are left with a hollow simulacrum.”
 - a. Ethel has reached the afterlife. She fully sees her life as it was, and how her need for external love spiraled her down a dismal and empty path.