

Université de Montréal

“Inside Our Own Skins”: Representations of Estrangement  
in Four Plays by Tennessee Williams

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Université de Montréal  
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Ce mémoire intitulé :

“Inside Our Own Skins”: Representations of Estrangement  
in Four Plays by Tennessee Williams

présenté par :

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## Résumé de synthèse

Tennessee Williams décrit souvent la rupture et l'isolation des individus ordinaires de la société américaine d'après la deuxième guerre mondiale. Dans ses pièces de théâtre, il explore l'exécution de l'aliénation, la frustration d'une sexualité non-conformiste et la fragmentation de l'identité des individus qui négocient leurs existences dans le cadre des environnements sociologiques défavorables. Williams esquisse les stratégies disparates et rebelles de la délivrance, la défense et la survie que ses personnages s'y engagent dans des circonstances déterministiques. Ce mémoire traite les manifestations de telles expériences dans The Glass Menagerie (1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), et Suddenly Last Summer (1958), dans les optiques des théories avancées par Horkheimer et Adorno, Michel Foucault et Louis Althusser. A la conclusion de ces pièces, les résolutions des conflits isolateurs offertes par Williams ne sont pas rassurantes. Le dramaturge dirige plutôt ses personnages envers une existence troublée par le malaise d'une identité désorientée, ou bien il les estampe avec le déséquilibre mental, la perte ou la mort.

#### Mots clés

déguisement . immobilité . performance . rupture . subjectification

**Abstract**

Tennessee Williams often depicts the estrangement and isolation of ordinary human beings in post-World War II American society. His plays explore the enforcement of alienation, the frustration of nonconformist sexuality, and the fragmentation of identity in individuals who negotiate their existence in inimical sociological environments. Williams traces the disparate and rebellious strategies of deliverance, defense, and survival his characters engage in deterministic circumstances. This dissertation examines the manifestations of such experiences in The Glass Menagerie (1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), and Suddenly Last Summer (1958), through the application of theories set forth by Horkheimer and Adorno, Michel Foucault, and Louis Althusser. Williams' plays offer no comforting resolutions to the isolationary conflicts of his plays. Instead, the playwright either leads his characters to a continued existence marred by malaise or exerts upon them the dynamics of mental imbalance, loss, or death.

#### Keywords

disguise . estrangement . immobility . performance . subjectification



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## Abbreviations

Throughout the dissertation, the following abbreviations are used:

CHTR – Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

GM – The Glass Menagerie

SLS – Suddenly Last Summer

SND – A Streetcar Named Desire

## Dedication

For my parents, because they are

## Acknowledgments

I first came to know of Tennessee Williams in my final year of secondary school, when Miss Phisicky introduced The Glass Menagerie to my English class. Since then, the inspiration and esteem Williams' work consistently produced in me have grown into the impetus for this dissertation. I am grateful to the playwright and my teacher for having afforded me the opportunity to explore his legacy.

I am also indebted to my research director Dr. Michael Eberle-Sinatra, who agreed to be the motivating guidance of my studies at Université de Montréal. Under his tutelage, I have learned to write more objectively and succinctly. His comments and suggestions regarding my work have always proved invaluable.

Finally, I must also express my gratitude to my family, friends, and colleagues, whose support and encouragement contributed in no small measure to the completion of this dissertation.



## Introduction

When Tennessee Williams died in 1983, T. E. Kalem of Time conferred upon him the title “laureate of the outcast.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the isolation, displacement, and desperation of the playwright’s variously memorable characters from the American South stamp the world of his drama. “[They] lie, dream, form illusions, and retreat into drink, drugs, and hallucination to protect themselves from hurt. We must view them primarily as victims” (Abbott 139). They are also often arrested between tensions pulling them in opposite directions, or immobilized in an aggregate of anxieties that Williams termed “a web of monstrous complexity” (CHTR 875). Social integration taxes their identities exorbitantly; hence, the exit to their deliverance is either willful withdrawal or imposed isolation “inside [their] own skins for life” (Orpheus Descending 42). Moreover, Williams confounds the conclusion of his plays by refusing to offer his characters comfortable resolutions to the tensions permeating their world. In this dissertation, I investigate the devices both poetic and theatrical the playwright employs to verbalize the estrangement of his characters compellingly, but he also often translates the socio-psychological pressures underlying these representations in visual idioms. In the relevant instances, I explore the particularities of these representations not only on stage but also on film, since the cinematic adaptations of the plays are valid and useful ways to appreciate representations of alienation in the texts.

I have chosen to examine four of Williams’ major plays from the forties and the fifties that mediate the shared economy of his theatre: in The Glass Menagerie

(1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), and Suddenly Last Summer (1958), the dramatist explores the delicate dimensions of memory, identity, estrangement, and sexuality, against the backdrop of social tensions and familial loyalties. In each of these plays, Williams depicts the distress of characters arrested in circumstances they negotiate with great difficulty, leading them to experience a sense of estrangement or to engage in acts of desperation.

The Glass Menagerie skillfully melds the articulations of Williams' themes in a lyricism that informs his other plays as well. The four major characters of the play are presented through the lens of recollection: the theatrical space Williams creates for them lacks definition, in contrast to the conformist reality of the culture industry predominating in the world outside their home. I examine each of the characters' negotiation of the culture industry's tensions through the application of the propositions Horkheimer and Adorno set forth in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1972). The narrator, Tom Wingfield, flees from the suffocation imposed upon his inarticulate homoeroticism by fragmenting his identity; his mother Amanda reverts to her southern heritage as a defensive tactic against the socio-economic pressures constraining the family; the sensitive and the slightly handicapped Laura disguises herself in the fragility of her glass animal collection, where she finds refuge from the world she cannot confront. The Gentleman Caller is a naïve dreamer who has surrendered his identity to the capitalistic world, convinced that his social and economic advancement will lead to the fulfillment of his potential as an individual.

Of the four plays I have selected, A Streetcar Named Desire is the most obviously invested with elements of the tragic. Both Amanda Wingfield and Blanche

DuBois are inheritors of the Scarlett O'Hara tradition, yet Blanche is more fragile and irresolute than her counterpart. Having experienced and survived at a young age a love that ended in disastrous circumstances, she carries the scars of the experience on her fractured psyche. Her past does not afford her the shelter that Amanda enjoys to avoid the harsh realities of the present: on the contrary, it is the source of her malaise. At her sister's home, Blanche DuBois hopelessly attempts to reconnect with the world in a renewed spirit, but her efforts are stymied by the unavoidable ruthlessness around her. Blanche's solution to her predicament is the reconstruction of her shattered identity. Williams pits the feigned refinement of this vulnerable woman against the earthiness of her brother-in-law Stanley, who views Blanche as an intruder upon his home and marriage and resolves to frustrate her project. The play then unfolds as a battleground for the two performers, who engage and irreversibly calibrate one another's identity in the context of Michel Foucault's theorization of power relations.

In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Williams mediates isolation, estrangement, and self-realization more equivocally than in his earlier plays. The play's setting is the South, but its central characters are an urbanite couple who have returned to the family home to reunite with the dying patriarch. Their estrangement from one another is not rooted in a displaced Southern sensibility but in the frustrated sexualities of both. Brick Pollitt cannot reconcile himself to the notion that his closest friend committed suicide, prompted by an inability to acknowledge his homosexuality; Maggie's efforts to produce that reconciliation and shatter her husband's illusions of a lost, loyal friendship are thwarted by his listlessness and spiritual paralysis. At the same time, the dying patriarch's wish to bequeath his estate to one of his sons informs the conflict

with an additional dimension of urgency. Against this backdrop of looming death and competing loyalties, Williams suspends the characters in the inability to alleviate their anxieties, arresting the play in an unsettling immobility.

The urgency to confront truth and achieve liberation from debilitating self-deception in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof also permeates the final play of the quartet in this dissertation, a drama more disturbing and morbid than the others. In the hermetic world of Suddenly Last Summer's Violet Venable, Dr. Cuckrowicz reveals that the horror haunting Catharine Holly originates in a contradictory universe of primal ruthlessness and artistic creativity, to which her dead cousin Sebastian Venable subscribed. To explore the Venables' mutual exploitation within this corrosive conflation, I borrow from Louis Althusser his terminology of subjectification, and I examine the ways in which the principal characters function simultaneously as Subject and subject. The play's visual and symbolic horrors lend themselves naturally to a cinematic idiom I analyze in discussing the film version of the play (Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1960), which Gore Vidal and Williams adapted from the playwright's text.

Dissimilar though their economic and social circumstances may be, the estrangement that the men and women of these plays experience unites them. "Despite the diversity of his dramas, Tennessee Williams essentially tells the same story over and over again. He records the yearnings of the loveless, the cries of the desperately lonely" (Koprince 94). They are all visited by the same sense of alienation, the articulation of which varies from play to play. Thus the emerging representations of the estranged in the four dramas are congruent yet unique. They are agencies of an

ongoing rebellion that is sustained by an aversion to conformity, a central theme in Williams' theatre. I am in agreement with David Savran's view that "his plays redefine and reconfigure resistance so that it is less the prerogative of rebellious individuals than a potential always already at play within both social organization and dramatic structure" (81). This constant reconfiguration is crucial to formulate an appreciation of Williams' dramas.

In the critical body of Williams' work, interpretive applications of aspects from his personal life and the anxieties stemming from his homosexual identity occupy a sizable space. Scholars have turned to his biography to trace the impact of these elements upon his writing. While this approach unfolds in persuasive and valid argumentations, I have foregone its service in my dissertation. Williams' theatre, I believe, defies the definitiveness borne upon his work by the tangibility of his life. Rather, like the characters themselves, Williams' theatre is a compendium of human frailty and resilience, of loss and survival, of deception and disillusionment. His delineation of human discomfiture in urban or hostile environments ranks him alongside Arthur Miller and Edward Albee, as one of the premier American voices who focalized the estrangement and anxieties of ordinary men and women in post-World War II America.

Notes to the Introduction

1. "The Laureate of the Outcast." Time Archives Online 7 Mar. 1983. 16 July 2006. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,953776,00.html>>.

Chapter One – The Glass Menagerie: Defiant Disguises



Ten days after The Glass Menagerie opened on Broadway on March 31, 1945, the author of Time Magazine's review extended an unenthusiastic endorsement to Eddie Dowling's production of the play.<sup>1</sup> The reviewer seemed to have enjoyed the drama despite himself, allowing reluctantly that the play was "appealing and unusual, clothing an uneventful family history in plenty of stage color."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, he thought the "use of a narrator, filmy curtains, dim lights, atmospheric music" were "a lazy man's theatrical devices" that amounted to "something, on occasion, as theater," though these "faults and needless frills" did not hinder Laurette Taylor (as Amanda) from giving "the most fascinating and memorable performance of the season." That Taylor's performance overwhelmed the production to the detriment of the play's narrative design is not specific to this review: subsequent productions both on the stage and on film also generated the same response in critics and audiences alike. When Katharine Hepburn played Amanda on television in 1973, the response was generally the same.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Amanda Wingfield's looming characterization, The Glass Menagerie is essentially Tom's play, for it is his narration of past events that animates Amanda and Laura.<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. King notes that "Tom opens the play and he closes it" (86). Furthermore, as Tom readily admits in his opening soliloquy, "the play is memory" (GM 400), *his* memory, in the landscape of which one wanders only as far as he permits. For the reader this construct entails the projection of two narrative planes. The contours of The Glass Menagerie are demarcated by Tom the narrator, who then

grants the reader access to his interiorized, autobiographical memory play.<sup>5</sup> Yet The Glass Menagerie is complicated further by Tom Wingfield's additional roles: on the first plane, the seaman-playwright poses as an inward narrator and sometimes as a stage manager, and on the second he assumes the role of the poet-son in his narrative. Tom's two planes and the self-assigned apportionment of roles are signposts to an anxiety of being discovered. I submit that he devises these complex manoeuvres to shield his identity from the normative prescriptions with which the culture industry coerces him into conformity with its values and codes, and his survivalist technique manifests itself in the play through the trope of dissimulation.

Why does the reader need a narrator? The mimetic architecture of any play hardly requires an external character to narrate the very events the actors simulate onstage. He or she must justify himself otherwise. The notion that The Glass Menagerie needs a narrator to embellish what Williams designated "an episodic play" (GM 396) must be discounted, for one would assume that the playwright was perfectly capable of rendering the narrator's interventions in dramatic dialogue. In The Glass Menagerie, the narrator's contribution comprises five monologues: apart from the opening and closing soliloquies, he relates circumstances surrounding the events in Scenes III, V, and VI. Ostensibly, his input consists of the framing of the diegesis, to offer a specific contextualization to the reader's reception of the play. Williams provides this perspective in the "Production Notes" accompanying the text. He maintains that "being a 'memory play,' The Glass Menagerie can be presented with unusual freedom of convention" (GM 395). The deliverance from restrictions dictated by conventional, essentially realistic staging modes privileges the "conception of a

new, plastic theatre,” one in which “its considerably delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part” (GM 395).<sup>6</sup> One should remember, however, that Williams’ notes are available only to the reader but not to the theatre-going audience. Hence, the non-realistic representation of events on two contiguous narrative planes onstage allows the narrator to become his author’s spokesman for the audience. Such a theatrical device would involve two risks: first, it might provoke resentment in the audience due to an implied condescension toward it; it might also undercut the dramatic tension flowing from the stage through excessive interruptions, unless the playwright is subscribing to the Brechtian concept of Theatre of Alienation, a possibility disqualified by the narrator’s participation in the play. Hence, the narrator’s rationale lies not in his paratextual contribution but in the unified value of his simultaneous activities within and without the play.<sup>7</sup>

The appreciation of the narrator’s significance also warrants a closer examination of Tom’s various functions—playwright, seaman, narrator, stage manager, son, poet. The potentials of these six functions are not fully exploited in Tom. For example, there is no information regarding his naval career, except that he joined the Merchant Marines (even this is not confirmed beyond the uniform he wears); C. W. E. Bigsby observes that Tom is a “putative writer” (41), since his dramaturgical talent is limited to the single exhibit at hand. These six functions are grouped within two large configurations, corresponding to the two narrative planes: first we meet the merchant marine-playwright-narrator-stage manager, then, within his narration, the son-poet. Since the play consists chiefly of Tom’s narrative, the latter

two are more fully realized than the first four. If one takes into account that chronologically the second configuration precedes the first, it becomes evident that the playwright-narrator is actually a projection of the poet-son's consciousness.

TOM. Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. (GM 400)

By obfuscating his multiple roles and functions, Tom Wingfield has fractionalized his identity into compartmental, disguised functions, to escape the impositions of too much "reality."

The pressures regulating Tom's intrapersonal negotiation of the world are invariably conditioned by the gloomy socio-economic context within which he operates. Roger B. Stein affirms, "The Glass Menagerie is built upon more than the poignant plot of illusion and frustration in the lives of little peoples. Williams has deepened the losses of individuals by pointing to social and even spiritual catastrophe" (136). Tom pronounces as much in his opening and closing remarks. He begins by relapsing from the present, a time when "the world is lit by lightning" (GM 465), to the past, "that quaint period, the thirties," when Americans are absorbed in the "deceptive rainbows" of "hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, [. . .] movies, and sex" (GM 425). In Spain, there is pervasive brutality prefiguring the imminent Second World War; in the U.S., only "shouting and confusion, [and] disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis" (GM 400). Against this social background, "the huge middle class of America was [. . .] having its fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy" (GM 425). An articulation of this blindness

in the play is Amanda's metonymic daily exhortation to her son to "Rise and Shine! Rise and Shine!" (GM 417). It is the naively optimistic expression of a conviction that the economic despair shrouding their world will be undone by her children: "Why, you—you're just *full* of natural endowments! Both of my children—they're *unusual* children! Don't you think I know it? I'm so—*proud!*" (GM 419). In The Glass Menagerie, the various self-valorizing mechanisms of the discomfited family allay its members' alienation from an increasingly deleterious society.

Despite the persistence of the socio-economic ramifications of its setting, The Glass Menagerie does not engage in ideological interpellations. Rather, the social background attends the characters' disparate negotiations of their alienation with an ineluctable forcefulness. Bigsby maintains this presence is the expression of "a fundamental determinism" (42) that is omnipresent in Williams' work. His characters are faced with an obvious choice: "you either capitulate to it or you resist with the only available weapons – the creative imagination, or a subversive sexuality with the power to deny, if not wholly to neutralise, the pull of death" (42). Though Bigsby's alternatives aptly abbreviate the predicaments of certain characters, I find that they are too reductive for two reasons. First, they are not applicable to the anxieties of other characters in Williams' plays. Brick Pollitt of A Streetcar Named Desire handles the tensions of energies beyond his control neither sexually nor creatively, but by isolating himself in alcoholism. Similarly, Laura Wingfield retreats into the imaginary world of her glass collection which does not yield creative output. Lastly, Jim O'Connor surrenders to societal pressures only too willingly, not because he is rebellious.

Bigsby's alternatives are also problematical when applied to those characters who refuse to surrender, because the articulations of their resistances are not always unequivocally exclusive; for example, in A Streetcar Named Desire Blanche Dubois engages in both creativity and unruly sexuality; Tom Wingfield certainly demonstrates he has the creative impulse, yet I argue below that he, too, is a sexual being, despite the absence of its overt manifestations in the play. Suddenly Last Summer reveals that Sebastian Venable's creativity is suspect and his sexuality corrupt: he combines Bigsby's alternatives in a censurable manner that ultimately destroys him. Maggie Pollitt's choice in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is arrested somewhere between the two options, since her husband refuses to accommodate her sexuality and procreate with her.

On the other hand, Catharine Holly in Suddenly Last Summer and Big Daddy Pollitt in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof engage with the world through a sexuality that serves to counterbalance the inimical circumstances in which they find themselves; and A Streetcar Named Desire frames sexuality in the diametric parameters of Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois. Creativity in The Night of the Iguana is a saving grace that makes life bearable for the painter Hannah Jelkes and her grandfather the poet Jonathan Coffin, while Maxine Faulk's sexuality in the same play is essentially redemptive. Conversely, in Orpheus Descending, the wandering musician Valentine Xavier opts for creativity, but his sexual entanglement with Lady costs him his life. Sexuality is also a destructive force for Chance Wayne, the hired lover of Sweet Bird of Youth. It is the currency with which he hopes to attain happiness with Heavenly Finley, the girl he loves, but it defeats him when he infects her with venereal disease

and her brother implements on him the most horrible fate of all the male protagonists above: castration. For Williams' characters, sexuality and creativity are nearly always dichotomous alternatives to a constant isolation from a deterministic, hostile reality. As Rev. Lawrence Shannon puts it, they "live on two levels, [. . .] the realistic level and the fantastic level," and they lose the ability to distinguish one from the other, because "when you live on the fantastic level [. . .] but have got to operate on the realistic level, that's when you're spooked" (The Night of the Iguana 380). Hence, any formulaic reduction of these characters' negotiation of their estrangement does not take into account their individual complexities.

For the Wingfields, the deterministic forces of their world articulate in the economy of the culture industry. The theatrical idiom representing its dynamic in the play is the topography of the Wingfield apartment: it "is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers" (GM 399). Each residence houses individuals who have no contact with their neighbours. In the stage directions at the beginning of the play, the playwright specifies that the apartment building is "symptomatic of the impulse of [the] largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism" (GM 399). Granger Babcock notes this "system of habitation [. . .] produces isolation and alterity, even as its hive-like quality gives it the appearance of community" (21).

The culture industry also impresses upon the characters the inability of the individual to circumscribe his or her gradual disappearance through conformity with

the masses. Consequently, each of the Wingfields seeks to counterbalance this appropriation by tracing a valorization in a defiant private sphere, which in turn, isolates them from one another. "Each character is hampered in relating to others by the need to inhabit a private world where the fundamental concern is with self-image" (Levy 529). For Amanda, repeated retrogressions to the expired time of her youth permit her, in her words, to "rise and shine" again and again; for Laura, the glass figurines she collects place her in a controlling position that she cannot enjoy in the real world; for Tom, the movies offer the opportunity to live vicarious adventures he yearns for but cannot find in his work. Levy astutely observes, "in virtue of this preoccupation with self-image and the psychological mirrors sustaining it, the world of the play is aptly named after glass" (529). Williams does not affix the self-valorizing project only to the Wingfields. Jim O'Connor, "the most realistic character of the play, [the] emissary from a world of reality" (GM 401), like Amanda, reverts to his past with Tom. "I was valuable to him as someone who could remember his former glory, who had seen him win basketball games and the silver cup in debating" (GM 432). Even those who operate in the world outside the circle of the family are in dire need of self-affirmation.

Appropriation of individuality by the culture industry surfaces in The Glass Menagerie much more pointedly than it does elsewhere in Williams' theatre. In Dialectic of Enlightenment (1972), Horkheimer and Adorno identify the culture industry's tensions in the following terms: "Through the countless agencies of mass production and its culture the conventionalized modes of behavior are impressed upon the individual as the only natural, respectable, and rational ones" (28). Amanda's



opening lines at the dinner table are an inspired example of the mentality that the culture industry instills in its subjects:

AMANDA (To her son). Honey, don't push with your fingers. If you have to push with something, the thing to push with is a crust of bread. And chew—chew! Animals have sections in their stomachs which enable them to digest food without mastication, but human beings are supposed to chew their food before they swallow it down. Eat food leisurely, son, and really enjoy it. A well-cooked meal has lots of delicate flavors that have to be held in the mouth for appreciation. So chew you food and give your salivary glands a chance to function! (GM 401-2)

One virtually expects Amanda to cite as the source of her information a widely distributed publication such as Reader's Digest. Her instructions are peppered with the imperatives “the thing to push with is,” “human beings are supposed to,” “delicate flavours have to be held in the mouth,” recommendations that are the hallmark of magazines offering their readers inane advice to improve their lives, however dubious such a claim might be. As Granger Babcock notes, “Amanda's knowledge about the body is gleaned from the magazines she reads and sells to others; it is part of the symbolic apparatus of organized society, and, I believe, that it illustrates her identification with the apparatus” (23). In Scene III, when Amanda sells subscriptions over the telephone to “The Home-Maker's Companion” featuring the “new serial by Bessie Mae Hopper” (GM 411), she tells her friend, “Oh, honey, it's something that you can't miss! You remember how Gone With the Wind took everybody by storm? You simply couldn't go out if you hadn't read it” (GM 411). Her admonition is almost an articulation of Horkheimer and Adorno's views:

What might be called use value in the reception of cultural commodities is replaced by exchange value; [. . .] the prestige seeker replaces the connoisseur. The consumer becomes the ideology of the

pleasure industry, whose institutions he cannot escape. One simply 'has to' [. . .] subscribe to Life and Time. (158)

Amanda's agency as a mediator of the culture industry is also evident when she monitors Tom's reading material. She confiscates and returns to the library "that horrible book by that insane Mr. Lawrence" (GM 412). In doing so, she insures that her children adhere to mass-produced, commonplace values rather than individualistic codes. In Horkheimer and Adorno's formulation, "in the culture industry the individual [. . .] is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned" (154). An instance of this generality in the play is the organization Daughters of the American Revolution, of which Amanda is an active member. Its motto, "God, Home, and Country," proposes absolutes, and its objectives, "Historic Preservation, Patriotism, Education," promote maintenance of communality over cultivation of individuality.<sup>8</sup> Amanda's identification with the D.A.R. is so complete that she has even assembled specific clothing she wears to its meetings (GM 405). Twice in the play, she commiserates with her fellow D.A.R. members, contextualizing their physical ailments within Christian iconography: "You're a Christian martyr, yes, that's what you are, a Christian martyr!" (GM 411, 423). In turn, Laura describes her mother's expression of dismay in Scene II in similar terms: "Mother, when you're disappointed, you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum!" (GM 408). Christian values viewed through the D.A.R. lens permeate Amanda's discourse even more elaborately when she addresses Tom in Scene IV:

AMANDA. Don't quote instinct to me! Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals! Christian adults don't want it!

TOM. What do Christian adults want, then, Mother?

AMANDA. Superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit! Only animals have to satisfy instincts! Surely your aims are somewhat higher than theirs! Than monkeys—pigs— (GM 421)

In this brief exchange, Amanda's conflation of Christian and educational platitudes is in strict concordance with the D.A.R. precepts; additionally, the particular animals she mentions near the end of their exchange are evident attempts to shame her son into following the exemplar she provides to engender in him develop normative attitudes.

Amanda's investment in the ideals of the D.A.R. may yield social dividends to her, but these benefits do not extend into her private life. Her efforts to sell subscriptions to "The Home-Maker's Companion" to her network of D.A.R. friends fail. The futility of her social dividends also manifests itself on the day the D.A.R. will induct Amanda into office in Scene II, when she discovers Laura has abandoned her studies at the Rubicam's Business College. Though Amanda may not be aware of it, the timing of her discovery is ironic. Her dedication to the social ideals of the D.A.R. has been recognized and rewarded, but her efforts to integrate her daughter into the business world have failed.<sup>9</sup> Undaunted by her failure, Amanda leads Laura to the "Young People's League" at the church she attends, but to no avail: "She spoke to nobody, nobody spoke to her" (GM 422). When Tom describes his sister as "the type that people call home girls," Amanda replies, "There's no such type, and if there is it's a pity! That is unless the home is hers, with a husband!" (GM 422). To Amanda, life outside the institutions of the culture industry is an inconceivable existence of marginality. In Scene IV, when she announces to Tom that together they must make "plans and provisions" for Laura (GM 422), her discourse posits marriage not only in a social but also in an economic context. Similarly, she projects for Tom a future in

fiscal terms. When she criticizes him for smoking excessively in Scene V, she calculates the costs involved:

AMANDA. You smoke too much. A pack a day at fifteen cents a pack. How much would that amount to in a month? Thirty times fifteen is how much, Tom? Figure it out and you will be astounded at what you could save. Enough to give you a night-school course in accounting at Washington U! Just think what a wonderful thing that would be for you, Son! (GM 424)

Amanda's conviction that a systematized plan can lead the individual to attain a fulfilled life is symptomatic of the "blindness" to which Tom the narrator refers in his opening monologue.

Amanda is not alone in her credulous negotiation of societal agencies. If Tom and Laura destabilize the Wingfield home by refusing to engage the world within their mother's parameters, Jim O'Connor's enthusiastic investment in the culture industry balances the play's quartet of characters evenly. Tom describes him to Amanda as someone who "goes in for self-improvement, [because] he goes to night school" (GM 430). Indeed, when he appears in Scene VI, he wants "to sell [Tom] a bill of goods" (GM 439)—the radio engineering and public speaking courses he studies to achieve "executive positions," because "the difference between you an' me and men in the office down front [is] social poise" (GM 439). His discourse commodifies the fulfillment of the self and reduces it to a syllogism: "*Knowledge—Zzzzzp! Money—Zzzzzp!—Power!*" (GM 454). In Horkheimer and Adorno's propositions, Jim's rationale is that of the individual whose "yardstick is [the] successful or unsuccessful approximation to the objectivity of his function and the models established for it" (28). He is a model of the culture industry's projection of "contemporary men [who] judge themselves by their own market value and learn what they are from what happens to

them in the capitalistic economy” (Horkheimer and Adorno 211). As a result, Jim O’Connor shares Amanda’s gullibility, believing that it is possible to devise a methodology for constructing the flourishing self. In this misguided belief lies perhaps the saddest aspect of Jim O’Connor’s life: the culture industry’s deterministic force to frustrate his potentiality. In Scene VI, Tom’s account of Jim’s formative years and his subsequent life establishes this preclusion:

TOM. He was shooting with such velocity through his adolescence that you would logically expect him to arrive at nothing short of the White House by the time he was thirty. But Jim apparently ran into more interference after his graduation from Soldan. His speed had definitely slowed. Six years after he left high school he was holding a job that wasn’t much better than mine. (GM 432)

Although the culture industry predominates the world of The Glass Menagerie, the Wingfields mitigate its agency by their defensive and desperate tactics, in order to prevent the appropriation of their identities. In this arena of conformity through subjectification, the most rebellious contender is the absent father of the Wingfield home. Tom’s introductory remarks describing him in the opening scene confirm the elder Wingfield’s function quite explicitly:

TOM. There is a fifth character in the play who doesn’t appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel.

This is our father who left us a long time ago.

He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town . . . (GM 401)

That function is to establish a case history of successful negotiation of the culture industry, yet the construct is paradoxical. The father maintains his identity intact by refusing to submit to societal constraints, but he must relinquish his position in society in order to achieve his liberation. As Bigsby suggests, “the possible cost of peace is

isolation” (42). In order to evade the pressures of the culture industry, the father resorts to the rather radical recourse of abandoning his home, his family, and his country permanently: “The last we heard of him was a picture post-card from Mazatlan, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words— ‘Hello— Good-bye!’ and no address” (GM 401). In view of his defiant achievement, it is not surprising that the Wingfields continue to channel him in their home and lives. His photograph occupies a prominent place in the apartment; Amanda wears his oversized bathrobe (GM 413); Laura spends long hours playing “those worn-out phonograph records [he] left as a painful reminder of him” (GM 409). In Scene IV, when Tom describes Malvolio the Magician’s artifice of emerging from a nailed coffin and wonders “who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail,” Tom the stage manager lights the father’s photograph in response (GM 417). In these acts, each of the Wingfields exhibits silent admiration for the father’s attainment of his deliverance. Perhaps unwittingly, each of them also emulates the father in devising an individual strategy to cope with the pressures of the pervasive estrangement in their lives.

For Laura, the strategy consists of privileging the safe, sterile world of the glass menagerie over the busy world outside her home that the secretarial school represents. From a dramatic point of view, the onstage prominence of her glass menagerie focalizes the single element in Laura’s life that is exclusively hers, similar to Brick’s liquor cabinet in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. “This piece of furniture (?!), this monument, is a very complete and compact little shrine to virtually all the comforts and illusions behind which we hide from such things as the characters in the play are

faced with. . . .” (CHTR 881). Interestingly, both dramatic devices feature the elusive reflection of light on glass surfaces, and both function as sites of refuge for the characters respectively linked to them. Like Brick, Laura arrests all movement in its hermetic world, turning it into a sanctuary from the vagaries of life. Eric Levy even suggests that Laura’s dedication to her menagerie and her identification with it reveal a conscious choice of representation:

The effect of Laura’s self-consciousness is to make her intensely protective of her self-image, and to shield it from exposure to anyone outside the home. [. . .] At bottom, the purpose of Laura’s withdrawal *is* to heighten her ‘fragility’; for, through belief in the damaging effect of exposure, she exchanges a negative self-image for one more flattering. (530-31)

Such a notion destroys Laura’s depiction as an apparently vulnerable woman of few resources, promoting instead the view that her preoccupation with the collection of glass animals is a disguising technique. By seeming too delicate, too unequipped to integrate the culture industry in her life, she renders herself impermeable to its tensions. In fact, at several instances in the play, Laura vouches for the view that she may be stronger than she appears. The first occurs in Scene II, when she explains to Amanda that she spent her time away from the secretarial school in the park or at the art museum and the zoo. She tells Amanda “it was the lesser of two evils” (GM 408). Her answer discloses an ability to handle difficulties with a measure of practicality. Another instance of her potential strength occurs in Scene VII, when she places the hornless unicorn in Jim’s hands, after he has tripped and broken it: “It’s no tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are. The traffic jars the shelves and things falls off them” (GM 457). Thomas F. Van Laan concludes, “this is not the voice of a shy girl, withdrawn from reality and obsessed with a grossly inferior

substitute for genuine experience. It is, rather, the voice of someone wholly at ease with reality and quite capable of accepting the less pleasant facts of life” (249). Indeed, the pragmatic attitude colouring Laura’s obliging response is hardly typical of a woman incapable of negotiating the harshness of life. Hence, it is not Laura’s fragility that sustains her devotion to the glass animals; rather, her fixation is a willfully isolationary, defiant tactic that keeps the tensions of the culture industry at bay. Whenever Laura enters her menagerie, the world outside it ceases to exist for her.

Similarly, Amanda’s repeated and seemingly ridiculous reminiscences of her girlhood in the South are projections of an identity removed from her present circumstances. In Anthony S. Abbott’s view, “the reality of the outside world is too much for all of them. Each must re-create reality in order to survive” (140). For Amanda, reviving her past serves the same function that the menagerie does for Laura. Whether her stories of genteel coquetry are truthful or exaggerated is of no importance, for they serve primarily to create for her temporary spaces where she can be as unfettered and carefree as in her youth:

AMANDA. I had malaria fever all that spring. [. . .] I had a little temperature all the time—not enough to be serious—just enough to make me restless and giddy!—Invitations poured in—parties all over the Delta!—“Stay in bed,” said Mother, “you have fever!”—but I just wouldn’t.—I took quinine but kept on going, going!—Evenings, dances!—Afternoons, long, long rides!—Picnics—lovely! (GM 435)

As she speaks these lines, Amanda wears “a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash,” and “she carries a bunch of jonquils. The legend of her youth is nearly revived” (GM 434). Like Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she assumes the role of the *ingénue*, albeit for different motives: for Blanche, the feigned identity is



an effort to assemble the fractions of her checkered life into a whole; for Amanda, the role is a shelter to which she turns in times of distress. She channels into her present a time of lost ingenuousness, to relieve the anxieties of the family's current social and economic hardship. Her past is also a collection of images her maternal instinct mediates for Laura, invoking for her daughter a credulous projection of popularity:

LAURA. I'll bring in the blanc mange.

[. . .]

AMANDA(Rising). No, sister, no, sister—you be the lady this time and I'll be the darky.

LAURA. I'm already up.

AMANDA. Resume your seat, little sister—I want you to stay fresh and pretty—for gentlemen callers!

LAURA. I'm not expecting any gentlemen callers.

AMANDA (Crossing out to kitchenette. Airily). Sometimes they come when they are least expected! Why, I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain— (Enters kitchenette). (GM 402)

In these lines, Laura has become the “little sister” and the “lady” of a Southern gracious lifestyle that includes the domestic services of the “darky.”

The most striking feature of Amanda's animation is its theatricality. Her revivification is replete with costume (the faded dress) and props (jonquils), producing an enabling disguise. Through this artifice, Amanda succeeds in splitting her identity into two parallel personalities. Whereas Laura erases herself and disappears inside her simulated vulnerability, Amanda's disguise does not nullify her creative self; rather, the two coexist simultaneously as facilitating devices for slipping in and out of roles at her convenience.

Between Amanda's transitions, the voice shattering her self-imposed illusions belongs to Tom, who refuses to oblige his mother by running to the movies every evening. She “perceives him as the voice of a hostile reality that she cannot accept in

its actual form but must alter in her imagination if she is to deal with it” (Van Laan 246). In Scene III, when Amanda refuses to believe Tom’s passion for the movies, she hints that he may be involved in unspeakable acts: “I think you’ve been doing things that you’re ashamed of. [ . . . ] I don’t believe that you go every night to the movies. People don’t go to the movies at nearly midnight, and movies don’t let out at two A.M.” (GM 413-4). Ironically, Tom’s refusal to indulge his mother her illusions leads him to the movies, where he encounters fantasies at least as grand as Amanda’s. When he responds to her insinuations, these fantasies traverse the space between the fictional world and his life:

TOM (Crouching toward her, overtowering her tiny figure. She backs away, gasping). I’m going to opium dens! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals’ hang-outs, Mother. I’ve joined the Hogan gang, I’m a hired assassin. I carry a tommy-gun in a violin case! I run a string of cat-houses in the Valley! They call me Killer, Killer Wingfield, I’m leading a double-life, a simple, honest warehouse worker by day, by night a dynamic czar of the underworld, Mother. (GM 414)

In the assumed profile of Killer Wingfield, Tom fractionalizes his identity like his mother, but for one striking difference: his manufactured personality is of the private, clandestine order, while Amanda’s is public and ostentatious.

Tom’s identification with the Killer Wingfield profile is one of the play’s few instances in which he intimates a thinly disguised sexuality, an energy otherwise absent from his life. Unlike Jim, who is engaged to be married soon (GM 460), curiously, he does not appear interested in romance, nor does he impress the reader as a forthright sexual being. Tom may have sublimated his sexuality, but its code is perceptible in several of Killer Wingfield’s admissions. He frequents “dens of vice,” owns “a string of cat-houses,” and lives “a double-life.” More tellingly, his prop is a

phallic weapon camouflaged in an artistic shell: “a tommy-gun in a violin case.” Like Jim, who keeps his romance a secret at work, Tom, too, has a secret, one of which Jim is aware: “He knew of my secret practice of retiring to a cabinet of the wash-room to work on poems when business was slack in the warehouse” (GM 432). Tom’s account of stealthy activity at the workplace echoes the alternate lifestyle behind his Killer Wingfield mask. Both reveal furtive pursuits, albeit one real and the other imagined.

Tom’s secluded activity at the workplace also parallels his solitary daily outings to the movies. He withdraws from work to the lavatory, just as he leaves his family to go the movie theatre. Interestingly, these two environments are localities for clandestine sexual activity: both provide opportunities for enfranchising a sexual identity that may be incompatible with society’s mainstream sexual norms.<sup>10</sup>

There are additional indications of Tom’s nonconformist sexuality in the play. He realizes that “other boys in the warehouse regarded me with suspicious hostility” and later “began to smile at me as people smile at an oddly fashioned dog who trots across their path at some distance” (GM 432). Also, his choice for a career is the Merchant Marines, an all-male environment. Citing sociological findings, Gilbert Debusscher argues that Tom’s dysfunctional home environment may have contributed to the development of his homosexual identity. Debusscher elaborates a convincing argument for this view:

Tom's refusal to abide by the meal rituals, and his reluctance to listen to the family saga reveal a rebelliousness, a refusal to conform, to pretend to be and act like the others, to suppress that otherness which nature has planted in him. His restlessness, his impatience, his swearwords, his outbursts, his drinking, and his final flight may all be symptoms of the bottled up frustrations of the gay person in the straight-laced environment created and insisted on

by Amanda. His sarcasm is aimed at the modes of courtship and marital arrangements of the heterosexual world.<sup>11</sup>

The index above posits Tom's sexuality at the very least in a homoerotic economy. He emerges from these allusions and references as a man who may have attenuated his homosexuality due to social intolerance and homophobia.

If Tom fits the profile of the frustrated homosexual, then his homoeroticism and its suppression would constitute additional motives for promoting a plurality of functional identities, through which he can operate in a hostile world, modifying his exteriorized self to neutralize the disparate pressures regulating his life. Naturally, these contiguous constructs are transient: they remain in place only for the length of time they serve as defiant disguises against oncoming tensions. The strain of suppressing one's sexual desire, the pressure of employment one detests, the burden of living through economic hardship, the distress resulting from societal proscription of one's values, all are detrimental to the propagation of the self. In Anthony S. Abbott's view, "while [Amanda] dreams of a past to which she cannot return and which perhaps never existed, Tom dreams of a future when he will be free; for him there will be a chance of turning illusion into reality" (141). Yet the play's finale shows a defeated Tom. He may have developed a new reality out of his illusions, but the old variant of reality threatens to destabilize the present. In his final monologue, Tom acknowledges that his defensive dissimulations always return him to his past.

TOM. I traveled around a great deal. [. . .] I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise.

[. . .] Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with

pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bit of a shattered rainbow (GM 465).

For all his agitated waving of Malvolio the Magician's rainbow-coloured scarf on his reality, Tom succeeds in transforming it only for the temporary duration of his play's performance. Tom the narrator-playwright-stage manager may have supplanted the constraints of reality, but for the poet-son there is no release: he remains estranged in the world of his illusions.

Significantly, in the play's last lines Tom evokes as his persistent companion Laura's spirit, but not Amanda's. He carries his sister's memory with him as the successful model for eschewing the reality he would have liked to evade, as did their father. However, Tom emulates his mother more than he would like to admit. Like Amanda, Tom vacillates between the past and the present, unable to function wholly in either space. In this regard, The Glass Menagerie anticipates the thematic framework of Williams' next plays, A Streetcar Named Desire and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Like Tom Wingfield, Blanche Dubois is committed to a project of recreating an identity, and like him, Brick Pollitt is immobilized at the crossroads of the past and the present. Alienation and estrangement are the ineludible conditions of the human condition in Williams' world.

## Notes to Chapter One

1. The Glass Menagerie premiered in Chicago, on December 26, 1944, and moved to New York three months later. It was first published on July 31, 1945, by Random House. Two editions followed in 1948, the acting edition by the Dramatists Play Service and the British edition by John Lehmann. All three editions vary significantly: the latter includes a preface by Williams, "The Catastrophe of Success," and in the two later editions, there are revisions and expansions of speeches, particularly of those by Amanda. Williams' preface "The Catastrophe of Success" also appears in Vol. I of The Theatre of Tennessee Williams (New Directions, 1971), an edition otherwise faithful to the Random House variant, which I have used for the purposes of my dissertation.

2. "New Play in Manhattan." Rev. of The Glass Menagerie, dir. Eddie Dowling. Time Archives Online 9 Apr. 1945. 11 July 2006. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,933516,00.html>>.

3. Roger Boxill parallels "the problem of playing The Glass Menagerie" to that of Shakespeare's Henry IV Part One, "which is Hal's play although Falstaff appropriates it in performance. [. . .] Similarly, although Menagerie is really the chronicle of the Son, its production record shows that it has nearly always been construed as a starring vehicle for the Mother" (72). For a useful summary of critical perspectives with regard to various film and stage productions of the play, see Boxill 72-75.

4. The Glass Menagerie has traditionally generated conflicting conclusions regarding the predominance of one of its characters: for example, Anthony S. Abbott maintains Laura is the protagonist, while allowing Tom's authorship of her (141); Roger Boxill is equivocal (see note 2 above); Ruby Cohn is convinced Amanda is the character who makes the play "viable" (101); Thomas L. King favours Tom (86).

5. Boxill goes even further, suggesting Amanda's recollections of her youth constitute yet a third narrative plane within the play. "Tom's memory of his mother's memory [. . .] is twice removed from reality, recessed within the play's innermost sphere of time. [. . .] Transparent gauze scrims [. . .] create a stage within a stage within a stage—a use of space which relates to the idea of containing time within time within time" (65-66). For a psychological application of the *mise-en-abyme* technique see my discussion of the dramatic topography in A Streetcar Named Desire in the present dissertation.

6. Phyllis Hartnoll qualifies the shift from realistic to the expressionistic theatre as a reaction to the excessive representation of photographic realism on the stage, or, as Williams put it, "the straight realistic play with its genuine frigidaire and authentic ice cubes" (GM 395). Hartnoll chronicles the development of the "new drama" out of the expressionistic (German) and constructivistic (Russian) forms into "the non-realistic theatre which would bring back to the playhouse the sense of wonder and participation temporarily lost in the desire for realism" (241-42).

7. Brian Richardson defines this genre as "a partially enacted homodiegetic narrative in which the narrator is also a participant in the events he or she recounts and enacts" (682). Richardson's marker for distinguishing between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives is the narrators' participation to the events they narrate; i.e., "narratives articulated by characters who are present in the world that their discourse creates" are of the first type, as opposed to "narratives produced by agents that are external to the storyworld" (682).

8. "About DAR: Who We Are." DAR National Society Online. 30 August 2006. <<http://www.dar.org/natsociety/whoweare.cfm>>.

9. The Internet website of the organization affirms that “the objectives laid forth in the first meeting of the DAR have remained the same in over 100 years of active service to the nation.” More significantly, the D.A.R. counts among its aims “the injunction of Washington in his farewell address to the American people, ‘to promote, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge, thus developing an enlightened public opinion.’” The last phrase of this objective is particularly striking for its evocation of the culture industry’s dynamics. See “About DAR: DAR History.” DAR National Society Online. 3 August 2006. <<http://www.dar.org/natsociety/history.cfm>>.

10. David Savran examines at some length two Williams short stories in which the movie theatre is a locus of “furtive pleasures” (76): the male protagonists of “The Mysteries of the Joy Rio” and “Hard Candy” (1954) gratify their desire for male-male sex in the darkness of the cinema venue. (Savran 76-78, 111-14).

11. Debusscher points out that traditional criticism of The Glass Menagerie did not explore Tom’s sexual identity until Paul Newman’s 1986 film version suggested that it may be homosexual. “John Malkovich’s insistence on exploring the acting possibilities from that vantage point [. . .] brought homosexuality into the mainstream of the play’s criticism”.

Chapter Two - A Streetcar Named Desire: Polarized Performers



In The Glass Menagerie, Williams delineates willed fragmentation of the self as a defensive tactic for the individual striving to allay distress caused by discomfiture, or struggling to thwart societal appropriation of his or her identity. This strategy proves successful insofar as it serves the individual to safeguard the most valued profiles of his or her identity, but it is equivocal as soon as the constituent fractions of the self become isolated, first from one another and then from society. Out of this isolation grows an urgency to reconstitute one's identity and experience wholeness once more. This, I suggest, is the impetus for A Streetcar Named Desire, the spectacle of Blanche Dubois' temporary exercise to restructure her self durably. I contend that she installs her self-renovation project in a theatrical framework that collapses the play onto itself. By definition, theatre is the transient display of artifice; and this very transience predetermines the frustration of Blanche's enterprise. I further propose that this theatricality informs the characters' agencies with the combined functions of performance and authorship. Under this lens, Blanche and Stanley are metatheatrical agents and both deploy their rivalrous engagement of one another within Michel Foucault's systemization of power relations.

The most obvious portal to the play is, of course, its title. Expounding Gerard Genette's theory of the paratext,<sup>1</sup> Marie Maclean regards a title "as a direct authorial speech act, [. . .] perhaps the most obvious threshold, the obvious stepping stone provided into the text [that] offers guidance, attempts to control the reader's approach to the text, and the reader's construction of that text" (275).<sup>2</sup> Williams' title and the

epigraphic verse from Hart Crane's "The Broken Tower" are both metonymically eloquent, for they prefigure recognizable narrative constructs. The vehicle of public transportation of the title implies both a noisy urban setting and passengers—expectations confirmed as Scene One opens on the Elysian Fields street in New Orleans, a neighbourhood where "you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This 'Blue Piano' expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here" (SND 469). The street is also enlivened by two female neighbours of different racial backgrounds and their lively repartee; a sailor, looking for a bar; a snacks vendor; and a group of men returning from work in the late afternoon. One of them, Stanley Kowalski, calls for his wife from the street and throws a package of raw meat to her, which she manages to catch as she appears on their apartment landing. In the economical space of one page, Williams animates a scene from a buoyant, almost comical world of "raffish charm" (SND 469). The streetcar of the title conducts into this setting the anticipated "passenger," Blanche DuBois, whose figuration as the principal agent of the play is established as soon as she steps onto the stage. In contrast to the "weathered grey" of the apartment buildings of the set, the "brown fingers" of the piano players, and Stanley's "red-stained package from the butcher's" (SND 470), she is dressed primly in white frills, hat and gloves, complete with pearl jewelry; "her appearance is incongruous to this setting," and her manner "suggests a moth" (SND 471). Thus we have an intruder as it were, a woman whose first foray into the stable, convivial environment of the opening scene recalls the "intrusion plot" design of nineteenth-century French theatre. Generally, this design unsettles a group by

introducing to it an intruder, “whose presence is resisted by one or more persons and accepted by one or more, with resulting conflict, until someone’s eyes are opened to the true situation, to the danger, to a possible solution. Different outcomes are possible, but the most frequent is the elimination of the intruder” (Cargill 422). Ostensibly, this is precisely the dramatic movement of this play: Blanche DuBois is the interloper who disrupts the equilibrium of her sister’s home and marriage, but her brother-in-law, his friend, and most importantly, her sister, frustrate her agenda; she is then banished from their world, where continuity will overrun alteration.

Initially, Blanche herself validates this outline of the play’s events, when she tells Eunice Hubbell she has arrived at her sister’s address—Elysian Fields—by riding two streetcars named *Desire* and *Cemeteries*.<sup>3</sup> The line institutes Blanche in the role of the passenger implied in the title, who is additionally invested with the function of the intruder. At the same time, the names of the streetcars complicate this validation. “*Desire*” may be viewed as an ambivalent term, as in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147 “My love is as a fever,” in which the speaker “is longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease” (1-2) and realizes “desire is death” (8); the gratification of desire ushers in its very death through its own expiration—hence, the “*Cemeteries*.” Alternatively, the continual frustration of desire signals persistent distress. For Williams, James Hafley affirms, “the abstraction ‘desire’—ranging in its meanings from longing for the absolute to a contradictory lust—is evoked only to be ridiculed as naming a mechanical contrivance, a vulgar corruption of some such conveyance as the ship of life” (755). Moreover, the inflection of the noun “desire” in French, *désirée*, embellishes Blanche’s association with the streetcar, inserting the function of the

desired object into that association and substantiating Blanche's tendency to inhabit that function. Other questions arise in the reader's mind: "Who is this strange woman—moth-like, 'incongruous' [. . .]—who has arrived unannounced and uninvited?" (Kleb 30); will Blanche-the-passenger's final "destination" be the cemetery? Or is she an objectification of the streetcar itself, a woman who oscillates between yearning and death? In either case, her link to the streetcar posits her in centrality vis-à-vis the group, but this seemingly clear taxonomy of the play's agencies is still made suspect by the play's epigraph:

And so it was I entered the broken world  
 To trace the visionary company of love, its voice  
 An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)  
 But not for long to hold each desperate choice. (SND 467)

Felicia Hardison Londré argues that Blanche "entered 'the broken world' when her young husband Allan Grey died [. . .]. His was the brief 'visionary company of love,' the loss of which—and the desire to 'trace' or recapture it—leads her to make so many desperate choices" (49). These ascriptions are convincing indeed, but it may also be argued that the world Blanche enters is cracked prior to her entrance; therefore, Blanche's desire curdles rather than flows in this unproductive environment. Yet another reading would suggest that the reader follows Blanche into a setting which she fractures by her very entrance, and this interruption will pre-empt her pursuit. Hafley traces Williams's refusal to commit the text to an unequivocal design to the dramatist's ambivalence toward comfortable categorizations: "In Williams [. . .] there is dualism and the pull of spirit against flesh, abstraction against concretion, but at the same time a grudge against the very idea of the absolute"<sup>4</sup> (755). The play may sustain both views, and, in the end, it matters little which prevails, for the play's thematic

design is more committed to the failure of Blanche's efforts to attain closure than to the contextual stipulations of her expedition. Stanley will defeat Blanche in any case, for in his world, as he puts it, "her future is mapped out for her" (SND 535). Metatheatrically, the inevitable outcome of each performance of the play corroborates the anticipation in his statement. Like the streetcars which run on specific tracks according to a precise schedule, so too every production of the play charts Blanche's route along the inexorable course of Stanley's obstruction. Hence, Williams' title reflexively connotes the predeterminate agencies of the play's two polarized principals, Blanche and Stanley.

Blanche's first words in the play, "They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields" (SND 471), institute her in the dynamics of transition. She is a passenger-intruder who has undertaken a "passage": in the final moments of the play, as she steps into the kitchen area from the cubicle of a bedroom, she tells the men at the poker table "Please don't get up. I'm only passing through" (SND 560). The transience of Blanche's residence both onstage and at the Elysian Fields apartment frames the play in the image of the restless moth Williams assigns her at her first appearance.

The predeterminate temporariness inherent in her "passage" cannot be lost to Blanche's sensibilities, just as the actress who personifies her knows her channelling is but for a theatrical moment. Having lost her family homestead for a while, Blanche has been living in transition between hotels. Her financial resources are depleted and few options are available to her: "I've run for protection, Stella, from under one leaky

roof to another leaky roof—because it was storm—all storm, and I was—caught in the center” (SND 515). The trip to New Orleans is her last recourse to find permanence. Having no friends on whom she might depend, she turns to Stella, her only relation. “I’m not going to put up at a hotel. I want to be *near* you, got to be *with* somebody, I *can’t* be alone! Because—as you must have noticed— I’m—*not* very *well*. . . ” (SND 477). In this self-diagnosis, Blanche effectively proposes to install herself for an extended stay at Stella’s home. Williams’ italicization of the prepositions rather than the pronouns in her line unpacks her profound sense of isolation, highlighting the need for *any* human contact, not necessarily with her sister. Mary Ann Corrigan observes a similarity in the initial dispositions of Laura Wingfield and Blanche DuBois: both are susceptible to a definitive withdrawal “inside their own skins,” but “Blanche does not retreat without a struggle; the progress of her struggle determines the forward movement of the play’s action” (83).

In another echo from The Glass Menagerie, Blanche is the embodiment of the unmarried solitary female relative whose circumstances Amanda describes to Laura: “barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife!—stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room—encouraged by one in-law to visit another—little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life!” (GM 409). For Blanche DuBois the scenario is much worse, for she has no other relative to whom she can turn, nor can she reconcile herself to the embarrassment that stamps such lives. Despite her claim that she cannot withstand being “just a visiting in-law” (SND 477), and even though antagonism colours her rapport with Stanley from the start, Blanche stays at the Elysian Fields apartment for

five months. Walter A. Davis rationalizes that aggression must be her motive for procrastinating her departure, just as it might be Stanley's reason for delaying to deliver the devastating blow to her (98-99). While this may be true, I suggest that the impulse protracting her departure is her urgency to avert her own ephemerality. In this last attempt to endow her existence with some degree of durability, Blanche is desperately hoping she can re-fashion herself: "I brought some nice clothes to meet all your lovely friends in" (SND 477).

From the outset, it is clear that like the world she enters, Blanche's identity was fractured long ago in the course of an increasingly adverse series of events: after a rather favoured early life at Belle Reve the family home, her adolescent love and subsequent marriage to Allan Grey proved disastrous when he committed suicide, unable to confront her revulsion at his homosexuality; the plantation was mortgaged little by little, to provide finances for the remaining family members and their funerals; Blanche became a teacher in Laurel, Mississippi, where she lived in disreputable hotels and socialized indiscriminately for sexual gratification; she was dismissed from her teaching position when her involvement with one of her students was discovered. In C. W. E. Bigsby's view, she became "the individual driven to the margin of existence and alienated from the positivist drive of [. . .] society" (60). To allay the proliferating alienation in her life, she resolved to cultivate this or that function of her identity, but to no avail: the romantic Southern belle was crushed, the teacher failed, the promiscuous woman was publicly condemned. In the process, Blanche shifted her gears to the theatrical mode, becoming adept at deception and subterfuge, her last resources as she arrives in New Orleans: "I'm very adaptable—to circumstances," she

tells Mitch (SND 499). At her sister's home, she believes she can channel her energies to reconstruct her former identity, free from the anxieties that vitiated her life in Laurel, Mississippi. She obviously deludes herself that a new setting bodes well for the emergence of her revised Blanche. Her project then, is the fusion of the disparate functions of her identity into a plenary self, even if this reintegration requires the otherwise unsavoury function of the crafty artificer. She channels her energies into her own reconstruction, but her censurable methodology sabotages her efforts by its own fraudulence. Laurilyn J. Harris outlines Blanche's project in the context of this view of dubious creativity:

Blanche pours out her creative energy on herself, attempting to recreate herself as an art object: a living embodiment of the ideal southern belle—young, lovely, genteel, flirtatious, and alluringly fragile. She is engaged in an artistic reconstruction of reality, involving both her present and her past. She transmutes her perceptions and experiences directly into her “art” as a conscious and intentional creative act. (90)

Blanche is resolved to author her self, and the arena of the theatre is literally and figuratively the most propitious medium for her enterprise. Sidney Homan alludes to this when he considers Blanche's first appearance in the play: “Solid and literal as it may appear, Streetcar's single set is suddenly *broken* when, with a lighting change, the exterior walls of the Kowalski apartment dissolve to reveal the interior. Thus the theater's own technical ‘magic’ coincides here with the entrance of Blanche” (123-24). Theatricality itself becomes the motif regulating her ethics and actions. In this respect, she emotes Tom Wingfield, who acknowledges, “Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (GM 400). Similarly, Blanche tells Mitch, “I try to give [magic] to people. I



misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth" (SND 545). In the metatheatrical landscape, Tom Wingfield's wandering persona, wandering from one city to another trying to shed his past, has arrived into New Orleans in the guise of Blanche DuBois.

The realm of dramatics in A Streetcar Named Desire is not exclusive to Blanche, even if she remains its principal agent. In fact, the motif of public performance permeates the play: Scene One unfolds in a public space replicating the stage itself, where Stanley and Stella perform a collaborative juggling act; Scene Eleven ends with Blanche's very public removal from the household and exit offstage, accompanied by a doctor who assumes the role of a gentleman caller. The conventional brackets of the play—its first and last scenes—are reflexive in A Streetcar Named Desire, and in the interim, various communal displays of performance punctuate it: Stella goes to watch Stanley and his friends bowl (SND 471); as the men return, they tell one another jokes in the street (SND 480); Stanley slaps Stella on her thigh in front of his friends around the poker table (SND 494); Steve and Eunice's bickering and lovemaking are within their neighbours' earshot (SND 481, 514). These players constitute an ensemble, among whose shared space Blanche proposes to eventuate her own theatrical regeneration. Stanley, Stella, and the other members of the troupe are all attuned performers, each reflecting and revalidating one another. Blanche's performance, however, is singular, since her project focuses onto herself. Thus, she cannot align with the troupe. Not surprisingly, (I elaborate upon this point below), once settled in the apartment, she hardly ventures into the public spaces beyond the stage.

Interestingly, as the play moves forward, Stanley and his friends perform less frequently in public, and when they do, their performances are subdued. Conversely, Blanche's performances in the enclosed arena of the apartment become increasingly regular, until she completely disappears inside her performance. As Steve and Eunice return from an offstage quarrel and climb slowly the stairs to their apartment "in a tight embrace," Stella asks Stanley to kiss her, but he refuses to oblige his wife in front of her sister (SND 515). Carla J. McDonough argues that "Stanley's antagonism towards Blanche stems in part from the threat that Blanche's presence might disrupt the 'routine' that Stanley has been able to create with Stella, leaving Stanley with no partner in his performance and no one for whom to perform" (25). The insouciance which marked Stanley and his entourage at the beginning of the play has now been displaced by Blanche's invasion of her sister and Stanley's home and appropriation of the stage.

Just as the actress who brings Blanche to life seizes the central locus of the stage, so too Blanche usurps the geography of the Kowalski home for her project. She occupies the first room of the apartment, and her trunk the bedroom; she cloaks the lightbulb there with a Chinese paper lantern and reupholsters the furniture; she consumes the alcohol Stanley brings home; Stanley constantly complains about his lack of access to the bathroom, where Blanche is either "washing out some things" or "soaking in a hot tub" (SND 529). It must be noted, however, that Stanley is not antagonistic toward Blanche from the outset. To his credit, he is even cordial to her at their first meeting:

STANLEY. You going to shack up here?

BLANCHE. I thought I would if it's not inconvenient for you all.

STANLEY. Good.

BLANCHE. Traveling wears me out.

STANLEY. Well, take it easy. (SND 482)

In the same scene, Stanley's demeanour is that of the host welcoming a guest in his home, offering her a drink and engaging in pleasantries. When she doesn't respond to the coarseness of his small talk, he is almost apologetic: "I'm afraid I'll strike you as being the unrefined type" (SND 482). By Scene Two, however, their interaction has degenerated to hostility on his part, insincerity on hers. He has learned from Stella that her family home was liquidated, and he invokes the Napoleonic Code to assert what he believes is his rightful share of the estate. Ostensibly, the legal claim is the crux of his antagonism toward Blanche, but a closer examination of their second conversation in Scene Two reveals other motives. His initial sociability has now been replaced with sarcastic frostiness and brewing antipathy for her. "It looks like you *raided* some stylish shops in Paris," he tells her (*italics mine*, SND 487). When she admits to "fishing for a compliment," he refuses to accommodate her: "Some men are took in by this Hollywood glamor stuff and some men are not" (SND 487-88). For Stanley, public performances are articulations of one's bonhomie but not vehicles for the duplicitous promotion of the self. Blanche realizes that Stanley's attitude may challenge the usual efficacy of her tactics. Accordingly, she quickly engages in an exploratory exchange, aiming to discover his strengths and weaknesses through flattery:

BLANCHE. I cannot imagine any witch of a woman casting a spell over you.

STANLEY. That's right.

BLANCHE. You're simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think. To interest you a woman would have to— (She pauses with an indefinite gesture.)

STANLEY (slowly). Lay . . . her cards on the table.

BLANCHE (smiling). Yes—yes—cards on the table. . . . Well, life is too full of evasions and ambiguities, I think. I like an artist who paints in strong, bold colors. I don't like pinks and creams and I never cared for wishy-washy people. That was why, when you walked in here last night, I said to myself—"My sister has married a man!"—Of course, that was all that I could tell about you. (SND 488).

As she acknowledges minutes later, Blanche is adept at "double-talk," and a number of intimations tightly follow one another in these lines. For Blanche, Stanley is first and foremost a male, who just happens to be her brother-in-law. In her experience, males respond positively to female artifice and "spells," but she realizes Stanley will not. She gropes for a strategy to ingratiate herself to him, but his slow response indicates his awareness of her intentions. He tells her all she has to do is to be honest. For Blanche, this is not option, since honesty in her past led to Allan Grey's suicide and the subsequent guilt it entailed for her. That she makes this association is abundantly clear in her response, when she mentions the "evasions and ambiguities" of life: Allan Grey was evasive and ambiguous regarding his sexuality.

Blanche next draws an association between masculinity and creativity, or, more explicitly, between male sexuality and artistic endeavour. In a remark intended to flatter Stanley's sexual ego, she mentions her preference for "strong, bold colors,"<sup>5</sup> alluding to her attraction to assertive males, as opposed to "pinks and creams and [. . .] wishy-washy people." The two nouns and the adjective she chooses are telling, since the first two are derogatory designations of homosexuals in popular jargon, and the final reduplication implies sexual indeterminacy. Stanley may be unaware of Blanche's allusions to the dead husband, but he can certainly detect the sexual innuendos that inform her discourse. He may even perceive her oblique hints at his virility—"my

sister has married a man!”—as sexual advances; in fact, when she playfully sprays him with her atomizer, he clearly does so:

STANLEY. If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you!

BLANCHE. Such as what!

STANLEY. Don't play so dumb. You know what! (SND 489)

Stanley may not conform to Blanche's expectations of a “gentleman,” but there can be little doubt about his conjugal fidelity. Unlike Steve Hubbell, who sometimes strays from the marital bed, Stanley is unwaveringly devoted to Stella. He is tolerant of Steve's adulterous ventures but he will not follow suit. Thus Blanche's overtures are doubly offensive to him, since they come from a family member. Minutes later, she exacerbates their interaction by patronizing him: “What's in the back of that little boy's mind of yours?”(SND 489). Of course, he will crush her patronization of him later, just before he rapes her. When he stumbles on Allan Grey's love letters to her in her trunk, she declares she will have to burn them, because “the touch of [his] hand insults them” (SND 490). Her reaction is not only condescending but also utterly virulent. From that moment, both harbour reciprocally increscent resentment for each other and are locked in a combative relationship.

The determinism with which I qualified Blanche's project earlier must now be contextualized within this adversarial relationship. Predetermination in the play is not a force external to it; rather, it is implicit in the reciprocal antagonism of its protagonists. This view is the crux of Michel Foucault's definition of the exercise of power and the dynamics of power relations:

power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted “above” society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. In any case, to live in a society is to live in

such a way that action upon other actions is possible— and in fact ongoing. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction. (343)

Stanley's antagonism toward Blanche does not stem solely from her claim of the physical space of the Kowalski apartment, nor is it simply rooted in the obvious disparity between their backgrounds, her haughtiness, or her overt libido. As soon as she appears in Stella's life, Blanche also proves for Stanley a rival in his marriage and his social circle. Walter Kleb views their contest in the Foucauldian economy of Sameness (Stanley) vs. Otherness (Blanche): "her strategy is [. . .] to defend herself by taking control of the Same; to reconstitute her otherness (her difference) as sameness. She attacks at three major points—Stella, Mitch, the flat itself—and at each point Blanche's otherness organizes itself around different modalities of Unreason" (31). Thus Blanche initiates a process of realigning Stanley's relationships, and Stanley feels compelled to maintain the status quo. The intransigence of each arrests both in a power relation that Foucault defines as "a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal. At every moment the relationship of power may become a confrontation between the two adversaries" (347).

Blanche and Stanley's confrontation first takes shape when she deems Stella's living conditions unacceptable: "What are you doing in a place like this? [. . .] Why didn't you write to me, honey, why didn't you let me know [. . .] that you had to live in these conditions!" (SND 474). She makes the first of many comparisons, first subtly, then more explicitly, between Stella's present home and Belle Reve:

BLANCHE. Stella, there's—only two rooms?

STELLA. And a bathroom.

BLANCHE. Oh, you do have a bathroom! First door to the right at the top of the stairs? (SND 476)

Later, she tells Stella, "I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with" (SND 509). Blanche's evocation of life at Belle Reve is a manoeuvre to reclaim her sister, in order to requisition Stella's attendance to her own mental landscape, where the fragmented components of her identity are assembled but cannot coalesce into her former self. Harris notes that Blanche "cannot reconcile her two self-images: the aristocratic lady from Belle Reve and the whore from the Flamingo Hotel" (93). Blanche's sense of alienation is not a consequence of her geographic dislocation but of her spiritual displacement. In Foucauldian terms, she is the Other who finds herself in the land of Sameness. Lacking the resolve to adapt, she reiterates her history instead, obsessively visiting and revisiting it, attempting to integrate her shattered self from the past into a whole in the present. "It is not just that Blanche is unreconciled and unreconcilable to the world in which she finds herself; she remains unreconciled to herself. Her alienation goes deeper than a cultural revulsion" (Biggsby 64). Surrounded by a harsh new reality, Blanche recalls familiar figures from her past to endorse the self she wants to resurrect: "Do you remember Shep Huntleigh? [. . .] I went out with him at college and wore his pin for a while" (SND 506-7). She even invents her truth or bends it: the furs she owns are "a tribute from an admirer" (SND 487).

Since Stella is the only other surviving vestige of Belle Reve, she becomes the channelling energy Blanche needs to reconstitute her former self. This reanimation of the siblings' bond dismays Stanley, who witnesses Stella's familial allegiance undercutting her devotion to him. Soon after Blanche's arrival, Stella begins to run errands for her sister (SND 488), admitting that attending to Blanche "makes it seem

more like home,” who, in turn, affirms, “I have to admit I love to be waited on . . .” (SND 516). Stanley’s bond with his wife is jeopardized even further, as her responses to Stanley at various instances increasingly echo her sister’s values. Foucault submits that as the dynamics of power begin to operate, they subvert the established order, enabling the adversaries “to decipher the same events and the same transformations [. . .] from the standpoint of the power relationships” (347). Blanche’s arrival upsets her sister’s harmonious marriage, and Stella looks at her husband through her sister’s lens. In Scene Two, Stella tells her husband his behaviour is “stupid and horrid,” to which his response indicates his awareness that her remark articulates an outlook of social superiority: “The Kowalskis and the Dubois have different notions” (SND 486). In the next scene, when Stanley throws the radio out of the window, Stella shouts, “*Drunk—drunk—animal thing, you!*” (SND 500); in Scene Seven, she reminds him “you’ve got to realize that Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did” (SND 529). Stella’s increasingly acrimonious censure of her husband in front of her sister comes to a head at Blanche’s birthday supper in Scene Eight, when she describes him as an “ape,” and tells him “your face and your fingers are disgustingly greasy. Go wash them up and then help me clear the table” (SND 537). Her imperatives recast him in a child’s role, but more importantly, from Stanley’s point of view, they emasculate him by requiring that he contribute to household chores he probably relegates to women. Hence, he responds violently, breaking dishes and seizing her arm, retorting in an imperative:

STANLEY. Don’t ever talk that way to me! “Pig—Polack—disgusting—vulgar—greasy!” them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister’s too much around here! What do you think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long



said—“Every Man is a King!” And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it! (He hurls a cup and saucer to the floor) My place is cleared! You want me to clear your places? (SND 537).

This husband cannot reconcile himself to his displacement by a visiting relative and resolves to thwart her. Alan Ehrlich concludes, “in this desire to inhabit an intimate space nests the conflict. [ . . . ] Stanley must defend his home against the enemy. [He] evaluates the problem and pursues the solution. Three into two won’t go; Blanche must leave” (126, 131). In the dramatic progression of the play, Blanche's failure to recognize the ramifications of the displacement she has effected in Stanley’s world, as well as his consequent resistance to her attempts at instituting herself, triggers her eventual eviction from that world.

Despite Stella’s growing disapproval of her husband after Blanche’s arrival, she remains nevertheless deeply attached to him on a very basic level. Their sexual relations bind Stella to Stanley irrevocably, regardless of his domestic violence or his resentment of Blanche. At the end of Scene Three, in a sequence that has become the cultural identifier of the play, Stanley calls her name in a cry of primordial longing, to which she responds and returns home to him. Williams reveals in Scene Nine that Stella’s attachment is fuelled not only by physicality, but also by a transmutation:

STANLEY. When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it, having them colored lights going! And wasn’t we happy together, wasn’t it all okay till she showed here? (SND 540-41).

Stella may have shared with Blanche the value system of affectations that life at Belle Reve instilled in both; however, upon meeting her husband, she replaced her outlook by the honest and impassioned— albeit often crude— engagement of the self and

one's own energies. Her renunciation of Belle Reve is so complete that when Blanche informs her of its liquidation, she barely asks for details. If Stella acquiesces to Blanche during her stay, it is partly due to loyalty of the blood, but also to pity: "You needn't have been so cruel to someone alone as she is," she tells Stanley, when he presents Blanche a bus ticket to leave town. "You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change" (SND 540). Stella may even feel her sister has not been as fortunate as she in constructing a new life for herself. In Stella and her marriage, Williams offers the antithesis to the idealized, albeit affected Southern notion of romance and happiness. Consequently, if Blanche is to achieve what her sister has, she must follow suit and relinquish her past. It is a transformation Blanche cannot undergo, even if she were willing. Her identity has been so fragmented that the only possible reconfiguration is the restoration of her former self.

Blanche believes Stella may be a natural collaborator to her, but she needs someone other than her sister who will serve as the screen onto which she can project her romantic, stylized self. Bigsby perceptively notes, "What she, no less than the playwright, needs is someone who will validate her fantasies. In the words of the popular song which she sings, 'It's a Barnum and Bailey world, just as crazy as it can be. But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me'" (61). The only available candidate for the position is Mitch. As she scans the men around the poker table in Scene Three, Blanche thinks he "seems superior to the others, [with] a sort of sensitive look" [SND 495]. After questioning Stella about his circumstances, Blanche settles on Mitch and begins to attract his attention. She immediately removes some of her

clothing and stands where he might see her in the portieres, between the two rooms. The ruse brings Mitch to her, and she initiates a conversation. Inwardly, Blanche can now pretend she is in her boudoir with Stella for a maid; while the “menfolk” amuse themselves in the parlour playing cards, she also amuses herself with a gentleman caller. Like Amanda Wingfield, Blanche “underst[ands] the art of conversation” (GM 403). Harris summarizes the intentions she might have at that moment: “she frantically seeks to create a romanticized, reassuring self-portrait that she can study endlessly in the living mirrors of her sphere of influence—particularly Mitch and Stella” (86). Her intentions, however, are not limited to spending a pleasant evening in the company of a male: her interior gaze focuses beyond the moment onto a stable future Mitch can provide. For Blanche, marriage with Mitch is a self-serving objective. When Stella later asks her if she “wants Mitch,” Blanche’s response reverses the focus from him to herself: “I want to *rest!* I want to breathe quietly again!” (SND 517). For Blanche, men belong essentially to two categories: those whom a woman might frequent when “the devil is in you,” and those who are “*ordinary!* Just *plain*—but good and wholesome” (SND 509-10). Clearly, for Blanche the two types are embodied respectively by Stanley and Mitch. She opts for the latter type, preferring the security of monotony over the impermanence of exhilaration. Blanche’s awareness that her youthful days are over urges the moth in her to alight on the nearest safe haven for her directionless existence. “What she wishes to do is to effect some compromise, to project another world, a fictive world, and sustain it by an act of will” (Biggsby 61). To achieve this landing, she does not hesitate to resort to pretence: she conceals her age

and her scandalous past. “I want to *deceive* him enough to make him—want me . . .” (SND 517).

At first, her trickery appears to render her as the object of his desire, until Stanley intervenes. According to Foucault, the disparity of rivals’ perceptions of the same event will result in different “readings” of the shared reality or object: “The interpretations which result will not consist of the same elements of meaning or the same links or the same types of intelligibility, although they refer to the same historical fabric, and each of the two analyses must have reference to the other” (347). Stanley’s disapproval of Blanche’s union with Mitch is cumulative: he already begrudges her hijacking his friendship with Mitch; and, for Stanley, who “sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications” (SND 481), Blanche’s intentions are transparent. For Blanche, Mitch represents the potential exit out of her present desperation; for Stanley, he is the unwitting, helpless friend who has been deceived, and his sense of loyalty impels him to reveal Blanche’s past to his friend, thus sabotaging his sister-in-law’s objective.

The rivalry between Stanley and Blanche is ultimately more his than hers. She dismisses him, as a performer spurns a colleague in the theatre, thinking the challenger unqualified for a contest. Yet Stanley subscribes to theatricality just as much as Blanche, as I have shown; furthermore, he is an adept performer who has practised his role for quite a while before Blanche arrives. Walter A. Davis demarcates the theatricality that informs both Blanche and Stanley in the following terms:

Blanche is the obvious performer, the grand dame who weaves a theatrical web around herself in order to transform each situation into a magical act whereby everyone will stand transfixed, compelled by her performance. Stanley would like to convince us that he's the antithesis

of such theatrics. He enters, one with his role: the mighty hunter, bearing meat. [. . .] Walking across the stage, Stanley enacts a complex drama. Everything in the way he moves is fashioned to give the world the assurance of a man. Stanley is as theatrical as Blanche and has carefully tailored his body language so that every movement proclaims his phallic status. (61)

Ironically, Blanche's contempt for Stanley energizes him to corral his skills to outperform her. To her disadvantage, their mutually assertive performances must be played out on his home ground.

In the dramatic topography of A Streetcar Named Desire, there is room only for one principal performer. “Together, they constitute the play, define its boundaries—in a sense, *need* each other. Representing two different concepts of theater, two different scenarios for Streetcar, and the two genders, these two rival actors cannot share the same billing” (Homan 125). Stanley and Blanche vie for not only Stella’s and Mitch’s attention, but also that of the audience. The spectacle of their rivalry expands across the dramatic topography of A Streetcar Named Desire, which is split into two major spheres of influence, both concretized in the physical setting of the play. The first is the neighbourhood where the Kowalskis live, the world of the bowling alley, the Four Deuces bar, the mechanic’s garage, the butcher shop—spaces traditionally situated in the sphere of masculinity. This is Stanley’s domain: studying the spatial implications of the play, Sidney Homan remarks, “the set itself, along with the implied geography just offstage, reflects [Stanley’s] character: provincial, controlled, exclusive, decidedly physical, and able to transform, by persuasion or by violence if necessary, anything coming into its orbit” (125). That these locations are all within walking distance of Stanley’s home reflects Stanley’s ease of identification with the world outside his apartment. It is not a coincidence, then, that Blanche seldom

ventures into that world. In fact, when she first arrives, Eunice's question, "Are you lost?" (SND 481) reveals, in retrospect, the extent of her disorientation in Stanley's world. During her stay, Blanche leaves the apartment only when accompanied by Stella or Mitch, and when she exits at the end of the play, she will not go alone willingly: she must hold the doctor's arm tightly as she treads on Stanley's platform outside. Williams specifies in the stage directions that "she allows him to lead her as if she were blind" (SND 564), reminding the reader of Blanche's line as she leaves the apartment for the first time with Stella: "The blind are—leading the blind!" (SND 492). To Blanche, both she and her sister are "blinded" by the masculinity of the world that encircles them and which affords them almost no opportunity to find direction. As Tom puts it in *The Glass Menagerie*, "their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes" (GM 400). Hence, Blanche's perception of her gender requires that she interiorize her gaze, but this prerequisite for her project of self-construction conflicts with her function of the performer, which requires an expansive stage and an undivided audience, hardly the hallmarks of internalized experience.

Stanley may move confidently in the first arena above, but he must struggle to regain his contested status in the second region, that of the inner space of the apartment. Blanche is the tentative author-performer here. Londré explains how she might view the setting: "The physical interior and exterior of the simultaneous setting also reinforce the mingling of objective reality and the subjective reality that is seen through the eyes of Blanche DuBois" (48). She crosses its physical space in the same manner that she wanders through the fragmented configuration of her psyche. Blanche's redecoration of the apartment is a manifestation of her desperate attempt to

fuse the chaotic configuration of her life into a unified identity. Like Chinese boxes nesting inside one another, the kitchen, the bedroom, and the bathroom of the apartment correlate to the segregated spaces of her mental landscape: the doorway and the kitchen are areas she treads tentatively; she would mostly prefer to remain in the bedroom, where she can parade through projected localities. It is virtually a dressing room for Blanche-the-performer, with a dressing table and a trunk of costumes completing the picture. Here she can pretend she is “in a little artists’ café on the Left Bank in Paris” (SND 523). Since she cannot articulate her identity for fear of showing its seams, she resorts to borrowing other, fictional persona. “In effect she constructs her own drama, costuming herself with care, arranging the set, enacting a series of roles, developing her own scenario” (Bigby 61). She assumes the function of authorship, casting herself in the role of the Marschallin from Der Rosenkavalier, with Mitch for her Octavian (SND 520); she imagines herself as Marguerite Gauthier and Mitch as Armand Duval of La dame aux camélias (SND 523); she suggests he is Samson to her Delilah (SND 524). It is also in this room that Stanley deflates the magnitude of her artifice:

STANLEY. I’ve been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy’s eyes! You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say—Ha!—Ha! Do you hear me? Ha—ha—ha! (SND 552)

This deflation has been brewing for a while: his reference to himself as a “boy” mocks her trivialization of his manhood in the earlier exchange I discussed above.

Interestingly, the women Blanche projects for Mitch and Stanley resonate with theatricality themselves: each is the tragic *grande dame* of her tale. More importantly, they are operatic representations of various aspects of Blanche's identity: the Marschallin signals Blanche's sexual proclivity for men younger than she, Marguerite her licentiousness, Delilah her trickery and deception, and Cleopatra her "immortal longings" (Antony and Cleopatra V ii 282-83). As though to complete this gallery of authoritarian women, Mitch carries home a plaster statuette of Mae West, the sexual icon of the 1930s, when he and Blanche return from an outing. The figurine is "the sort of prize won at shooting galleries and carnival games of chance" (SND 520), varnishing Blanche with the twin coats of cinematic and exhibitionistic performance. Blanche is only too willing to be painted in these terms, for they fill the cracks of her disintegrated self and prop her identity. The only occasion where Blanche's frayed psyche emerges fully is, appropriately, when she goes into the bathroom, where prying eyes cannot follow her. In the most recessed room of the apartment, the smallest of the Chinese boxes, Blanche closes upon herself during long baths, and she claims afterward she feels "like a brand new human being" (SND 486), or that "a hot bath and a long, cold drink always give me a brand new outlook on life!" (SND 535). The implicit symbolism of emerging through baptism into a renewed life is the foundation of her Christian doctrine, whereby she wishes to cleanse her slate of her sins and somehow start anew.

Williams' *mise-en-abyme* of the dramatic space of the play would appear conducive to the fruition of Blanche's project were it not for Stanley's adversarial authorship. His rape of Blanche that follows the angry tirade above is not only the



annihilation of her imagined roles, but also the decimation of Blanche's fragmented selves with such finality that she will never be able to resuscitate them again. Harris attributes his success to the resources Stanley has at his disposal: "Stanley's perception of 'reality', while just as subjective as Blanche's, is backed by a much more dynamic, confident, and considerably less fragmented ego" (86). Williams has pitted two formidable, adversarial authors who refuse to enter each other's reality or adapt their modalities to become more in tune with one another. Each remains bent on authenticating an individualistic self, and, in the process, eliminate the other from the arena of their contest.

In the final account, although the dramatic movement of the play props Stanley through Blanche's rout, it does not endorse his optimism that Sameness will be restored to its previous fullness: "it's gonna be all right again between you and me the way that it was" (SND 538). The performer-intruder has been forcibly removed, but her passage has altered the relationships upon which she infringed. "This is a very bad thing," remarks Pablo, Stanley's friend; "This is no way to do it. She should've been told," echoes Steve (SND 562-3). Their disapproval detracts Stanley from the full enjoyment of his accomplishment. More consequentially, Mitch's direct accusation of Stanley as unjustly hostile toward Blanche will forever taint their friendship: "You! You done this, all o' your God damn rutting with things you— [. . .] I'll kill you!" (SND 562-63). Stanley's public performances may never be the same again, while at home, he can no longer effusively envelope Stella in his devotion as he did once. As the play comes to an end, Stella sobs uncontrollably, "luxuriously," but all Stanley can offer her is "Now, honey. Now, love. Now, now, love," over and over (SND 564).

Though she may not realize it, Blanche DuBois did finally imprint her fantastic self upon the world.

## Notes to Chapter Two

1. Genette's designation for constructs the reader encounters alongside the literary text is "thresholds," which is also the French title of his work on the theory of the paratext, Seuils (Paris, 1987). Genette states that the function of a title "is to describe the text by one of its characteristics, whether thematic (this book talks about ...) or rhematic (this book is ...)." He considers this "shared function the *descriptive* function of the title." Beyond this primary function, Genette finds titles also pressure the text in secondary, supplemental ways, which he deems connotative, "because they stem from the *manner* in which the thematic or rhematic title does its denoting" (Genette, Paratexts: Thresholds of Definition 89).

2. Maclean emphasizes as well the vitality of a title because it enjoys "a special relationship with the reader or readers" (275). She enumerates the various operative modes of titles: inclusionary, as in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, or exclusionary in the case of An American Tragedy; broad to the point of insignificance like The Lonely Lady, or addressed only to a cultural group such as Cowboys and the Trappings of the Old West; and, lastly, appealing to intertextuality, which is both inclusionary and exclusionary, and which piques the reader's interest because it relies on a prior knowledge of elements in the title, as in The Name of the Rose. "Titles which contain a reference such as 'utopia' subsume within themselves the many voices, the ever widening connotations of the original title they quote or parody" (Maclean 275).

3. In a 1948 interview with Mary Margaret McBride, Tennessee Williams disclosed his sources for naming the two streetcars. "In New Orleans, they call it Desirée, the old people do. [. . .] It's French, you know. Two streetcars run along one track: one is named Desire, and the other is named Cemeteries. [. . .] So they sum up all of life on those one tracks." Kenneth Holditch adds, "the streetcar named Desire ran through the French Quarter. They took streetcars out in 1948. The Streetcar Named Desire play, opened in 1947. Tennessee was working on a play called The Poker Night, when he moved into 632 St. Peter Street, and he said from that apartment he could hear that rattletrap streetcar named Desire running along Royal, and the one named Cemeteries going in the opposite direction. And it seemed to him the ideal metaphor for the human condition. So he changed the name of the play from The Poker Night to A Streetcar Named Desire" (See Nelson and Silva, "Tennessee Williams: The Pennyland Recordings").

4. The binarism that characterizes A Streetcar Named Desire (and Williams' other plays) is reflected in the interpretative and critical perspectives within which scholars have interpreted the play. A perusal of their titles is sufficient to observe the playwright's ambivalence: "Complementarity in A Streetcar Named Desire" (Berlin, Tharpe 97-103); "Birth and Death in A Streetcar Named Desire" (Cardullo); "Realism and Theatricalism in A Streetcar Named Desire" (Corrigan); "Ambiguity and Performance in the Plays of Tennessee Williams" (Gronbeck-Tedesco, The Mississippi Quarterly 48.4 (1995): 735-49); "Abstraction and Order in the Language of Tennessee Williams" (Hafley); "Perceptual Conflict and the Perversion of Creativity in A Streetcar Named Desire" (Harris).

5. Felicia Hardison Londré reports that in early drafts of the play, its title was variously "The Passion of a Moth", "Go, Said the Bird!", "Blanche's Chair in the Moon", "The Moth", "The Poker Night", "Electric Avenue", and "The Primary Colors" (49); Bert Cardullo identifies the latter as the title of the first draft (176). If we take into account that the men around the poker table "are wearing colored shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and white check, a light green, and they are men at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors" (SND 492), Blanche's association of "strong, bold colors" with masculinity is validated beyond Stanley. The draft title would situate the play in that arena, tilting the scales of the play toward the male characters, a bias that Williams avoided by shifting attention to the mechanical public transportation vehicle and genderless term "desire."

Chapter Three - Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Arrested Anxieties

Domestic integrity is relatively inviolate at the outset of both The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire. Dramatic tension peaks in both plays only after the intervention of a visitor. That design of encroachment is absent from Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. No intruder comes to distress the Pollitts; rather, family circumstances— both those of the offspring and of the parents— are already in turmoil as the play begins. Williams punctures the deceptions ruling the Pollitt household and exacerbates its members' silent, embryonic resentments of one another by allowing their hostilities to flow freely. The arena is then set for the inexorable collision of their individual agendas, leading the characters to relational dead-ends. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof shares this design with the two earlier plays. Indeed, at its core lies the articulation of a dramatic inertia, the mechanics of which are not altogether dissimilar to those of The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire. In all three plays, despair derives from the impasse in which the principal characters find themselves. Moreover, Williams offers no comfortable resolution at the end of these plays to alleviate the anxieties regulating the dramatic flow; instead, the characters must allow for compromises not of their choosing. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Williams mediates the sense of desperation endemic in his theatre through the thematic motif of waiting and its correlate, immobility. I argue that the play is a paradoxical construct, gathering dramatic momentum but disallowing progression. I demonstrate further that the paradox of agitated stasis is a necessary device for this play, to explore the ramifications of a refusal to negotiate sexuality and mortality.

Every character in the play has committed in some measure to biding his or her time in a state of suspended momentum. Brick repeatedly accounts for his drinking and his self-imposed isolation “[because] it just hasn’t happened yet. [. . .] The click I get in my head when I’ve had enough of this stuff to make me peaceful” (CHTR 894). He also states in Act Two, “I’d better sit by myself till I hear that click in my head, it’s just a mechanical thing but it don’t happen except when I’m alone or talking to no one” (CHTR 936). For Brick, waiting is part of a routine punctuated only by the lull of drunken stupor. For Maggie, his wife, waiting is also a *modus vivendi*, but hers is uninterrupted. For her strategy to restore her marriage to its initial ardour, Maggie has adopted the tactic of pertinacious forbearance, waiting for her husband to surrender himself to her out of sheer exhaustion, as it were. In Act I, she refers to her marriage as “the martyrdom of Saint Maggie” (CHTR 892), and she defines her objective in the context of tenacity: “the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof [is] just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can” (CHTR 892-3). For Big Daddy, the preoccupation has an economic dimension. He hopes for Brick’s rehabilitation, in order to bequeath to his favoured son “twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile” (CHTR 942). Similarly, waiting is very much an economically motivated *modus operandi* for Gooper and Mae, in their pursuit to acquire Big Daddy’s fortune. The couple anticipates the family patriarch’s death and hastily coordinates the legal appropriation of the family estate. Although the reader is not privy to their private conversations, both versions of Act Three leave no doubt with regard to their project.<sup>1</sup> Finally, and much less overtly, Big Mama is also in a state of waiting; throughout her married life, she has been searching for a signal of acknowledgment by Big Daddy of

her devotion to him: “In all these years you never believed that I loved you??” (CHTR 923).

As the predominant mode regulating the lives of the characters, waiting, or at least standing still, is also reflected in the play’s title. Williams opts for dropping any article that might otherwise define “cat.” Thus we have Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, which is much more indefinite than “*a* cat” or “*the* cat” might have been: the use of either determiner would lead the reader to seek a correspondent personality in the play. Without it, the title does not refer to anyone in particular, but it signals a common denominator in the behavioural norms of the Pollitt family. The image invoked by the first part of the title is the absence of kinetic momentum, while the descriptive phrase following intimates circumstances and mood arranged by the playwright to precipitate the festering of family crises.

In his theorization of titles and their dynamics, Gerard Genette has suggested that “the title as we understand it today is actually [. . .] an artifact of reception or of commentary” (55-56). The title of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof hardly serves as a tool to comment on the play in the manner, for example, some of Dickens’ titles (Great Expectations, Hard Times) do. Rather, Williams’ title is a construct of reception for its addressee, almost an abstraction of the play’s dramatic movement— or the lack of it. Genette goes on to identify four areas in which titles function: designation, description, connotation, and temptation (93). Of these, Genette stipulates, the designative is the only compulsory one, since it is needed to set the work apart from others. One might note that it is also a function wholly disjunct of the addressee, since it is a seemingly arbitrary starting point for the reader’s encounter with the work in

question. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof exists in the Williams canon independently of the reader's familiarity with or ignorance of the play. Of the other functions, the descriptive and connotative are "unavoidable" (Genette 93) yet subjective, often operating conjunctively, their dynamics largely dependant on such elusive aspects of the work as authorial intent or the reader's response. The most significant of Genette's quartet is perhaps his last, the temptation function. Though Genette finds its operation of "questionable efficacy," he affirms that it "doubtless depends more on the third function (connotation) than on the second (description)" (93).

Genette's assessment is particularly accurate when applied to the title Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, which is almost certainly intended as a figurative, abstract image, irrelevant of any single character or event in the play. I contend that it is a guidepost to a microcosm of costive estrangement rather than an epithet for Maggie, despite the fact that she is the only character in the play who identifies with the role of the title feline: "But Brick?!—*Skipper is dead! I'm alive!* Maggie the cat is—[. . .]— *alive! I am alive!*" (CHTR 911-12). The reader's initial reception of the unsettling image the title conjures gradually ushers the view that Maggie's self-acknowledged identification may only be the tip of the iceberg.<sup>2</sup> David Savran has noted that "Maggie is not the only character who scampers and bounds through the action like a cat on a hot tin roof" (106). In fact, the creature in the title is a congealed extrusion of the play's essential temperament, that of the intense, volatile alienation of its characters from one another.<sup>3</sup> Nancy Tischler writes, "even when mutual needs force the family into temporary unity, it lacks sympathy. The family unites to secure individual benefits but not in mutual affection" (Rebellious Puritan 2 16). Indeed,



much of the play's drama flows from Brick's narcissism, his avowed detachment from Maggie, her desperate attempts to revitalize their marriage, and Gooper's and Mae's individualistic self-promotion.

In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, the characters' self-absorbed or calculated dealings corrupt the traditional wholesomeness of the family unit into the materialistic lovelessness of disconnected individuals. This inversion is especially remarkable given the historical context of the play. In the aftermath of World War II, at a time when affirmation of harmonious life was essential to mend the torn fabric of social economics in America, the play presented the abiding bastion of moral values—the family—as an essentially corrupt, estranged social unit. Instead of a cooperative household, Williams assembles under the same roof alienated individuals who are driven by counterpoised agendas they are reluctant to reveal, and which provide fodder to their mutual hostilities. This view is the reductive premise of Richard Brooks' film version of the play (1958). Although the text sustains it, Brooks' telescopic interpretation ignores the polemic of Brick's homosocial bond with his friend Skipper, which I discuss below. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is more than a play in which a coterie of antagonistically positioned characters are merely set to depict a story of mutual destruction. Though the dramatic action pits the family members against one another, there are associations and affinities between them beyond their grasp, promoting multiple but equipotent centres of gravity in the play.

The most significant among these associations for the purposes of my dissertation is the juxtaposition of Big Daddy and Brick Pollitt. The patriarch of the family and his favoured son are bound in subtle, inextricable ways. Mark Royden

Winchell points out that “the contrast between Big Daddy’s gusto and Brick’s lethargy is so great that we are apt to miss the similarities of father and son” (710). To begin with, both are unwell. The father suffers an illness, the gravity of which he ignores and which will undoubtedly take him to his grave; the son wallows in a malaise that has steered his marriage to a standstill and now gnaws at his inner tranquility. Degeneration has begun to dismantle the sanguinity of both. The father will eventually become paralyzed by his illness; Brick is already experiencing moral immobility. Williams ascribes to Brick “that cool air of detachment that people have who have given up the struggle. But now and then, when disturbed, something flashes behind it, like lightning in a fair sky” (CHTR 885). Alongside these similarities, the constitutions of the two characters are complicated by their contrasting circumstances. The elder Pollitt is enduring physical pain, but his son experiences a moral disquietude; while Big Daddy’s health will most certainly deteriorate regardless of his awareness of it, the alleviation of Brick’s distress is dependent on his willingness to review his own responsibilities in precipitating his present state.

Big Daddy and Brick are also intertwined for the purposes of the play’s dramatic structure. According to Tischler, “this play’s only movement is the uncovering of truths” (Rebellious Puritan 215). Indeed, much of the play is devoted to stripping the layers of deceit and lies muddying the father’s and the son’s lives. This central process of discovery manifests itself in two major strands. The first revolves around Big Daddy’s acknowledgment of the certainty of his imminent death, and the second involves Brick’s final assessment of the nature of his friendship with Skipper. The two strands vary with regard to both their import and the consequences they will

spawn in the lives of father and son, yet both strands inevitably lead to controversial and disconcerting disclosures for the parent and the offspring. For Big Daddy, a patriarch who has long retained unilateral dominance over his life and of those around him, the discovery ultimately shatters his exclusive authority. For Brick, who has long regarded his relationship with Skipper as an idealized, platonic devotion, an “exceptional friendship, *real, real, deep, deep friendship!* between two men” (CHTR 948), the discovery process forces him to confront the self-delusion inherent in his notion of the “clean true thing” (CHTR 948) that he has nurtured over the years.

Though they run parallel, the strands of discovery progress along diametrically opposed lines in the play, since they unfold conversely. Brick’s relationship with Skipper is rooted in the past, while Big Daddy’s illness will gradually take him to his grave in the future. The twin processes of revelation pull the play’s dynamics in opposite directions, gradually conflating the past and the present. The conflation anchors the play in a state of limbo, reflecting the passive irritability of the title. Moreover, the bidirectional movement intensifies the senses of estrangement and disconnectedness that Williams first explored through Tom Wingfield and Blanche DuBois.<sup>4</sup>

The conflation becomes particularly charged by Williams’ restriction of the play’s time and space frames to a single summer evening in Brick and Maggie’s bedroom. Despite its apparent adherence to the Aristotelian concept of unity of setting, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof betrays the classical stipulations of dramatic unity by allowing the past to attend palpably to the present.<sup>5</sup> In his “Notes for the Designer” of the play, Williams specifies this tenuous yet unmistakable persistence:

the room [. . .] hasn't changed much since it was occupied by the original owners of the place, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. In other words, the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that involved a tenderness which was uncommon. (CHTR 880)

In Act Two, during his confrontational scene with Big Daddy, Brick himself acknowledges the lingering energy of the room's previous owners: "Maybe that's why you put Maggie and me in this room that was Jack Straw's and Peter Ochello's, in which that pair of old sisters slept in a double bed where both of 'em died!" (CHTR 945-46).

The ramifications of such homoeroticism prevalent in the conjugal room constitute yet another dimension in which Big Daddy and Brick are linked. First, they are the only two characters in the play who discuss the dead couple at length, albeit from disparate perspectives. For Brick, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello are "a pair of dirty old men," "a couple of [. . .] ducking sissies," "queers" (CHTR 947). Michael Bibler notes, "Brick is the only person in the play who is afraid of that identification between himself and the room's original inhabitants, for as the play makes clear, Big Daddy and the others are completely at ease with Straw and Ochello's homosexuality" (385). Brick's denigration reveals his refusal to grant the couple any measure of validity, regardless of what bearing the dead men may have on his life. Contrarily, Big Daddy views them foremost as businessmen— "I quit school at ten years old and went to work like a nigger in the fields. And I rose to be the overseer of the Straw and Ochello plantation. And old Straw died and I was Ochello's partner and the place got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger!" (CHTR 923). In the same scene from Act Two, he intimates his readiness to attribute value not only to the couple's

relationship, but also to any unconventional pairing: “I seen all things and understood a lot of them, till 1910” (CHTR 946). Even more significant is Big Daddy’s valuation of the homoerotic bond he witnessed as a young man on the plantation: “When Jack Straw died—why, old Peter Ochello quit eatin’ like a dog does when its master’s dead, and died too! [. . .] I’m just saying I understand such—” (CHTR 946). In these lines, Big Daddy’s discourse is invested with silent admiration for the couple’s mutual commitment. Arguably, Big Daddy’s stance may be ascribed to the couple’s generosity to him and his gratitude for it: “I hopped off a yellow dog freight car half a mile down the road, slept in a wagon of cotton outside the gin— Jack Straw an’ Peter Ochello took me in. Hired me to manage this place which grew into this one” (CHTR 946). In any event, Big Daddy’s outlook is explicitly more accommodating than Brick’s: “Always, anyhow, lived with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton is *tolerance!*—I grown it” (CHTR 948).

Big Daddy’s tolerance also has a bearing on the direction of his estate’s bequest. The ailing patriarch has resolved that Gooper and Mae should not be the inheritors, since “I hate Gooper and his five same monkeys and that bitch Mae! Why should I turn over twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile to not my kind?” (CHTR 942). Bibler points out that “this passage makes clear the ideology of patrilineal inheritance and its intrinsic emphasis on the idea of sameness” (397). Big Daddy’s implication is unmistakable: he considers Brick “his kind” but hesitates to name the son his successor, for Brick has become an alcoholic. “Why should I do that?— Subsidize worthless behaviour? Rot? Corruption?” (CHTR

942). Nevertheless, Brick remains the preferred offspring to whom the father intends to bequeath the estate, and, to that end, Big Daddy is determined to rehabilitate him: “You’re my son and I’m going to straighten you out; now that *I’m* straightened out, I’m going to straighten out you!” (CHTR 937). His redemptive intervention aims at identifying the reason for Brick’s drinking, and it constitutes the investigation he conducts in the confrontation scene of Act Two. When he forces Brick to admit that he refused to respond to Skipper’s confession of homoerotic desire with compassion, Big Daddy exclaims, “we have tracked down the lie with which you’re disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself” (CHTR 951). In order for Brick to redeem himself to his father, he must demonstrate that he is capable of assuming responsibility and developing sympathy for a friend’s plight. Brick’s categorical refusal to do so at Skipper’s confession sharply contrasts with his father’s disposition with regard to Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. Out of Big Daddy’s tolerance grows a transparent inference for Brick to heed. Indulging Jack Straw and Peter Ochello their relationship, Big Daddy thereby became first a partner and eventually the inheritor of the plantation; Brick must demonstrate that he harbours a similar temperament if he is to be named his father’s successor. This stipulation will, as Bibler states, necessitate Brick’s complete identification with Big Daddy and qualify him to inherit the estate: “Big Daddy’s inheritance of the plantation from Jack Straw and Peter Ochello and his own desire to pass that inheritance on to someone who is also his own ‘kind’ show that the patrilineal form of descent on the plantation actually values sameness over any other factor of identity” (397).

The implications of Big Daddy's and Brick's contrasting attitudes are valuable, particularly as they apply to Brick's friendship with Skipper. Brick refuses to recognize the inherently homoerotic nature of that friendship; to refute it, he resorts to defining it in exalting terms, endowing the bond with quasi-existential qualities. In Act One, when Maggie alludes to the "truth that [. . .] yours and his world had told him could not be told" (CHTR 911), he offers an alternative characterization of the friendship as "one man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true! I had that friendship with Skipper.—You are naming it dirty!" (CHTR 910). Brick's sublimation is conscious, motivated by his apprehension of the implications an association with Skipper would engender. What is especially striking, however, is his vehement claim that his love for Maggie could never be invested with an intensity equalling that of his affection for Skipper: "Not love with you, Maggie, but friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing, and you are naming it dirty!" (CHTR 910). At this juncture, it is worthwhile to review Brick and Maggie's sexual history. In Act One, she recalls their energetic lovemaking early in the marriage:

MARGARET. You were a wonderful lover. . . .

Such a wonderful person to go to bed with, and I think mostly because you were really indifferent to it. Isn't that right? Never had any anxiety about it, did it naturally, easily, slowly, with absolute confidence and perfect calm, more like opening a door for a lady or seating her at a table than giving expression to any longing for her. Your indifference made you wonderful at lovemaking—strange?—but true. . . . (CHTR 892)

Later, she also suggests that early in the marriage "we were happy, weren't we, we were blissful, yes, hit heaven together ev'ry time that we loved!" (CHTR 910). In one of the many parallels between Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Streetcar Named Desire, her account of their mutual passion recalls Stanley Kowalski's reminder to Stella:

“You remember [the] way that it was? Them nights we had together? God, honey, it’s gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way that we used to and get the colored lights going” (SND 538). In both plays, the yearning to restore the vigour of lovemaking in marriage amplifies the displacement that one of the partners experiences in the present. Both Maggie and Stanley are wrestling with the intrusion of a third partner who has dislodged and isolated them from their respective marriages.

Paradoxially, Maggie’s description of Brick’s lovemaking prowess also discloses his disengagement. By her own account, she confirms Brick’s exclusion of his emotional commitment to Maggie during their physical encounters. Lovemaking for Brick was more or less an automatic response, a biological gesture intended to fulfill a physical need, rather than an act integrating the desire to adjoin a lover and the eagerness to proffer and receive assiduous ardour. Brick also confirms his own disposition in Act Two, when Big Daddy investigates his relations with Maggie: “she and me never got any closer together than two people just in bed, which is not much closer than two cats on a—fence humping. . . .” (CHTR 950). This admission underlines even more sharply Brick’s congruence with his father. Earlier in the same scene, the elder Pollitt reveals to Brick his antipathy to Big Mama in the same context: “Pretenses! Ain’t that mendacity? Having to pretend stuff you don’t think or feel or have any idea of? Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama!—I haven’t been able to stand the sight, sound, or smell of that woman for forty years now!—even when I *laid* her!—regular as a piston. . . .” (CHTR 941). Ostensibly, in disengaging emotionally from Maggie and casually recommending to her to “take a lover” in Act One (CHTR 897), Brick replicates his father’s rapport with Big Mama. Winchell



confirms this view: “both men have left the marital bed because of a self-indulgent revulsion with their wives” (710-11). John C. Clum argues that “love is not an operative term for the men in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. It is a word used only by Maggie and Big Mama—the men can only wonder” (173-4). In Act Two, when Big Daddy announces his intention to avail himself of his renewed sexual energy, his discourse is even misogynistic: “I’m going to pick me a choice one, I don’t care how much she costs, I’ll smother her in— minks! Ha ha! [. . .] I’ll strip her naked and smother her in minks and choke her with diamonds and smother her in minks and hump her from hell to breakfast” (CHTR 935). Both father and son succinctly articulate their ambivalence regarding the authenticity of their wives’ devotion to them, in terms that validate the potency of that love: after Big Mama’s humiliation by her husband in Act Two, in a genuine outburst that signals her disappointment, she confesses her unceasing love for Big Daddy, and he mutters to himself: “Wouldn’t it be funny if that was true. . . .” (CHTR 923). Brick repeats the line verbatim at the end of the play in response to Maggie’s avowal of her love for him (CHTR 976).

By Brick’s own account in Act Two, the circumstances in which he and Maggie married were not very conducive to forging a wholesome, loving conjugal relationship. After meeting at university and gaining her unreciprocated affection, he agreed to be wed at her insistence: “—that summer, Maggie, she laid the law down to me, said, Now or never, and so I married Maggie!” (CHTR 950). Even more revealing is the account of their courtship Maggie provides in Act One: “Why I remember when we double-dated at college, Gladys Fitzgerald and I and you and Skipper, it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if

it was necessary to chaperone you!—to make a good public impression—” (CHTR 910). By pairing herself to Gladys Fitzgerald and Brick with Skipper, her discourse denotes the levels of fondness and intimacy the males shared. Maggie is fully aware of the nature of that bond:

MARGARET. It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in the Greek legends, [. . .] it was love that never could be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly. Brick, I tell you, you got to believe me, Brick, I do understand all about it! I—I think it was—noble! Can’t you tell I’m sincere when I say I respect it? (CHTR 909)

Maggie’s discourse informs the passage with pure but passionless spiritual affection. Her description implies that the affection the two friends bore did not translate into carnality. As Winchell puts it, “Not only is there a lack of sexual intimacy between Brick and Skipper, but the very language with which Maggie describes the situation elevates it to a platonic status” (707). Yet despite Maggie’s insistence on the “nobility” of Brick and Skipper’s bond and her conclusive conviction that the men never articulated their mutual fondness in physical terms, she is nonetheless exasperated by her husband’s choice to cultivate a relationship with Skipper more qualitative than her own. Bibler correctly states, “Maggie resents the fact that her husband can share an emotional bond with his male friend at a higher lever of intimacy and intensity than the one he shares with his wife” (391). When the marriage does not solidify Brick’s emotional bond to Maggie, her irritation understandably grows, and she resolves to challenge Skipper: “SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN’ MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE’S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!” (CHTR 911). Maggie’s tactic yields definitive results, though not to her advantage. Heeding her, Skipper confesses his attraction to his friend, but Brick refuses to consider his friend’s admission and

abruptly terminates their friendship. In the wake of the severance, Skipper becomes unable to cope with his quandary. As Maggie puts it, “from then on Skipper was nothing at all but a receptacle for liquor and drugs” (CHTR 911), and he effectively commits suicide.

In a departure from the play, the film version embellishes Maggie’s account of Skipper’s death during a sequence Brooks inserts in Brick and Big Daddy’s confrontation in Act Two. The family patriarch forces the estranged couple to examine the circumstances leading to Skipper’s suicide. In the play, Maggie recounts to her husband Skipper’s attempt to counter her admonitory allegation by seducing her; in the film, their roles are reversed. Maggie is endowed with the fortitude that both Skipper and her husband lack. She divests Skipper of stamina and masculinity in suggestively sexual terms: “Without you, Skipper was nothing. Outside, big, tough, confident; inside, pure jelly.” She seduces Skipper to drive a wedge between the two men, but thinking better of it at the last instant, she withdraws:

MARGARET. I wanted to get rid of Skipper. But not if it meant losing you. (To Big Daddy) He blames me for Skipper’s death. Maybe I got rid of Skipper. But Skipper won out anyway. (Looks at Brick) I didn’t get rid of him at all. Isn’t it an awful joke, honey? I lost you anyway.

BIG DADDY. You didn’t talk to him again, before he—

MARGARET. No. But Brick did.

BIG DADDY. How do you know they talked?

MARGARET. Skipper told me.

BIG DADDY. When?

MARGARET. When they put his poor broken body in the ambulance. I rode with him to the hospital. And all the time he kept sayin’, “Why did Brick hang up on me? Why?” (Both she and Big Daddy turn to Brick) Why Brick?

The sequence articulates Brick’s responsibility with regard to his friend’s death much more clearly than the play, but it also confounds that responsibility by pointedly

distancing Brick from the homoerotic bond of the two men. The film traces the anxiety flowing from Skipper's death into Brick's life to Maggie's destabilization of the loyalty of friendship, which now forms the core of Brick's estrangement from his wife and his family. Roger Boxill concludes, "holding her responsible for his friend's ruin gave him a reason for no longer engaging in intimacies toward which he had been indifferent from the start" (109). Brick's isolation and his ensuing lethargy are Williams' castigation revealing for the reader the debilitating effects of his inability to love.

In Brooks' film, Brick's sexuality is firmly established as heterosexual, due to the adaptation's conformity to the contemporary American public morality, which indicted homosexuality as reprehensible behaviour. For example, the script makes no mention that the couple occupies the Straw and Ochello bedroom. Maurice Yacowar notes that in one of the earlier scenes in the film, Brick wields his crutch at Maggie "in phallic positions that imply he has a sexual disability, rather than a deviance" (43). In addition, Brooks underlines Brick's heterosexuality by inserting glimpses of him in the throes of unfulfilled sexual desire for Maggie. Early in the film, as Big Mama rushes into the bedroom and Brick hides in the adjoining bathroom, the camera follows, to discover the husband desperately burying his face in his wife's undergarment, inhaling her perfume. The image leaves no doubt about Brick's sexual preference. Brooks retains the Skipper sub-plot but excludes any reference that would cast doubt on Brick's sexual orientation or situate him in the homoerotic continuum.

Whether Brick harbours any homoerotic desire is immaterial: in fact, both Maggie and Big Daddy are certain he does not. In Act One, Maggie thinks her

husband's friendship "couldn't be anything else, you being you" (CHTR 909); and when Brick tells Big Daddy Skipper's homoerotic desire was "*his* truth, not *mine*!" (CHTR 951), his father concurs. Brick's italicization signifies his wilful detachment from Skipper, mirroring his aloofness from Maggie in their marriage. What is really suspect in the play is not Brick's sexual orientation, but his adequacy for constancy—his humanity. For the reader, Skipper's avowal places the onus on Brick to demonstrate his capacity to commiserate with a friend troubled and confused by his desire, in a society unwilling to oblige it. Brick, however, is unable to offer steadfast friendship to Skipper and shirks his responsibility. Big Daddy accuses him of this in no uncertain terms: "*You!*—dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!—before you'd face truth with him!" (CHTR 951). Winchell observes that Brick's repudiation is refluent to Blanche DuBois' reaction in similar circumstances in A Streetcar Named Desire: "Like Blanche, Brick drives a homosexual to self-destruction by withholding love and understanding" (705). Brick chooses instead complete and further estrangement from his wife and isolation from the world, muffling his inner turmoil by alcoholism. Paul J. Hurley suggests that "Brick drinks to avoid his sense of guilt at having failed Skipper" ("Social Critic" 131). Brick's gravest shortcoming is his reluctance to initiate responsible and mature processes of resolution to his anxieties. Judith J. Thomson defines "Brick's tragedy" as his "failure to explore his own psychological nature [. . .], his cruelty to Skipper, his punishment of Maggie, his childish vindictiveness toward Big Daddy, and [. . .] his inability to love at all" (78-9). Ironically, Brick's methodology collapses onto him the very "mendacity" his alcoholism allegedly defers. He rationalizes his estrangement from Maggie by

accusing her of precipitating Skipper's death, instead of negotiating his own apprehension of the stigma his friend's male-male attraction implies in his life.

The most significant compromise of the play in Brooks' adaptation occurs in the alteration of the source of Brick's distress. In the play, Williams clearly regards Brick as a husband caught at an impasse in his marriage, troubled by the cherished memory of a friendship he could not accommodate, due to his inability to gaze inward. The film reduces these serious failings to a single and rather simplistic shortcoming for which he is not responsible; i.e., being born into a family driven by materialism (Big Daddy) and greed (Gooper and Mae). Brooks achieves this exoneration through a transposition he makes of the sequence in Act Two in which Big Daddy recounts to Brick his travels abroad. In the play, the sequence occurs long before Brick tells Big Daddy the diagnosis of his terminal illness, but in the film, Big Daddy contemplates his past after he forcibly confronts his impending death. In addition to this shift, the film adds a sequence where Big Daddy shows Brick a small suitcase as the only surviving memento of his own father, comparing it to his own bequest of the plantation to Brick. He then begins to relate the poverty and homelessness of his childhood, and the misery of shame he experienced working alongside the father, who is rendered in the romantic image of the dispossessed but happy tramp. Brick points out that through these memories shines Big Daddy's love for his own father, implying that for the child the value of parental love is irreplaceable. The intrusive cliché violates the authenticity of the play, absolves Brick of any responsibility, and promotes the perception that Brick is a victim rather than a wrongdoer: hence his inability to cultivate a healthy relationship with his wife. Yacowar states:

Brick here becomes the victim of an unloving father while in the play his problem was that he could not handle all the love people had for him (his father, mother, Maggie, Skipper). It is almost as if Brooks feared that his audience would not understand Williams's point in the drama, and so instead he tossed in a number of familiar lessons that they could handle. [. . .] As a consequence, the play is converted into an attack on materialism. Both by the arrangement of the original scenes and in his addition of new, but familiar, material, Brooks has emphasized the folly of materialistic greed over Williams's theme: mendacity in the human condition (47).

According to Williams' lengthy intervention in the stage directions in Act Two, Brick's self-imposed isolation stems from his revulsion of a world that rejects the "one great good thing" of his life. Williams submits that Skipper's death was necessary to disprove the homoerotic context of his friendship with Brick. "The fact that if it existed it had to be disavowed to 'keep face' in the world they lived in, may be at the heart of the 'mendacity' that Brick drinks to kill his disgust with" (CHTR 945). Under this lens, Brick's alcoholism is virtually a gesture of rejoining Skipper in death, for as he himself states, "liquor is one way out an' death's the other. . . ." (CHTR 953). It is an articulation of his loyalty to his friend, an act of unconscious and belated compensation for his callousness toward Skipper. In any event, the voluntary banishment from reality is designed to circumvent the implications his friend's death precipitates in his life. Winchell concludes, "If Skipper is undone by too much knowledge, Brick suffers from a desperately willed innocence. [. . .] Instead, he waits for the alcoholic click that will allow him to evade responsibility" (704-5). Thus the "click" is an enabling device which allows the suspension of persistent distress plaguing him, a knell signalling a thorough detachment from the world. William J. Scheick affirms, "the deathlike internal silence provided by this 'click' suppresses Brick's impulse to talk and to touch, temporarily arresting his search for identity"

(768). The device is similar to Allan Grey's gunshot that brings the Varsouviana waltz to an abrupt end for Blanche Dubois in A Streetcar Named Desire, relieving her of the distress to revisit her own culpability in her young husband's suicide.

The two central strands of discovery in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof unmistakably lead to Brick as the character who stands to gain the most at the propitious resolution of the play's conflicts. Both strands also appoint him as the character from whose point of view the drama unfolds. He is the locus of interplay for the play's two other major characters, Maggie and Big Daddy. Both are determined to reclaim him from his intentional reluctance to commit: Maggie to herself for a husband, Big Daddy for his estate as a deserving heir. The two roles are not mutually exclusive, but they are not synchronized either. For Maggie, Brick's return to her side in their bed will validate for Big Daddy his eligibility as inheritor, thus securing economic prosperity to their marriage. Having spent her childhood in dire economic circumstances, she values material comfort highly:

MARGARET. You can be young without money but you can't be old without it. You've got to be old with money because to be old without it is just too awful, you've got to be one or the other, either young or with money, you can't be old and without it.—That's the truth, Brick! (CHTR 907)

In Act One, she discloses the degree of her determination to accomplish her goal: "Mae an' Gooper are plannin' to freeze us out of Big Daddy's estate because you drink and I'm childless. But we can defeat that plan. We're *going* to defeat that plan!" (CHTR 907).

Big Daddy's objective is less pragmatic. Deteriorating health and a profound awareness of his mortality have amplified the urgency to select his successor, for he



needs to be assured that his life achievement will survive him. “The human animal is a beast that dies and if he’s got money he buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting!—Which it can never be. . . .” (CHTR 930). Having amassed a fortune, he realizes now that his industriousness will attain significance only if it survives him in the patriarchal economy of his family.

Big Daddy and Maggie have jointly, albeit independently, initiated a contest as it were, the prize of which is Brick’s resumption of committed living. To highlight their constant struggle, Williams inserts the sports motif in the background of the play. In addition to presenting Brick as a former athlete, there are a number of stage directions and characters’ speeches introducing the competitive element of sports. In Act One, Maggie’s announcement “my hat is still in the ring and I am determined to win!” is accompanied by “the sound of croquet mallets hitting croquet balls” (CHTR 892); later in the same scene, Brick “turns to glance at her—a look which is like a player passing a ball to another player” (CHTR 904). The motif of sports serves as a twofold metaphor: while it highlights Brick’s clashes with his wife and his father, it evokes simultaneously the self-indulgent tendency to engage in the distraction “games” afford, which, in turn, affords the reluctance to assume responsibility.

Besides the sports motif, constant activity onstage accompanies the remedial erosion of facades in the play. Williams heightens the mood of disquietude by theatrical devices, often through peripheral activities and their sounds both on and off the stage. Twice in Act One, Maggie slams a drawer shut; near the end of both Acts One and Two, a child rushes into the room screaming “Bang, bang, bang!” (CHTR

912, 953). In Act Two, “the room sounds like a great aviary of chattering birds” (CHTR 915), and later, “a little girl bursts into the room with a sparkler clutched in each fist, hops and shrieks like a monkey gone mad and rushes back out again as Big Daddy strikes at her” (CHTR 937). The harshness of these sounds and the violence they infer contribute to the urgency of the rivalling tensions that are the backbone of the play. In contrast with this backdrop rife with antagonism, Brick Pollitt disengages himself completely from the family’s preoccupations and withdraws into the dissociative respite of alcohol. He rarely interacts with anyone, except perhaps for his wife and his father, in that order. His entrances and exits firmly establish this pattern of behaviour: soon after he appears at the beginning of the play, at his mother’s entrance he hides in the bathroom, only to reappear after her exit. In Act One, as Maggie speaks, he reacts “without interest” (CHTR 884), “absently” and “dreamily” (CHTR 889), and “indifferently” (CHTR 891). Thereafter, except for the confrontation scene with his father, Brick is on the sidelines of the dialogue onstage. When asked to describe the “click” he longs to hear in his head, Brick defines it as the “switch [. . .] turning the hot light off and the cool night on” (CHTR 936). The contrasting images of day (activity) and night (lethargy) invoked by Brick suggest the impossible coexistence of two opposite states in him, and the play translates this cohabitation into Brick’s distressed immobility. Williams chooses to deny consummative development to the tension in order to render his point of view effectively. The paradox of agitated stasis is, then, the compositional device essential for the accurate depiction of Brick’s malaise.

It is important to note that Williams did not intend to present Brick's retreat from energetic life as a particular, isolated case, though in itself it would have amply served as an absorbing human condition. Rather, Williams states in his stage directions,

The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of common crisis. (CHTR 945)

Precisely because the playwright refuses to make Cat on a Hot Tin Roof one character's platform, the reader must turn attention to the universal difficulty of honest communication between estranged human beings. Big Daddy and Brick repeatedly refer to the impossibility of achieving meaningful contact in general, and the gulf between them in particular. "Why is it so damn hard for people talk?" asks Big Daddy in Act Two, and Brick agrees (CHTR 928). A few minutes later, Brick complains, "Communication is—awful hard between people an'—somehow between you and me, it just don't—" (CHTR 931); in his subsequent attempt to block further discussion of his troubled spirit, he protests, "We talk, you talk, in—circles! We get to no where, no where! It's always the same, you say what you want to talk to me and don't have a ruttin' thing to say to me!" (CHTR 938).<sup>6</sup>

In the structural design of the play, stifled interaction and thwarted activity are thematic constructs that operate fully from the very beginning. I note, for example, that in the early moments of Act One, Maggie's lines are virtual monologues which Brick punctuates with terse remarks. These constructs inform the structure of the play with a sense of impasse that cannot be resolved in the third act. The reader's

anticipation of conventional resolutions to Maggie's attempts to redress her marriage and Big Daddy's struggle to reform his son are pre-empted by the very design that regulates the two character's interactions with Brick. Regardless of their bearing, finite attainments of the play's two most pressing projects would provide pat resolutions to insistent anxieties. Jeffrey B. Loomis affirms, "Cat does not finally assert that love is always enduring, or beneficent, or perfectly sound. Brick's and Maggie's marital troubles will not very likely end in a 'happily ever after' following the play's final curtain" (102). As a result, inconclusiveness emerges as the prevailing protocol of the play. Brick and Maggie's reconciliation is indefinite, though possible. The film version is decidedly less ambiguous in this regard. In the final sequence, Brick throws his pillow from the couch onto the marital bed as the couple kiss.

In many ways, Cat on Hot Tin Roof occupies a middle ground in the four plays discussed in this dissertation. Gone are the fragmentation of identity and its reassembly from The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, and abstention has replaced the Kowalskis' youthful sexual energy. Similar to The Glass Menagerie, memories from the past do not offer release in the present for the principal character in this play, and echoing A Streetcar Named Desire, that memory is of an absent homosexual character who has committed suicide. The contest over Big Daddy's estate is a precursor to the uncertainty surrounding Sebastian Venable's legacy in Suddenly Last Summer, just as Maggie Pollitt's efforts to produce Brick's eventual rehabilitation through his confrontation of the truth prefigure Catharine Holly's unflinching account of her cousin Sebastian Venable's horrific death. On the other hand, unlike The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin

Roof does not end with the disunion of family; rather, a qualified optimism for the family's future informs the final scene. In addition, Gooper and Mae Pollitt's machinations are depicted with humour, an element otherwise absent in the other three plays. Although Cat on a Hot Tin Roof does not share the poignancy of The Glass Menagerie nor bear the manifestly tragic mood of A Streetcar Named Desire, it remains, nevertheless, a subtle, complex illustration of distressed figures at odds with both each other and with themselves.

## Notes to Chapter Three

1. When Williams had completed the “original” first version of CHTR, Elia Kazan indicated to the playwright his interest in directing the play on Broadway, on condition that Williams make several changes, particularly in Act Three, and the playwright complied (See Memoirs 169). When the play was first published in 1954, Williams decided to include both versions, introducing the “Broadway version” by a “Note of Explanation.” All subsequent editions of the play include both versions as well as Williams’ “Note.”

2. In his essay exploring the patriarchal ideology of the Southern plantation culture and its implications in the play, Michael Bibler notes that “the play’s very title indicates the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology in the Pollitt family drama. Maggie is a ‘cat’ on the ‘hot tin roof’ of patriarchy, moving and dancing and performing to acquire wealth and comfort through the only means available to her: marriage” (390). Bibler’s view of the title as a construct encompassing the larger issues of Southern land ownership and inheritance confirms my perception of Williams’ title as more than a reference to Maggie only.

3. The filmmaker Harry Rasky spent one year in the early seventies to prepare material for a documentary he was producing for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. During one interview, the playwright revealed that “the title Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, for instance, was a favourite phrase of my father’s. When he would come home at night, he would say, ‘Now, Edwina, cut it out. You’re making me nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof’, when she would start reproaching him for his condition when he came in the door.” Williams’ account of the expression as an anxiety signal yet again confirms my view that the title does not designate any single character in the play. (See “Tennessee Williams’s South: A film by Harry Rasky”, 1973.)

4. Savran offers an incisive insight into the characters’ lack of cohering personalities by contextualizing their disjointedness in the arena of hazy manifestations of sexuality. Savran suggests that “this incoherence is encoded in the relative instability of both male and female subject positions” (105-6), and he traces this fragmentation in Williams’ stage directions which render “all of the characters [as] subhuman creatures or human beings so radically fragmented, diseased, or wounded as to be barely recognizable as human” (106).

5. In his self-congratulatory reflection upon the play, Williams esteems Cat on a Hot Tin Roof as “closest to being both a work of art and a work of craft. It is really very well put together, in my opinion, and all its characters are amusing and credible and touching. Also it adheres to the valuable edict of Aristotle that a tragedy must have unity of time and place and magnitude of theme. [. . .] I know of no other modern American play in which this is accomplished” (Memoirs 168).

6. During an interview with Don Ross for the New York Herald Tribune in 1957, when Williams was asked to enumerate the “moral values of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” he stated his design was to capture the anxiety of the human spirit when forced to live in self-deception, the pressing need to communicate, and the resiliency of life. “I meant for the audience to discover how people erect false values by not facing what is true in their natures, by having to live a lie, and I hoped the audience would admire the heroic persistence of life and vitality; and I hoped they would feel the thwarted desire of people to reach each other through this fog, this screen of incomprehension. What I want most of all is to catch the quality of existence and experience. I want people to think ‘This is life.’ I want to offer them my own individual attitude toward it” (Ross 40).

Chapter Four - Suddenly Last Summer: Fluctuating Functions

Near the end of Scene Two of Suddenly Last Summer,<sup>1</sup> Catharine Holly tells Sister Felicity, the nun supervising her, that during the previous summer, her cousin Sebastian Venable asked her to accompany him on a trip to northern Europe, “to walk under those radiant, cold northern lights,” because he had “never seen the aurora borealis!”. Catharine then appends to this account a curious statement of her own: “Somebody said once or wrote, once: ‘We're all of us children in a vast kindergarten trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks!’”(SLS 119).<sup>2</sup> Catharine’s reflection must be taken into consideration, of course, in conjunction with her preceding disclosure about Sebastian, and it prompts a full discussion of its relevance to Sebastian’s life. I wish to begin, however, by suggesting that Catharine’s metaphor is an apt signifier of the paradigmatic design governing this play, that of a controlling authority and its relation to its subject. I intend to explore the various manifestations of this design in both Suddenly Last Summer the play and the 1959 film version, to construct the thematic framework within which representations of isolation and estrangement in the play can be appreciated.

Obviously, Catharine intends to submit her citation as a figurative delineation of human beings grappling with the concept of a supreme entity— God. The metaphor posits two contexts of unequal relations involving control. The first is that of children at an educational institution (learning of fundamental concepts is inferred), which implies the necessary presence of educators who exercise controlling behaviour. Indeed, her metaphor is lexically possible only if adults are included in the context to



produce the observation. Hence, the “children,” human beings, are objectified in a controlling process. The second context is of the activity described, the obvious futility of which heightens the implied imbalance of the objectification, since the “children” attempt to assimilate a complex concept, but their efforts are stymied by the inadequacy of the tools available to them. In the metaphor, the tools might even be provided by the observing authorit(ies), who then engender both the *controlling* and the *controlled* as distinct and co-dependent entities.

In exploring “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser turns to the dynamics of Christian religious ideology to derive from them the conceptions of “Subject” and “subjects.” He elaborates the fundamental precepts of Christianity, as expressed through “its two Testaments, its Theologians, Sermons, [. . .] its practices, its rituals, its ceremonies and its sacraments” (1505), and notes that these precepts apply to human beings through various rites—“baptism, confirmation, communion, confession and extreme unction,” thus devising a “‘procedure’ to set up Christian religious subjects” (1506). Althusser then concludes “that there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God” (1506). Christian ideology, then, establishes the interdependency of *Subject* and *subjects*, for “just as men need God, the subjects need the Subject, [so] God needs men, the great Subject needs subjects” (1506). Although Althusser’s formulations of Christian ideological terminology serve chiefly to define parameters for his socio-political theories, they provide nevertheless a convenient frame of reference to my discussion of Williams’ play. Borrowing from Althusser, I shall assign *Subject* to the controlling authority and *subjects* to the controlled entities

of Catharine's metaphor and to their respective representations in Suddenly Last Summer.

The first such representation occurs at the very beginning of the play, as Sebastian's mother, conducting a tour of her son's "creation," draws Dr. Cukrowicz's attention to the unique environment her son effected in his garden. She opens Scene One with "Yes, this was Sebastian's garden" (SLS 101). The line is seemingly innocuous and might be regarded as no more than an articulation of parental pride in the offspring's successful enterprise; its true investment, however, only becomes evident a few lines later. To the doctor's remark that "it's a well-groomed jungle," Violet responds by "That's how he meant it to be, nothing was accidental, everything was planned and designed in Sebastian's life and his—[. . .] work!" (SLS 102). This characterization clearly postulates Sebastian's position as Subject in hermetic configurations: in his garden, he affixed labels in Latin to the various plant species and kept a Venus flytrap alive by feeding it flies especially flown from Florida; he printed his poetry himself, "at his—atelier in the—French—Quarter—so no one but he could see it. . . ." (SLS 104). Joseph L. Mankiewicz's film version of Suddenly Last Summer ingeniously constricts Sebastian's world even more, by relocating the *atelier* to one corner of the garden itself and by attaching to it a value of sexual utility:

MRS. VENABLE. Would you like to see Sebastian's studio? It's at the end of the jungle in what used to be the *garçonnière*. That's an old New Orleans convenience. A place where the young men of the family could go to be private.

Sebastian's determined endeavour to maintain his status as Subject assumes even metaphysical proportions in the play. When Violet shows Dr. Cukrowicz two identical photographs of her son masked as "Renaissance pageboy," she points out the twenty-

year difference between the photographs and challenges the doctor to identify the older Sebastian of the two. The Doctor objectively—and perhaps tactfully— singles one as “this photograph looks older,” to which Violet responds pointedly: “The photograph looks older, but not the subject. It takes character to grow old, Doctor— successfully to refuse to. It takes discipline, abstention” (SLS 109). Violet describes Sebastian as a man who attempted to transcend his corporeality, defying, even inverting the order of the natural world. The dramatic representation of this inversion in the play is Sebastian’s garden, a controlled contrivance of nature, showcasing only the hostile energies of the natural world. Once again, the film version underscores the correlation between Sebastian’s garden and his outlook on life. Upon being led to it by Mrs. Venable, the Doctor notes that “it’s unexpected,” to which Mrs. Venable remarks:

MRS. VENABLE. Like the dawn of Creation. It was Sebastian’s idea.  
Part of his lifelong war against the herbaceous border.

DR. CUKROWICZ. Not unlike a well-groomed jungle and, frankly, a little terrifying.

MRS. VENABLE. Se was Creation. So *is* Creation (holds up a small box containing flies to the Doctor’s ear). Listen to them buzz, buzz.

The truculence permeating Sebastian’s garden is reminiscent of another in American Gothic fiction, that of the title character’s in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” In that tale, as Giovanni Guasconti enters Dr. Rappaccini’s garden and surveys a proliferation of similar vegetation, his observations anticipate Dr. Cukrowicz’s above reaction:

The aspect of one and all of them dissatisfied him; their gorgeousness seemed fierce, passionate, and even unnatural. [. . .] Several also would have shocked a delicate instinct by an appearance of artificialness indicating that there had been such commixture, and, as it were, adultery, of various vegetable species, that the production was no

longer of God's making, but the monstrous offspring of man's depraved fancy, glowing with only an evil mockery of beauty. (117)

Both Hawthorne's Dr. Rappaccini and Williams' Sebastian Venable have chosen to cultivate miasmatic gardens, corrupting the biblical mythology of the first garden. In fact, Williams' stage directions describing the play's scenery echo the fierceness prevalent in Hawthorne's tale:

The colors if this jungle garden are violent, [. . .] There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents, and birds, all of a savage nature. . . . (SLS 101)

In addition to the asperity the two characters have appropriated for their gardens, both Dr. Rappaccini and Sebastian Venable also exert substantial influence upon others immediately around them— even after his death, in Sebastian's case. Dr. Rappaccini looms as the controlling figure in his daughter Beatrice's life, and through her, in Giovanni's as well; Sebastian holds a similar compelling control over those who survived him, especially his mother and his cousin. As Susan Koprince observes, "the unseen character Sebastian remains at the center of the play *at all times*, [. . .] so dominant is his presence that Sebastian Venable, a figure who never appears in person in Suddenly Last Summer, actually succeeds in taking over the drama" (93). Yet the exegetic similarities of the two characters end here. Dr. Rappaccini's function as Subject is uniform, challenged only by an outsider, Dr. Baglione, on the academic competitive plane; Sebastian's function as Subject, on the other hand, is bifurcated. Inasmuch as he was an authoritative figure at the centre of his world, he was also Violet's subject, simultaneously occupied with exercising his control and allowing his mother to be the exclusive gratifying force in his life. "I was actually the only one in

his life that satisfied the demands he made of people,” Violet tells the doctor (SLS 110). In the Mankiewicz film her function as Subject is amplified both textually and visually at her first appearance. The camera’s lens looks up at an elevator, in which the seated Violet (Katharine Hepburn, an imposing presence on the screen) descends to the viewer’s eye level with the following lines:

MRS. VENABLE. Sebastian always said, “Mother, when you descend, it’s like the goddess from the machine.” I feel just like an angel coming to earth, as I float, float into view. Sebastian, my son Sebastian, was very interested in the Byzantine. Are you interested in the Byzantine, Dr....? [ . . . ] Well, it seems the Emperor of Byzantium, when he received people in audience, had a throne, which during the conversation would rise mysteriously in the air, to the consternation of the visitors. But as we are living in a democracy, I reverse the procedure. I don’t rise, I come down.

Violet’s vertical descent in this scene is the visual exposition of the lines in the play but deleted from the film in which she pronounces her outlook on life. It is an “attitude [ . . . ] that’s hardly been known in the world since the great Renaissance princes were crowded out of their palaces and gardens by successful shopkeepers!” (SLS 111). Violet is at odds with a world where the erosion of lines defining social strata gradually divests her of the self-appointed “grandeur” (SLS 111). More importantly, the social deflation shrinks her function from Subject to subject. The ramifications of this divestiture are consequential, given Violet’s centrality in her son’s life. To counteract the diminution of her stature, Violet colludes with Sebastian to create a hermetic world, where she might maintain her status. At the same time, she instills in Sebastian her codes, and through this proximity, their moral and ethical values slowly collapse to the point where the lines of their fusion into one Subject are indistinct.<sup>3</sup>

MRS. VENABLE. We were a famous couple. People didn’t speak of Sebastian and his mother or Mrs. Venable and her son, they said

“Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian are staying at the Lido, they at the Ritz in Madrid. Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian have taken up a house at Biarritz for the season,” and every appearance, every time we appeared, attention was centered on us!—everyone else!—Eclipsed! (SLS 111)

Violet and Sebastian’s unified Subject bears particular import upon the son’s creative impulses. Sebastian, we learn, composed a single poem annually, during the three months he travelled with his mother from one European destination to another. According to Violet, the other nine months, “the length of a pregnancy,” were the gestation period of the poem, which would be completed only with and because of her. She acknowledges that for Sebastian “the poem was hard to deliver [. . .] even with me! *Without me, impossible, Doctor!*— he wrote no poem last summer” (SLS 104). In this contiguity of poetic composition and childbirth processes, it is impossible to overlook the incestuous conjugality that informs Violet’s discourse, rendering her contribution to Sebastian’s creativity in the economy of the impregnating male. Robert Gross identifies in Violet a “phallic” mother, who “is presented as the agent of Sebastian’s artistic creativity. [His] existence as an artist depends completely on his mother” (241). The image is a reversal of the mother-son relationship in The Glass Menagerie: the movement of that play depicts the gradual disintegration of the bond and its eventual complete severance; in Suddenly Last Summer, we witness the destructive ramifications of an indissoluble link between a mother and her son. One might also note that both Tom Wingfield and Sebastian Venable are aspiring poets; yet Tom’s creativity never hinged on Amanda, while Sebastian’s was exclusively dependent on Violet. In this light, The Glass Menagerie might be viewed as a tale

enfranchising the poet's emancipation, while Suddenly Last Summer becomes a story constraining the artist to his doom.

Violet's agency as "the will necessary for artistic creation to take place" (Gross 241) invests her with continued indispensability to Sebastian. "We had a contract, a sort of contract or covenant," she claims (SLS 138). Unlike Amanda Wingfield, who prods both Tom and Laura to integrate more gregariously in the socio-economic order, Violet Venable's pact widens the gap between her son and that order, isolating him in a cocoon. I suggest that Violet forges the private bond out of her need to compensate for a social order she scorns. "Most people's lives—what are they but trails of debris, each day more debris, more debris, long, long trails of debris with nothing to clean it all up but, finally, death" (SLS 111). Violet replaces this contorted view of human life with her own, convincing herself, and more importantly, Sebastian, that together they can transcend the barrenness surrounding them and live "creatively": "My son, Sebastian, and I constructed our days, each day, we would—carve out each day of our lives like a piece of sculpture!" (SLS 111). Williams offers three instances where one may evaluate the measure of their artistic accomplishment. The first is their visit to Melville's Encantadas. On that occasion, Sebastian and his mother witnessed predatory birds swooping down on newly hatched turtles and devouring them. The spectacle is not of creation but of destruction. The second is presented circuitously, through the identical photographs of Sebastian in Cannes and Venice, costumed as a Renaissance pageboy. Although the photographs of the disguised Sebastian attest to his creative impulse, his construct is a camouflage, a false identity masking the authentic self. The third is Sebastian's retreat to a Buddhist monastery, presumably to

overcome the horror he witnessed on the Galapagos Islands. On that occasion, Violet rushes to his side, making “the classic mother’s choice of son over husband, allowing her husband to die alone while she protects her child” (Tischler 503). At Violet’s behest, Sebastian’s eventual abandonment of his intention to enter the Buddhist order hardly signals creativity, for the entire episode culminates as a debacle. “From then on, oh, we—still lived in a—world of light and shadow. . . .” concludes Violet to Dr. Cukrowicz (SLS 108).

Violet’s three accounts and her subsequent encapsulating characterization of life with Sebastian not only invalidate but also affix negative value to her claim of artistic accomplishment, since they conflate creativity respectively with the predatory instinct, a falsified identity, and an abandoned project. Echoing Sebastian’s transmutation of his garden, Violet’s Subject inverts the human generative disposition into corruptive impulse. “But the shadow was almost as luminous as the light,” she asserts (SLS 108). The remark is an unwitting admission to her proclivity to view realities through a willed inversion: darkness appears as light, Catharine’s truth is merely “babble,” she and Sebastian remain unaffected by time, lobotomy is a “blessing” to the patient who becomes “just suddenly peaceful” (SLS 113). In the Mankiewicz film, additional dialogue pronounces the inversion more succinctly in medical terms:

MRS. VENABLE. You’re very like him, Doctor.

DR. CUKROWICZ. In what way?

MRS. VENABLE. Because you, a doctor, a surgeon, are dedicated to your art. Yes, to your art. It is an art, what you do. Using people the way he did. Grandly, creatively. Almost like God.

DR. CUKROWICZ. I’m afraid my art is to help. Not to use, but to be used.



MRS. VENABLE. Well, it comes to the same, doesn't it? I mean, in the end.

Another significant instance of Violet's inversions in the play is her view of generosity: "The role of the benefactor is worse than thankless, it's the role of the victim, Doctor, a sacrificial victim, yes, they want your blood, Doctor, they want your blood on the altar steps of their *outraged, outrageous* egos!" (SLS 112). She interprets altruism in the context of affected selfless consumption, suggesting masochistic impulses. The line from The Merchant of Venice she quotes next completes this interpretation: "So shines a good deed in a naughty world" (SLS 112). In Portia's line the signifier is active charity, but in Violet's interpretation the benefactor has supplanted the generous act.

Violet's restructuring of the world, which Sebastian complacently adopts, is the governing design of their claustrophobic existence and situates their experiences in the arena of mutuality. The self-sufficiency of their sealed lives effects in the son a sense of circumscriptive distinctiveness which the mother acknowledges readily. She characterizes Sebastian as a "snob about personal charm in people, [who] insisted upon good looks in people around him, and, oh, he had a perfect little court of young and beautiful people around him always, wherever he was" (SLS 109). Barbara Herrnstein Smith suggests that "a subject's experience of an entity is always a function of his or her personal economy: [. . .] its specific 'features,' 'qualities,' or 'properties' are all the variable products of the subject's engagement with his or her environment under a particular set of conditions" (1914). Sebastian's negotiation of social order is tainted by the insulative codes Violet introduces to him. As a result, it precludes any dealings with those outside the circumference of his world. He refuses to engage even

visually with the impoverished children of Cabeza de Lobo, labelling them as “little monsters” and admonishing Catharine to follow suit, because “beggars are a social disease in this country. If you look at them, you get sick of the country, it spoils the whole country for you. . . .” (SLS 143). In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Big Daddy remembers confronting similar child poverty in Spain and in Morocco, and his response is a variant of Sebastian’s refusal to acknowledge the destitute children. Both men turn away from the disconcerting view of the human condition, albeit due to their slightly different individual attitudes. Sebastian excludes the children from his restrictive social order, but Big Daddy offers them monetary relief. Judith J. Thompson compares these responses and identifies the first as an “egoistic,” triggered by “revulsion and repugnance,” and the second prompted by “social and spiritual concern” (117). Though Thompson’s assessment of Sebastian is accurate, I contend that Big Daddy’s response is not empathetic but affordable. Unlike Sebastian, he recognizes the harshness of economic disparities—“the children running over those bare hills in their bare skins beggin’ like starvin’ dogs with howls and screeches, and how fat the priests are on the streets of Barcelona, so many of them and so fat and so pleasant” (CHTR 929). His response, however, is facile indifference:

BIG DADDY. Y'know I could feed that country? I got money enough to feed that goddam country, but the human animal is a selfish beast and I don't reckon the money I passed out there to those howling children in the hills around Barcelona would more than upholster one of the chairs in this room, I mean pay to put a new cover on this chair!

Hell, I threw them money like you'd scatter feed corn for chickens, I threw money at them just to get rid of them long enough to climb back into th' car and— drive away. . . . (CHTR 929)

Interestingly, in Suddenly Last Summer the film, Sebastian also offers the children money as a tactic to distract the boys following him into the street long enough to evade them.

Violet's function as Subject does not pause nor end with Sebastian's death. It survives now in the binary locus of his legacy. Apart from the estate, he has also bequeathed to her his poetry, "his work and his life," as she calls it. Sebastian's foresight of this survival is interesting not for its predictiveness but for his consciousness of her function. "Violet? Mother? You're going to live longer than me, and then, when I'm gone, it will be yours, in your hands, to do whatever you please with!" (SLS 103). Sebastian's emphasis of placing his work in her hands suggests her talent to mould him, while the equivocation of "do whatever you please with" connotes an awareness of her destructive art. That Violet is unaware of her son's intended meaning is confirmed by her concentration of her endeavours in a single project: "I'm not afraid of using every last ounce and inch of my little, left-over strength in doing just what I'm doing. I'm devoting all that's left of my life, Doctor, to the defense of a dead poet's reputation" (SLS 103). In keeping with the conflation of art and death, she offers the doctor the gilt-edged volume entitled "Poem of Summer," claiming it as the objective representation of his life: "Well, here is my son's work, Doctor, here's his life going *on!*" (SLS 103). In a reversal of Norman Bates' taxidermic preservation of his mother in Alfred Hitchcock's film Psycho (1960), the mother becomes the custodian of her son's corpus/corpse.

Violet's role as the caterer to her son's sexual appetite perverts him into the Venus flytrap the mother keeps alive on a diet of disregard for human life. She shapes

Sebastian according to the image of Gloucester's God in King Lear: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport" (IV i 38-39). Sebastian's sexual tastes and interests are destructive. Paul J. Hurley has contextualized Sebastian's moral corruption within his predatory homosexuality, concluding that Sebastian's violent end is a necessary metaphor of his scorn for humanity (396). John C. Clum also correlates "homosexuality in Suddenly Last Summer [. . .] with Sebastian's brutal, carnivorous sense of life" (169). This view is undermined by the fact that Sebastian's sexuality is of the pedophilic order, which is not always homosexual. Sebastian's pedophilia is evident in Catharine's account of his activities in Cabeza de Lobo: She would wait for him "outside the bathhouses, on the street. . . . He would come out, *followed* [by] the homeless, hungry young people" (SLS 141); she specifies later that the boys were "between childhood and—older" (SLS 144). Sebastian's moral corruption is certainly focalized in his sexual preference for teenage boys, but not necessarily in his homosexuality.

Predictably, Sebastian is not the only subject in Violet's sphere of influence, for she controls the other characters of the play as well. The foremost preys are the Holly family: Catharine, who is a "vandal and with her tongue for a hatchet [. . .] gone about smashing our legend" (SLS 111), and who must be lobotomized now, for insisting upon the restoration to Sebastian the truth of his death; her brother George, who receives from Violet Sebastian's clothes and prances around wearing them, producing for her the illusion of Sebastian alive; Mrs. Holly, whose maternal ambition to obtain for her son part of Sebastian's estate will immolate her daughter, through her consent to the lobotomy. Violet manipulates even Dr. Cukrowicz, whose medical work

is in dire need of financial resources, and who will receive from Violet, in Sebastian's memory, the necessary funds for his research. In Scene Four, Violet tells him "a poet's vocation is something that rests on something as thin and fine as the web of a spider, Doctor" (SLS 138). Her use of the spider's web metaphor to describe her position in Sebastian's creative life is fitting, for it describes perfectly her perception of her role, as well as Williams' depiction of her as Subject.

The economy of Subject-subjects stipulates only one hegemonic entity in relation to several tractable subjects. What if this economy multiplied onto itself, each of the subjects also behaving as Subject, and the Subject transforming into a subject itself? This, in fact, is the tautological paradigm of Williams' play. Sebastian is the play's ostensible Subject providing impetus to the dramatic action, yet the other major characters alternately exhibit controlling behaviour as well. Mrs. Venable predominates and overwhelms Dr. Cukrowicz in Scene One, while Catharine only appears near the end as though she were a portrait, literally framed by the lace curtains of the window; in Scene Four, Catharine has replaced Mrs. Venable and fascinates everyone present with her account of Sebastian's last day, while Dr. Cukrowicz admonishes Mrs. Venable to allow Catharine the foreground. Dr. Cukrowicz is also a Subject as far as both Violet and Catharine are concerned: Violet depends on the "great predator" (Bruhm 100) to perform the lobotomy, her ultimate recourse to maintain her beloved Sebastian's image; for Catharine, the doctor's decision to operate will impact her irrevocably. Mrs. Holly and her son are in turn empowered in their capacity as Catharine's mother and brother, turning their consent to the lobotomy into a Damoclean sword over Catharine. Robert Gross situates Catharine in literary

tradition that affirms this view: “From the moment Catharine witnessed Sebastian’s death, she became the archetypal persecuted maiden of Gothic fiction” (233). Williams’ sanction of his characters’ transit from one function to another erases their contours, allowing them to operate in a fluid circuitry: Catharine replaces Violet on Sebastian’s last trip abroad, George relishes wearing Sebastian’s white suit, and Dr. Cukrowicz repeats to Catharine Sebastian’s earlier command to “stand up” (SLS 135).

In the Mankiewicz film, after starting to feed the Venus flytrap, Violet calls Miss Foxhill to complete the task as she tells the doctor, “She loves feeding our wicked lady. Foxhill’s rather a brute,” and the camera corroborates Violet’s characterization as it notes Miss Foxhill’s obvious delight. In what Sofer has called “a dizzying hall of mirrors” (336), the characters borrow partial or whole functions from one another, compiling the fragmented bits into a new identity, following Sebastian’s example to disguise himself as a medieval courtier. Fluctuating functionality in Suddenly Last Summer is a traceable motif that also weaves through Williams’ other plays, most notably in the predominant women of The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire. Both Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois don the variously convenient representational functions of the artist, the object of desire, the fading cultural Southern belle, and the ingénue in distress. This traffic of functions screening the self halts in Suddenly Last Summer with Dr. Cukrowicz’s confessional treatment of Catharine, whereupon she is made to remember the events surrounding Sebastian’s death. It is an exorcising act, but ironically, it is also a figurative lobotomy: he pries out of her mind the horror stultifying her.

For Williams' characters, the continual transmutation of the self to promote a community of functions is often the only affordable avail. It also signals an alienation of the self from the homogeneous community. Violet's inability to accommodate the societal levelling of her status leads to her isolation in a sovereign domain, but her otherwise essential need for communication draws Sebastian into her sphere. Catharine's estrangement is similarly dictated by social dynamics. At the Duelling Oaks ball, she expresses her sensuality to a married man who only regards her as a sexual being. The incident reveals to Catharine a social code that refuses to accommodate her, resulting in her alienated view of herself. Her estrangement assumes the sensibility of the unreal, "the sort of feelings that you have in a dream" (SLS 131), and it finds its articulation in her journal where she refers to herself in the third person. Catharine's estrangement also manifests itself in her intercourse with her family: Sebastian calls her "little bird" (SLS 119); Mrs. Holly repeatedly addresses her as "Sister," an appellation echoing Sister Felicity's spiritual function, depriving her of her individuality as Catharine;<sup>5</sup> her brother George thinks she is a "bitch" and "perverse" (SLS 123). More significantly, Violet identifies Catharine as a destructive force; "She's a destroyer. My son was a *creator*!" (SLS 114). Two mothers offer the reader contrasting views of Catharine, leaving her in an isolated limbo at the centre of the play. As James R. Hurt states, "the play may be seen as a struggle for the soul of Catherine [sic] between the dead Sebastian and Dr. Cukrowicz" (399).

Despite the colluding efforts of her relations to subjugate Catharine, she retains in the play the unique capability to resist circumscription through a perceptive albeit fragile outlook on life. Her conviction that "we all use each other and that's what we

think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what's—*hate*. . . ." (SLS 131) offers certainly a grim prospect, for it confirms the corruption of the individual in her world and recognizes the *modus operandi* that this corruption entails, i.e., the exploitative function of the individual with its attendant malice. Yet Catharine is sufficiently astute to realize the repercussions of adopting this view as the foundation of one's engagement with the world. Her estrangement is posited in her realization that she may be alone in recognizing this, and the awareness debilitates and confuses her, yet she is reluctant to abandon her ethics: "A ship struck an iceberg at sea—everyone sinking— [ . . . ] But that's no reason for everyone drowning for hating everyone drowning! Is it, Doctor?" (SLS 131). The metaphor is a brilliant abstraction of Sebastian's morals. Or is it?

Williams' choice to pre-empt Sebastian and deny him the opportunity to account for his actions and expound his views is an efficient dramatic enterprise, for it provides momentum to the suspense that moves the play forward. The disclosure of the odd circumstances surrounding Sebastian's death, in fact, necessitates a retrospective review of his life. Williams complicates this review by offering Violet's and Catharine's disparate accounts, which otherwise complement one another. Robert Gross regards this enhancement in equivocal terms: "Just as [Sebastian's] physical body can never be completely recovered (because parts of it have been devoured) so too the character of Sebastian can never be completely and coherently described by those who knew him. Sebastian is a figure of unresolvable contradiction" (239). While this may be true for the characters of the play, I contend, however, that a unified reading of Sebastian is possible for the reader, through the assemblage of the facts and



observations the characters supply about Sebastian. We learn from his mother that Sebastian was a poet, but that fact is disputable. Sebastian is recognized a poet only by his mother; he is not known “outside a small coterie of friends” (SLS 102). He publishes his work himself, almost secretively, but Violet explains this by declaring that “he had no public name as a poet, he didn’t want one, he refused to have one. He *dreaded, abhorred!*— false values that come from being publicly known, from fame, from personal—exploitation. . . .” (SLS 103). The justification is an example of the convolution of reason that inspires Violet’s inversions. It may be perfectly true that public fame often generates personal exploitation, but this does not constitute a valid reason to withhold one’s creative output from the world. If that were the case, we would be deprived of an appreciable body of work in the canons of poetry.

By Violet’s own admission, Sebastian did not expressly avoid fame. “We were a famous couple,” she informs the doctor (SLS 111), “wherever he was, here in New Orleans or New York or on the Riviera or in Paris and Venice, he always had a little entourage of the beautiful and the talented and the young!” (SLS 109). Apparently, fame does not offend Sebastian on those occasions; on the contrary, he appears to welcome it. Sebastian’s determination to remain unpublished is not rooted in his shunning of fame, but it is inspired by his attitude toward his work. In The Night of the Iguana, the poet Nonno recites his last poem, and this offering enables the reader to adjudicate it. Since the reader has no such sample of Sebastian’s poetry, he must rely on telltale facts surrounding his creative process.<sup>6</sup> Sebastian composes one poem annually; he only works in summer; he publishes his work himself, in clandestine circumstances; and lastly, Violet attends to its creation very closely. Given these

conditions, the poem becomes a willed artifact, instead of a stylized and compact rendition of the poet's sensibilities. The fact that he insists on printing it "on an eighteenth-century handpress at his atelier" (SLS 104) implies his inclination to devote at least equal, if not particular, attention to its elegant print rather than its aesthetic value. Additionally, Violet's collaboration does not promote the poem's authenticity, while the paucity of Sebastian's output signals a lack of commitment to his art. For Sebastian, poetry is a leisurely activity, an annual ritual supervised by an authoritarian mother. He is certainly a dilettante, an effete whose dedication to art is incidental. Violet's revelatory account of her allegedly stimulative role and its methodology clearly establish this estimation of Sebastian's attitude toward his art:

MRS. VENABLE. When he was frightened and I knew when and what of, because his hands would shake and his eyes looked in, not out, I'd reach across a table and touch his hands and say not a word, just look, and touch his hands with my hand until his hands stopped shaking and his eyes looked out, not in, and in the morning, the poem would be continued. (SLS 138)

Sebastian's occasional blockage is apparently accompanied by dread and physical discomfort, but tellingly, the obstruction is the consequence of "looking in." Violet's contribution is to direct Sebastian's gaze outwardly, but this channelling signals an emphasis on exteriority rather than intrinsic value. In my view, Sebastian may be aware of his limitations; hence his indifference to the survival of his poetry after his death. He is also conscious of Violet's manipulation of his life, and as I have shown above, he tells her to dispose of it to the best of her judgment.

The fear that Sebastian's inward gaze precipitates in him warrants some consideration. Why would Sebastian be apprehensive? The answer lies in his paradoxical view of creation. Sebastian is not altogether an unsophisticated man. He

travels extensively, and his affluence allows the indulgence of his whims. His sophistication is counter-productive, however. It expands in the self-centred space Violet creates for him, and which, through its emphasis on affectation and posturing, stifles the willingness to derive productive insight from experiences. Thompson is convinced “Sebastian develops an attitude toward life which is at once decadent, elitist, and savage— [ . . . ] his egocentric elitism also makes decadent his self-conception as a poet” (115). Thompson does not, however, delve into Sebastian’s fear. I suggest that this fear is symptomatic of the confusion Sebastian experiences when he becomes aware of the contradiction between his functions as poet/creator and man/predator.

Among Sebastian’s numerous trips abroad, two are excepted for their deviation from the regulated yearly visits to Europe. The first, of course, is the visit to the Galapagos Islands; the second, though never undertaken, is the trip to the northern Europe Catharine mentions. Both trips indicate Sebastian’s enthusiasm for experiences removed from urban centres and his wish to be closer to the natural world. Both expeditions also disclose an inquisitiveness to comprehend the dichotomy of nature’s creative and destructive forces. Sebastian reads Melville’s impressions of the Encantadas, but when he arrives there, he witnesses “something Melville hadn’t written about” (SLS 105): birds preying on new life. The violent spectacle unsettles him, for he believes he has confirmed the nature of his own sexual appetite as the guiding principle of the universe— God’s destruction of his own creation. The misguided confirmation is irrefutable for him because he is unable to transcend his inhibitive outlook on humanity. It is a splenetic vision of doom in which creation is

senselessly devalued. Hence, he abandons his poetry during his last trip, particularly since Violet is not there to coax it from him. Additionally, the confusion paralyzes Sebastian's proactivity:

CATHARINE. He!—Accepted!—all!—as—how!—things—are!—And thought nobody had any right to complain or interfere in any way whatsoever and even though he knew that what was awful was awful, that what was wrong was wrong, and my Cousin Sebastian was certainly never sure that anything was wrong!—He thought it unfitting to ever take any action about anything whatsoever!—except to go on doing as something in him directed. . . . (SLS 145)

This indifference to his lot precipitates a heedless indulgence in self-destructive behaviour, and for the first time, Sebastian “switch[e]s from the evenings to the beach” (SLS 139). The “beautiful and the talented and the young” people Violet usually finds for him are now replaced by the “bands of homeless young people that lived on the free beach like scavenger dogs, hungry children” (SLS 141), who eventually execute on Sebastian's body the very spectacle that engendered his confusion and passivity. As Violet affirms, “Without me [Sebastian] died last summer, that was his last summer's poem” (SLS 104). To Violet, Sebastian's ultimate creation—his work and his life— is his own death, another inversion.

According to Catharine's account, Sebastian's second aborted trip to northern Europe stems from the desire to introduce variety in his sexual conquests. Having spent some time in Spain, Catharine reveals he was “fed up with the dark ones, [and] famished for light ones; that's how he talked about people, as if they were—items on a menu.— ‘That one's delicious looking, that one is appetizing,’ or ‘that one is *not* appetizing’” (SLS 118). However, Catharine also tells her audience Sebastian expresses an interest to witness the Northern lights, and she associates this curiosity

with her cousin's attempt to assimilate the dynamics of creative energies. According to Catharine, Sebastian's endeavour is destined to fail, for Violet has given him "the wrong alphabet blocks". When Dr. Cukrowicz asks her to tell Sebastian's story, she impugns Violet's upbringing of her son: "I think it started the day he was born in this house" (SLS 136). Catharine places the responsibility of Sebastian's horrific death on Violet's spurious philosophy of creative life, the impetus of which is to imprint the world with one's inspired endeavour. If this is the ultimate achievement of the individual, then Sebastian's legacy is in the image of the scene of his death:

CATHARINE. There wasn't a sound any more, there was nothing to see but Sebastian, what was left of him, that looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been torn, thrown, crushed!—against that blazing white wall. . . . (SLS 147)

In Suddenly Last Summer, Sebastian's living and dying experiences unite in a bleak depiction of a wasted life that might have otherwise been valuable. Sebastian Venable's story is a tale in which the promise of art dies.

The conflation of art and death is a recurrent design in Williams' plays. The young poet Allan Grey commits suicide in A Streetcar Named Desire; Valentine Xavier, the musician of Orpheus Descending, suffers a death similar to Sebastian's at the hands of a band of men who turn their blow-torches on him. Andrew Sofer views the conflation in terms of the "self-consuming artifact".<sup>6</sup> Sofer sees Williams' characters as "master-performers," who "continually try on versions of themselves for public display, mapping an increasingly desperate performance onto their resistant and shrinking matter of their bodies" (339). Sofer's summative view encapsulates the agencies of the Tom and Amanda Wingfield, Blanche DuBois, Sebastian Venable, Brick Pollitt, and even Stanley Kowalski.

In The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, Williams informs the performances of his characters with theatricality and its attendant illusion; in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Suddenly Last Summer, the expanse of performativity is the very reality from which the characters in the earlier plays fled. The concurrent realms of illusion and reality thus offer a shelter to the estranged characters of these plays, whereupon they activate their individual projects of rehabilitation. Tom Wingfield's ambition is to dress reality in the disguise of illusions; Blanche DuBois enacts her self-delusional performance onto the inhospitable reality she encounters; Brick Pollitt prefers to impose the confining illusion of his past on his performativity in the present; and Mrs. Venable forces her vision of herself and her role on her son's reality. Only Catharine Holly and Maggie Pollitt choose the harshness of reality over the deception of illusions. The valour necessary to negotiate one's self in an honest manner is a rare commodity in Williams' plays, and its deficiency always encases the individual in alienation and estrangement.

## Notes to Chapter Four

1. Williams was a relentless editor of his work, sometimes even after the production of a play. He constantly rearranged scenes, renamed characters, included or deleted allusions and references, etc. Suddenly Last Summer went through several of these revisions, which have been documented in detail by Brian Parker in "A Tentative Stemma for Drafts and Revisions of Tennessee Williams's Suddenly Last Summer (1958)". After the initial publication of Suddenly Last Summer by New Directions Publishing in 1958, Williams revised the play for a second printing in 1959, making significant changes—mostly deletions—in the first scene between Dr. Cukrowicz and Violet Venable. Williams' alterations for the second printing have also been documented Rita M. Colanzi, and their impact on the play has been explored by Judith J. Thompson. (See Colanzi 651-52, Thompson 222-23.)

Since the first off-Broadway production of the play, two versions have circulated widely, their variance consisting chiefly of the two versions of Scene One mentioned above. For instance, the acting edition published in 1969 by Dramatists Play Service follows the revised edition—second printing—of 1959, but most other editions are of the 1958 "original" version, as is the one in Tennessee Williams Plays 1957-1980, used for the purposes of this dissertation.

2. Catharine is quoting the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935). When a literary critic complained that Robinson's poetry offered a bleak view of the world, he retorted, "I am sorry that I have painted myself in such lugubrious colors. The world is not a prison house but a kind of spiritual kindergarten where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks." Interestingly, Robinson's poems often portray troubled characters, who resonate with the same despair with which Williams informs his. Robinson has been recognized as the poet of "human isolation, the tormented introversions of the personality, the doubts and frustrations of lonely people inhabiting a world from which God appears to have hidden his face" (Gray 139), prefiguring many of the themes Williams explores in his theatre.

3. Robert Gross views this fusion in terms of authorial intention: "The names, with their echoes of Shakespeare's twins, Viola and Sebastian, minimize the age difference between mother and son and bring them closer to appearing as a single being" (242). Andrew Sofer concurs, "Violet echoes the identical twins of Twelfth Night with an incestuous flourish, suggesting that Violet and Sebastian shared more than their last name" (341). Judith J. Thompson associates the family name to "venal, venomous, and, ironically, Venus," the latter linking Violet to the insectivorous plant in Sebastian garden. Thompson also finds Venable evocative of "venerable," suggesting "the archetypal agelessness of their mutual savagery," while her first name phonetically resembles "violent," the French *viol*, and the English "violate" (112-13).

4. Admittedly, Big Daddy's response is far more sympathetic than Sebastian's for two reasons: first, he recognizes the reprehensible lack of compassion in himself; more significantly, his approaching death has provided the opportunity to reassess the experience and derive from it humility: "But a man can't buy his life [. . .], that's one thing not offered in the Europe fire-sale or in the American markets or any markets on earth [. . .]. That's a sobering thought, a very sobering thought, [. . .]. I'm wiser and sadder, Brick, for this experience I just gone through" (CHTR 929).

5. Catharine is also her mother's "poor angel", "kitten," "a perfect lamb," in the Mankiewicz film.

6. Although neither of the Suddenly Last Summer editions includes Sebastian's poetry, Brian Parker has established that Williams considered doing so in some drafts of the play (Parker "Legends" 1). Parker's documentation shows that in the early versions of the play, Catharine's character actually recites a poem, which she variously claims was Sebastian's last, completed—as in The Night of the Iguana—on the eve of his death; Violet's character corroborates this in one draft, claiming Sebastian sent a copy of the poem to her one week before he died (Parker "Stemma" 306-7). The recited poem is

one of Williams' own (again, The Night of the Iguana), and it appears in the 1964 volume of his poetry entitled In the Winter of Cities. I have chosen to forego discussion of the poem's contribution to a reading of Sebastian, since Williams opted to exclude it from the published versions of the play.

7. Sofer borrows the phrase from Stanley Fish's Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (1972). He recognizes the "purely rhetorical sense" of the phrase in Fish, but he insists "in the case of Williams, Fish's phrase must be taken literally. It is the *self*, which seeks to impose its own version of itself on the world, that is literally consumed in the praxis of performance" (339).



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