



## QUEERING AND DEQUEERING THE TEXT Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

GEORGES-CLAUDE GUILBERT  
*Université de Rouen*

### *The Dead-Queer Motif*

Elizabeth Taylor once declared: "Without homosexuals there would be no theater, no Hollywood, [...] no Art!". In the 1940s and 1950s, America was not particularly liberal, to put it mildly, and definitely not "gay-friendly." However, as Frederick Suppe writes,

[The] cultural and artistic contributions of queers were decidedly subversive, countering attempts to smother gays and lesbians into cultural invisibility with films, plays, literature, music and art that revealed and made public a gay sensibility that spoke to queers everywhere even when the plots and vehicles used to deploy that sensibility were disguised as heterosexual.

Suppe then exemplifies: "Thus most of Tennessee Williams's plays—especially *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*—focus on struggles with homosexuality in a very straight society" [Suppe, 14]. To do so, Williams's plays constantly speak of gender, and almost as constantly of sexuality and sexual orientation—something Pedro Almodóvar knows intimately, as he palimpsestuously flirted with *A Streetcar Named Desire* (as well as with Truman Capote texts) in his film *All About My Mother* (1999).

This paper focuses on gender, sexuality and sexual orientation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I am quite aware of the fact that there are many other, equally interesting objects of analysis in the play, such as madness-or-not-madness, Old South vs. New South, and so on, not to mention the illuminating comparisons that can be established between the play and Kazan's film; this essay is to be read as a companion piece to the others in this issue of *Cercles*.

Although this paper concentrates on the queer aspects of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and is very much informed by Queer Theory, I do not intend to present Williams as a "gay writer," whatever that may mean. If *A Streetcar Named Desire* were "a queer play," it would be *Belle Reprieve*, its (in)famous 1991 *Split Britches/Bloodlips* semiotically wobbly gender-bending reworking. Some critics are tempted to see Williams's plays as "homosexual art," which can quickly become reductive. Supposing there were such a thing as "homosexual art," and supposing Williams's plays were instances of such an art, this would not necessarily make them alien to heterosexual audiences. Kate Millet writes,

Although "straight" society may be affronted at the thought, homosexual art is by no means without insights into heterosexual life, out of whose milieu it grows and whose notions it must, perforce,

imitate and repeat, even parody. [...] Williams and Albee can say as much, and often speak more frankly than others about the horrors of family life, the tedium of marriage. [Millet, 341-342]

The critic Howard Taubman famously complained in 1961 about “the infiltration of homosexual attitudes” in American drama, judging that the portrayal of women and heterosexual life should be undertaken by clearly heterosexual playwrights, whereas the gays could write gay plays [Loughery, 292]. Stanley Kaufmann’s attacks of the same kind in the 1950s and 1960s are equally (in)famous [Tinkcom, 348].

It is silly to suppose, as some critics still do, that homosexuals (exclusive or not) do not know enough about heterosexual life to write about it convincingly or interestingly. Homosexuals live, like everyone else, in a heterosexual world.<sup>1</sup> It is equally silly to suppose that homosexual writers particularly want to write about the homosexual experience to the exclusion of other spheres; and even if they do want to write about the homosexual experience too, they usually know better than to limit themselves to it (particularly before Stonewall), especially if they want to make a living out of their work.

So without claiming that Williams’s only aim was to discuss things queer, he certainly had an interest in “finding ways for this silenced majority to be allowed to speak” [Miller, 99]. As we shall see, in order to focus on gender and sexual orientation, Williams’s plays often queer the pre-text more than the text: the queer in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) has already died before the play starts. The queen is dead, long live the queen: it is this death that gives life to the plays.

*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, Tennessee Williams tells us in his notes for the designer, takes place in “the bed-sitting-room of a plantation home in the Mississippi Delta.” He goes on to specify that the style of this room is somewhat unexpected. Why? Because “it 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” [*Cat*, 13]. Just in case Straw’s and Ochello’s sexual orientation were not clear enough as indicated by the classical euphemism “a pair of old bachelors” and the fact that they shared the room, Williams then accumulates references to the tremendous love Straw and Ochello felt for one another.

So the queering of the text starts before and beside the text, as it were. Things are never simple with Williams. More than perhaps any other American playwright, he delivers a great deal of information in his stage directions, thus creating both a mine and a minefield for the scholar. It is so tempting to read his often copious directions, or as in this case notes for the designer as “simply” part of the text, and assume that they signify as much as the dialogue. In the same way, it is tempting to forget for research or teaching’s sake that we are dealing with a play, a work of art to be seen on

---

<sup>1</sup> If such notions were true, a sizeable portion of the art of the past twenty-six centuries or so would be irrelevant to heterosexuals, from Plato to Warhol, via Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Wilde and Chaikovsky. If such notions were true, any novelist wishing to write, say, about serial killers, would have to murder several people before hitting his keyboard.

stage—rather than to be read. Naturally, much depends on the talent (or lack thereof) of the director and stage designer of any particular production; talent in this case not meaning slavish observance of frequently unrealistic authorial wishes. In this paper I intend to force myself to remember that few productions of Williams's plays scrupulously obey the master's directions, if only because they are not necessarily feasible. I also intend to take them into account even though some may say that they are more paradiegetic than diegetic. When Williams writes that "there is something about [Blanche's] uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth," [*Streetcar*, 117], I am not certain—however talented the director, actress and costume designer—that a single spectator in the theater thinks of a moth.

In Act Two of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, when it has been established that Brick and his wife Maggie-the-cat do not have sex any more, that Brick is an alcoholic, that Big Daddy is dying of cancer, and that Gooper and Mae embody the worst possible form of heterosexuality and heteronormativity (they are heterosexist, bigoted, brainless, unfeeling homophobic "breeders"), Big Daddy states: "You started drinkin' when your friend Skipper died." Brick's frat house teammate football-playing friend Skipper committed suicide some time before Act One. Big Daddy reports that Brick's brother Gooper and wife Mae have suggested there was something not "right," not "normal" in his relationship with Skipper, and we learn that Maggie has suggested it too [*Cat*, 75]. When Brick becomes highly agitated, Big Daddy says: "Now, hold on, hold on a minute, son—I knocked around in my time." Brick wonders, "what's that got to do with—" [*Cat*, 76]. Precisely, *that* has got everything to do with...

You don't have to be a queer theorist to imagine that what Big Daddy is trying to tell his son is very possibly that he himself in his youth had sex with men on several occasions. "I knocked around" can easily be identified as polysemic; and "I bummed this country" or "I slept in hobo jungles and railroad Y's and flophouses in all cities" are highly evocative, even in pre-Village People America [*Cat*, 76]. Later he says: "Jack Straw an' Peter Ochello took me in" [*Cat*, 77], conjuring up the picture of a young and attractive man rescued from poverty and homelessness by two generous gentlemen, possibly moved by other feelings than mere charity. At this point some critics see distinct hints to sexual relationships in Big Daddy's discourse. Some like imagining a potential *ménage à trois* [Clum, "Tennessee Williams," 752]. They left the plantation to him, turning him into some sort of a son, which in no way contradicts the above, obviously.

But Brick, shouting, uses phrases such as "that pair of old sisters" [*Cat*, 76, 81], "dirty things," "dirty old men," "ducking sissies," and finally "queers." [*Cat*, 77] He is the one who talks about "things like that," an "unnatural thing" [*Cat*, 78], and "fairies" [*Cat*, 79]. At last we understand that Maggie suggested to Skipper that he and Brick were repressed—or latent—homosexuals, leading Skipper to try and prove her wrong in bed. But he was incapable of performing (polysemy intended) that night. After much coaxing, Brick ends up admitting that it was after "a long distance call [...] in which he made a drunken confession," and on which he hung up, that Skipper killed himself [*Cat*, 81]; However hard Brick tries to "pass the buck" and blame it on somebody else, he is ultimately responsible for

Skipper's death. Skipper loved him. No amount of auto-suggestion can persuade him that this love was an invention of Maggie's. No matter how clever she was and no matter how "dumb" Skipper was, how could she have convinced Skipper *ab nihilo* that he harbored queer feelings?

Whether Brick more or less unconsciously reciprocated those feelings and desires (whether he was basically heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual) is not so important [Garber, 390]. Of course, it is often tempting to see homophobia in men as the manifestation of bottled up homosexual tendencies; without indulging in supermarket psychoanalysis it is well-known that the most violent queer-bashers are often queers (not merely in the closet, but right down there in the cellar) who hate themselves.

Williams's original idea for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was queerer than what was finally shown on stage, since Elia Kazan, who first directed the play, obliged him to somewhat dequeen the ending. Then the film was further dequeered, as always [Sinfield, *Cultural Politics*, 54; Garber, 387]. Still, it remains a queer text to an important extent. What is central to the understanding of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* and all of Williams's work is to see that Skipper's death is the principal motor of the play, just as some form of hubris is the motor of many a Greek tragedy. The play *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* simply would not exist if Skipper had not committed suicide before the curtain rises. Admittedly, there is Big Daddy's cancer, the question of inheritance, Maggie's splendid character, Big Mama's pathetic ramblings and Mae's detestable child-rearing. Then, of course, there is the Southern heritage. But without Skipper's suicide, there is no Brick drinking himself into oblivion, and no play. Yes, Brick is "responsible" for Skipper's death, but Brick was merely an instrument of the heteronormative dominant culture. "Homosexual panic" killed Skipper [Sedgwick, *Epistemology, passim*; Sedgwick, *Tendencies, passim*]. Hence my Dead-Queer Theory, which I wish to further illustrate before I move on to *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Williams's work often depends on events that took place prior to the diegesis *per se*, to the "action" in the restrictive sense. "Tennessee Williams is a master of the guilty-secret-buried-in-the-past" [Garber, 390]. This is a habit in Southern literature, obviously. Dark, often Gothic, pasts full of daunting secrets haunt the present. *Suddenly Last Summer* is no exception. Catherine Holly is locked up at St Mary's, a private institution, watched over by zealous nuns. Why? Because the preceding summer, vacationing at a sea resort somewhere called Cabeza de Lobo, she more or less witnessed the murder of her cousin Sebastian Venable, eaten alive by a mob of underprivileged boys. The Dead Queer this time is a poet, just like Allan Grey in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a frail poet with a weak heart who wrote one poem a year.

Sebastian used to have a perfect arrangement with his overprotective mother Violet, who took him on vacation to various chic places and used to procure for him. In Cabeza de Lobo, Violet was replaced by Catherine. As D. A. Miller calls her, Catherine is "queer bait." [Miller, 98] The idea is simple: if you are a lonely homosexual with money in the 1950s and you want to meet young attractive men, travel with a woman who has charm and an easy-going manner. The implication, of course, is that those young men Sebastian had sex with were not necessarily homosexual themselves.

Indeed, in Cabeza de Lobo, the boys were certainly heterosexual. Starving as they were, they were prepared to comply for a few coins (shades of Baron Von Gloeden's Sicilian boys). This was and is a common practice. Today it would be called "sexual tourism." Not that Sebastian actually needed to get away from New Orleans to find such pleasures, as there are always straight young men in any western city who resort to prostitution for various reasons—a phenomenon with which Williams was familiar.

After he had had a few Cabeza de Lobo boys, Sebastian, feeling poorly and possibly satiated, stopped going to the public beach with Catherine. The boys were still starving, though. As she narrates the traumatic events, Catherine first calls them "homeless young people" [*Suddenly*, 152], then "hungry young people," [*Suddenly* 153] and eventually "naked children" [*Suddenly*, 154]. So as to make clear for the spectator/reader that Sebastian's activities were more pederastic than pedophilic, Williams makes her specify: "I think he recognized some [...] of the boys, between childhood and—older..." [*Suddenly*, 156]. So presumably Sebastian has not had sex with *all* the boys who eat him, only some of them, the older ones. "That gang of kids shouted vile things about me to the waiters [of the café]," says Sebastian. No doubt they called him queer.

Setting aside the ridiculous question of the (lack of) realism of *Suddenly Last Summer*,<sup>2</sup> it is worth pointing out that Sebastian has martyr tendencies, like his namesake (Saint Sebastian being of course the quintessential gay saint). But this in no way prevents his death from being the result of homophobia. If society had been more open-minded, Sebastian might have found love on his doorstep in New Orleans, would not have turned into a self-destructive neurotic dandy, and the play *Suddenly Last Summer* would not exist. Instead he is killed by cannibal, heterosexual (even if they were available for rent) homophobic boys [Koestenbaum, 117; Miller, 99].

Since Catherine easily stands for the Madwoman-in-the-attic syndrome [Brontë, *passim*; Rhys *passim*; Gilbert & Gubar *passim*], such a queer reading goes hand in hand with a feminist reading. What does an oppressive patriarchal society do with women outcasts, women full of rage, who find refuge in madness? What does it do with women who dare have a mind of their own or who will not "shut up" and do men's bidding? Women who are in patriarchy's way? It locks them up in a psychiatric institution (possibly considering lobotomy), which is what happens to Blanche at the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Things may get worse when the disturbing—more than disturbed—women are the depositories of secrets, especially, of course, when they hold the keys to the closet, like Catherine in *Suddenly Last Summer* and Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, both played by Elizabeth Taylor in the film versions [Koestenbaum, 116-117].

Yet, it would be simplistic to see Williams as some kind of gay militant. He himself long suffered from a severe case of internalized homophobia. By most accounts—including his own—he remained a virgin until the age of 26 (1937), and after heterosexual affairs yielded to his

---

<sup>2</sup> Why some critics still bother with this—or worse, seriously wonder if Catherine hasn't made it all up—is beyond me.

homosexual desires reluctantly, progressively and belatedly (possibly starting in 1939). He came out of the closet to his entourage very slowly, and only came out publicly on the David Frost Show at the advanced age of fifty-nine (1970), in the wake of Stonewall [Devlin, 146]; by then, his sexuality was practically an open secret.<sup>3</sup>

So, Williams wrote from the closet for many years. Warren Johansson and William A. Percy write,

The gay writer has three levels of identity: the real, closeted self; the mask of conventional sexuality; and the freely unconventional personalities of the characters in the plays, novels or short stories. The interaction of all three can engender sufficient complexity and ambiguity to baffle the analytic powers of the literary critic or biographer. [Johansson & Percy, 150]

Williams wrote from the closet with his three levels of identity, and though his work often *functions* as denouncement of homophobia, through literally lethal examples that can horrify the spectator/reader, he is not actually preaching or politicizing the issue [Savran, 77].

In the 1940s and the 1950s, many young American men committed suicide because they could not deal with their homosexuality in a heterosexist environment. It still happens today, but not in such great numbers. For all we know, Williams's plays could have saved dozens of lives, or more, even though, reading Freud and seeing therapists, he himself was often tempted to pathologize homosexuality. As he famously acknowledged, he was something of a puritan *malgré lui*.

It would be equally silly to hail Williams as a feminist activist. Nevertheless, *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be read as a feminist play, even though Williams never decided to write one. One of its central preoccupations is gender and the rigidity of the gender roles society enforces, etc. Savran writes: "Williams's destabilization of mid-century notions of masculinity and femininity is accomplished, in part, by his ability both to expose the often murderous violence that accompanies the exercise of male authority and to valorize female power and female sexual desire." [Savran, 80-81] In a patriarchal society, women's bodies are colonized by men and sexual minorities are crushed, sexual minorities and women are equally victimized, to various degrees, as we shall see. In the case of the latter, this is especially true when they dare express and act upon sexual desires of their own.

### *Allan Grey: The Ur-Dead-Queer*

Why does Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) constantly refer to herself as a maid, a single woman, an unmarried woman, when in fact she was married to Allan Grey? Especially in 1947, it would have been so much more convenient, respectable, and "in the order of things" to go by the widow label. It could be partly explained by the fact that she was married

---

<sup>3</sup> I do not believe he was actually, as some say, outed in the 1950s, but I suppose it depends on one's understanding of the phrase [Gage, Richards & Wilmot, 189].

very young, and for a very short period of time. But could it not be because she never had sex with her husband? It is a possibility, that Williams never refutes nor confirms. At the end of Scene One, when Stanley asks Blanche to confirm she was once married and asks what happened, she replies: "The boy—the boy died. [*She sinks back down.*] I'm afraid I'm—going to be sick!" [*Streetcar*, 130]. In 1947, a widow simply did not call her dead husband a "boy." This word is obviously opposed to the word "man." So it can mean either or both of two things: first, he was very young indeed when he died, he was not yet fully grown, as it were; secondly, he was less butch than a man, and the memory makes Blanche sick. This helps Williams develop the running opposition between Allan the Dead Queer and the very-much-alive Stanley.

Blanche drinks. Blanche and Brick's alcohol intakes echo each other. They both drink until they reach that moment when they are temporarily relieved of their pain, until the click. In Blanche's case, the torment subsides when she hears in her head (after the polka) the sound of the gun shot that took Allan's life. In both instances, the Dead Queer was killed by society's homophobia. And Blanche, of course, feels guilty, like Brick.

So the boy died, and talking about it makes Blanche feel sick. Indeed lots of things make Blanche sick, in every sense of the phrase. Blanche is ill, Blanche is extremely frail and mentally fragile. Words like "nerves," "nervous," "nervousness," "neurasthenic," "hysteria," "hysterical," recur in the stage directions. She had always been a fragile, tender and delicate creature, of course, but the horrors she survived made her a nervous wreck. As Stella tells Stanley in Scene Eight: "People like you abused her, and forced her to change" [*Streetcar*, 198]. Allan, too, was a fragile creature. His boyish fragility, clearly, is opposed to Stanley's brutish strength.

In Scene Two, Stanley takes hold of a sheaf of paper belonging to Blanche. Blanche says: "These are love-letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy." Later, she calls those same papers "poems a dead boy wrote." As Suzanne Fraysse astutely remarks, there is a great deal of ambiguity in those terms. Are these papers letters or poems or both? What is more, nothing tells us with certainty that—whatever they were—they were addressed to Blanche [Fraysse, 52]. For all we know, they could have been addressed to a man and appropriated by Blanche—in every sense.

This is familiar Williams territory. He has used, and maybe even overused, throughout his work (plays, novels, short stories, poems, screenplays, memoirs) the following "equation:" lonely poet/artist/creator (*poète maudit*) = monster/freak/mad(wo)man = queer. Stanley stands for normality and unrefinement as opposed to the refinement of Allan (and Blanche). When he grabs the poems Blanche tells him: "The touch of your hands insults them" [*Streetcar* 139]. She will have to burn them, she adds. Her husband was "young and vulnerable," she says. Further, in Scene Seven, Stella tells Stanley about her sister's marriage to Allan, which "killed her illusions." Here are the arresting words Williams puts into her mouth: "She married a boy who wrote poetry... He was extremely good-looking. I think Blanche didn't just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human! But then she

found out [...] this beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate" [*Streetcar*, 189-190].

So Allan was angelic, Allan was—of course, one is tempted to write—very beautiful and very talented, *and* (rather than but) Allan had the "evil" sexuality of a "degenerate." Blanche, as an aesthete, worshipped his beauty, talent and refinement. Stella, for her part, likes her men "real," or butch at any rate, and her choice of adjective shows her homophobic tendencies. Practicing homophobia is one of the best ways to uphold the patriarchy, and this somehow prepares her for her later rejection of Blanche.

Williams was extremely keen on Hart Crane, whose promiscuous sex life fascinated/repulsed him almost as much as his poetry. Crane was an outcast, a pariah, and fit into Williams's "equation" articulated above. Williams frequently handled this type of notion in his nonfiction too, speaking notably of the "Sense of the Awful."<sup>4</sup> That "Sense of the Awful" ranges from Southern Gothic to closet poetics. In Scene Six of *A Streetcar Named Desire* comes the queerest passage, spoken by Blanche. Here is the first half,

He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate-looking—still—that thing was there... [*Streetcar*, 182-183]

Craftily, Williams manages to cater for the initiated and the uninitiated at the same time. Blanche was unlucky enough to fall for a homosexual. She was "deluded" because she mistook him for a heterosexual. How much of what she then tells Mitch is in fact hindsight? Surely that "thing" that was there contributed to Allan's attraction. A sensitive woman like Blanche, fond of poetry and refined pastimes was bound to enjoy a particular "softness and tenderness" in a man—or rather, a boy. The subtext here is that she might even have indulged in half-unconscious "fag-hag" tendencies (in 1972's *Small Craft Warnings* Williams favors "faggot's moll," rather than "fag hag" or "fruit fly").

Before I proceed, a few precisions linked to gender are in order. Williams's colleagues and sometime friends Truman Capote and Carson McCullers both abundantly showed in their fiction that they were constructionists in matters of gender, half a century before people like Judith Butler theorized constructionism—as opposed to essentialism. First, there

---

<sup>4</sup> See for instance the introduction he wrote for Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, which can be found in the Bantam edition: "It appears to me, sometimes, that they are only two kinds of people who live outside what E. E. Cummings has defined as "this so-called world of ours"—the artists and the insane. Of course there are those who have not been committed to asylums, but who have enough of one or both magical elements, lunacy and vision, to permit them also to slip sufficiently apart from "this so-called world of ours" to undertake or accept an exterior view of it" [McCullers, xi]. Later, he writes: "*Reflections in a Golden Eye* is one of the purest and most powerful of those works which are conceived in that Sense of The Awful which is the desperate black root of nearly all significant modern art, from the *Guernica* of Picasso to the cartoons of Charles Addams" [xiv].

are genetic data: one is born XX or XY (and even that is not so systematic as people think). Then there are social constructions. The categories “man” and “woman” are pure constructs, enforced by what I like calling “the dictatorship of gender.” Total constructionists tend to believe that sexual orientation is just as artificially constructed as gender. Williams, for his part, often hovered between essentialism and constructionism. Blanche is persecuted because she does not respect the dictatorship of gender.

So what does an “effeminate-looking” (man) mean? In a constructionist perspective, not much. If you believe that gender is performance (and performativity), that every sign of femininity observable in women is learnt, imitated (walk, gestures, “softness,” “tenderness”), then an effeminate man is someone who performs the “wrong” gender. Many Freudian trajectories can lead a gay man to effeminacy, often installing itself at the time of puberty, but this is no place to discuss such phenomena. We are all semioticians, most of us are perfectly unaware of it, and the only difference—besides reproductive organs—between your neighbor Mrs. Smith and a successful drag queen is that the latter knows what she is doing: piling up signs of “femininity.”

So Allan was not “effeminate-looking,” Blanche tells Mitch. This serves various purposes. Spoiling a cliché that is reassuring for the dominant culture, Williams is telling his 1947 audience that not all homosexuals are effeminate. Many people *still* think they are, but this was an even more popular misconception in the 1940s—long before gay liberation and Castro Street butch leather clones began to explode old stereotypes and create new ones. In other words, your neighbor, brother, or even, as with Blanche, your husband, may be homosexual—without you ever suspecting it. So the world is not such a safe place after all. Just like communists, homosexuals were in hiding in 1940s and 1950s America and could be lurking anywhere. In the same way transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and other cross-dressers may have been mistaken for XX people though there were XY, or vice versa. They were *passing*. Without ever directly addressing the politics of passing, Williams certainly was interested (for an interesting comparison, see the blacks who pass for white in the novels of William Faulkner or even those of Boris Vian writing as Vernon Sullivan). The world is dangerous for heterosexual WASPs if they can walk by a black man or a homosexual without perceiving the threat, isn't it?

Besides, even though Williams was not averse to a bit of “camping around,” he did not like queens (“effeminate homosexuals” in non PC parlance, or worse, “queeny men,” or “campy men”), nor did he approve of flamboyant conspicuousness in public places. Lyle Leverich writes,

Although in gay circles Tennessee Williams enjoyed the often hilarious ritual of antic camping—while seldom joining in himself—he was never able to reconcile himself to fragrant public displays, which he saw as a mockery not simply of women but of his own sense of manhood. [Leverich, 288]

In *Small Craft Warnings*, a much more openly queer play, the character named Quentin (and not Bobby, *pace* James Fisher) is presented as such in Williams's stage directions: “The young man, Quentin, is dressed effete in a yachting jacket, maroon linen slacks, and a silk neck-scarf. Despite this

costume, he has a quality of sexlessness, not effeminacy" [Small, 199]. God forbid that the spectator/reader should see him as effeminate. Fisher writes that effeminacy was "a trait Williams himself disliked. When these types appear in his plays they are often objects of ridicule, Williams showing strangely less compassion for effeminate men than for the more masculine homosexuals he often depicted" [Fisher, 17].<sup>5</sup>

Are we to understand that Allan's difference, his nervousness, tenderness, and softness did not constitute enough clues for Blanche? That entertaining many prejudiced misconceptions (like most people) she would have needed to see him mince his way around the plantation with a handbag to start wondering? When she states that her husband's tenderness and softness were not like a man's (i.e. not like Stanley's), she partakes in the general oppression of gender roles, which constrain men to repress their feelings and hide their fragility. Here is the second half of that very queer passage,

He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't find out anything till after our marriage when we'd run away and come back and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me—but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. [*Streetcar*, 183]

So what is the help Allan wanted from Blanche? Did he merely need a "beard," that is, a girlfriend or wife serving as cover? Or was he "sincerely" attempting to "convert" to heterosexuality? Perhaps both? It is unlikely that he cynically used Blanche strictly as a beard. Homosexuality as an identity-engendering category was "invented" in the nineteenth century, along with heterosexuality [Katz, *passim*], and seen as pathological by the medical profession until the 1970s. Allan very possibly saw himself as ill and sought a cure in Blanche, but was too terrified to confide in her. In other words, the reigning heteronormativity drove him to neurosis, and then to suicide. Through him, it drove Blanche to neurosis (some would say psychosis), and then to a psychiatric institution. What is that mysterious way in which Blanche failed Allan? Does it simply mean that she failed to arouse desire in him? As I intimated above, it is possible, though not absolutely certain, that he never managed to make love to her, that he was heterosexually impotent (which might partly explain why she refers to herself as a maid(en) rather than a widow, the marriage having never been consummated). Rather, does it mean that she failed to erase his desire for men? What Blanche does not seem to realize is that in all probability she could not have helped him. As a woman she was basically not equipped to help him, unless she had turned more or less lesbian and played a Jane Bowles to his Paul Bowles. "Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a

---

<sup>5</sup> Like Stella, Williams liked his men butch. He was always attracted to butch types, as is well documented in his *Memoirs*, his letters, and elsewhere [Windham, 114; Leverich, 351]. So he did not like them camp—which in no way kept Camp out of his work, in which, moreover, larger-than-life camp women abound (see, for instance, Alexandra Del Lago AKA Princess Kosmonopolis in *Sweet Bird of Youth* [1959]).

room that I thought was empty—which wasn't empty, but had two people in it..." [*Streetcar* 183].

David Savran has entitled one of the chapters of his book *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* "Tennessee Williams: By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty" [Savran, 76-110]. An inspired and revealing choice, as this sentence is of course central to *A Streetcar Named Desire* but also to Williams's entire body of work. The quote above comes from the Penguin edition. Now let us examine the longer, queerer version from the Signet edition,

"Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty—which wasn't empty, but had two people in it... the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years..." [*Streetcar* Signet, 95]

Of course, only the really obtuse spectator/reader needs to be actually told that the two people in the room are both male. But in that more complete Signet version, the sentence which in the Penguin edition is to be read in the dots, gives us "boy" and "older man" in the same breath (pun intended). It thus adds meaning to Allan's boyhood, boyishness and "boyness," as it were, placing it in the realm of cliché Greek style relationships: Allan is the *eromenos* and the older man his *erastes*. The fact that Blanche specifies the older man had been Allan's friend for years allows us to imagine that their sexual relationship had been going on for a long time and very possibly had the chronological advantage over Blanche's and Allan's relationship. So the room of sexual alternatives was not empty at all, and would in turn lead Blanche to other rooms like it, to "other voices, other rooms," as Truman Capote put it.

So Allan was "found out," he was caught in the act. Blanche speaks of it as if it were a crime (Stella uses the same phrase). In the Penguin version she proceeds to narrate his suicide, indicating a transitory period when she "pretended nothing had been discovered," and then explains: "It was because—on the dance floor—unable to stop myself—I'd suddenly said—'I know! I know! You disgust me...'" [*Streetcar*, 184]. The Signet edition gives us, much more graphically: "*I saw! I know!*" [italics mine, *Streetcar* Signet, 96]. This gives the words "you disgust me" much more strength, as the spectator/reader may imagine in the Penguin version that Blanche merely realized Allan was in bed with a man, whereas in the Signet version s/he may infer that Blanche not only recognized Allan's lover but also actually witnessed just exactly what it was they were doing, the precise *act* they were involved in. Both versions have the first part of Blanche's narration interrupted by the sound of a terribly Freudian locomotive, which fills various roles in the play but could in this case, of course, evoke sodomy, among other things. A western heteronormative society expresses its homophobia in various ways, but one of the most common learned notions is that of disgust; it usually rests on two millennia of Judeo-Christian dubious essentialist conceptions of what is "natural" and what constitutes a crime against nature. The homosexual as cultural Other is he who does things with his body homophobic society refuses to envisage and is shocked when compelled to visualize or worse, *see*. Hence, "I saw! I know! You

disgust me..." Hence Blanche finding out "in the worst of all possible ways."

As Antony Easthope puts it,

The dominant myth of masculinity demands that homosexual desire, if it cannot be sublimated, must be expelled. And this governs the prevailing attitude towards male homosexuals. It accounts for homophobia, the fear of homosexuality, and for the way that gay individuals are made into scapegoats [...]. Homophobia strives manfully to eliminate its opposite, the thing which causes it. It does this mainly through three operations which are understood by psychoanalysis as projection, hysteria and paranoia. [Easthope, 105]

Blanche, failing to realize as she would later that gay men and women are on the same side, both victimized by heterosexual men, is disgusted by what she has seen. But what exactly has she seen? As signaled above, the Signet edition makes us think that she has witnessed an act of sodomy, or perhaps fellatio. In either case, she has probably seen a male body being *penetrated*, something which terrifies the dominant culture. Homosexual panic is very much linked to this most basic dichotomy: female bodies are made to be penetrated, male bodies to penetrate.

According to Nancy Plooster, "visual confirmation of homosexuality is constructed as not just harmful to her marriage but as the worst of all possible knowledges." Blanche "infantilizes her husband, referring to him as 'the boy' as she does consistently throughout the play. It appears that she is unable to conceive of consensual intercourse among homosexual adults." Plooster also writes: "Blanche never refers to her husband by his name, as though she is attempting to erase his identity except as it existed in relation to their marriage." Actually, when Blanche refers to Allan by his name, it is through her quoting other people's reactions to his suicide: "Then I heard voices say—Allan! Allan! The Grey boy!" [*Streetcar*, 183-184]. This is, in fact, the only way the spectator/reader has of knowing his name. As Plooster continues, Blanche "assumes the room she enters is empty. She assumes not simply that her husband is not in the closet, but that no one is" [Plooster, 1-2]. Savran calls such textual practice "mapping the closet." Mapping the closet was a way for Williams to queer his text without losing the moneymen or the mainstream Broadway audience. "[T]he 'censorship' of Broadway productions tended to be internal and closely attuned to a general sense of public morality. The representation of promiscuity was usually limited to melodramatic suffering (Tennessee Williams) or eventual accommodation into domesticity and romance" [Mizejewski, 90].

Plooster, though, seems to imply that Blanche remains homophobic after the death of her husband. I suggest she in fact evolves considerably in this respect. I suggest her initial homophobia is at least mitigated by her feelings of guilt and her subsequent identification with Allan. It is easy, in any case, to see her voicing disgust as the embodiment for Allan of society's rejection, worsened by his obvious affection—if not love—for her. She is evidently silly to imagine that *she* killed her husband. He was neurotic, unhappy, he suffered from internalized homophobia, her outburst was merely the trigger that made him pull the trigger. Her guilt is one of the motors of the play, as we shall see.

In André Previn's 1998 opera *A Streetcar Named Desire*, whose libretto was penned by Philip Littell, that passage becomes,

But, oh, I was unlucky, so unlucky. There was something different about the boy... A nervousness. Although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking! Still, that thing was there. A tenderness. That thing was there. He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't know anything at all. Until we had run away and come back. Then all I knew was that I'd failed. Failed him in some mysterious way. I didn't know anything except... I couldn't help him, and I couldn't help myself... But suddenly coming into a room I thought was empty... A room that wasn't empty... That had two people in it... The boy I had married and an older man, his friend for years... I found out. [Previn, 99]

The order of the sentences has changed, probably to fit the music. What is noteworthy is that the "which wasn't like a man's" and the "in the worst of all possible ways" have been left out. To suit a more enlightened and more politically correct era, perhaps?

In the 1951 Elia Kazan film, American style economically-motivated "self-imposed" censorship (see MPPDA, MPAA, CLD, etc.) drastically dequeered the text, on the other hand. The reminiscent passage is whitewashed. Blanche still says she was unlucky and deluded. She says, "there was something about the boy," as opposed to "something different about the boy." She speaks of "nervousness" and "uncertainty." Then she says, "And I didn't understand. I didn't understand why this boy—who wrote poetry—didn't seem able to do anything else; lost every job. He came to me for help." She heard him cry at night, she narrates, "the way a lost child cries." Naturally, Mitch, baffled, answers, "I don't understand." She replies, "No. No, neither did I." Then she tells Mitch about Allan's suicide and explains, "It was because, on the dance floor, unable to stop myself, I'd said, 'you're weak. I've lost respect for you. I despise you.'"

Many critics have asserted that the viewers could fill in the gaps; I wonder if this is not a serious case of overrating the perspicacity of average moviegoers. *Some* viewers no doubt understood what was hinted at. To me the whole scene seems preposterous: wife finds husband weak, wife tells husband that he's weak, wife says that she has lost respect for him and despises him, husband kills himself! This is actually typical of Tennessee Williams films: if the viewer does not come equipped with a modicum of extratextual data s/he is bound to miss something. Can we assume, as some claim, that every American viewer of the film in 1951 had seen the play, read about it or heard about it—or at least knew enough about Williams to compensate for such drastic dequeering? I do not believe so.

Of course, all the gender-related ingredients are there to point to Allan's difference. Allan is not a "real man" like Stanley. He writes poetry, which is in itself suspicious. There is worse though: he is not capable of doing anything else, he loses every job, that is, he is not a breadwinner, he does not bring meat to the conjugal home—an absolute must in 1947's definition of heterosexual masculinity. I suppose even the thickest viewer can somehow hear "different" between the "there was something" and "about the boy." What is more, he cries at night. Everyone knows that the number one rule in the dictatorship of gender that rules the world is "Boys

don't cry." Much less men. Still, such dequeering is enough to make Kazan's film literally another story, with its own closet discourse. In 1979 I had bought the official Warner Bros video of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, that lasts 122 minutes. Then in 1992 I bought the official Warner Bros video, "original director's version: totally restored footage never seen before," that lasts 125 minutes. Disappointingly, none of those extra 3 minutes concerns the above-mentioned scene, with Allan's and the film's closets remaining as airtight.

So, like *Suddenly Last Summer*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is to a large degree a play about the closet; many critics agree with that proposition. Yet there is no consensus when it comes to the dance floor flashback. Independently from what Williams himself may have said about it, a serious point remains open to two contradictory interpretations. Did Blanche out her husband or not? Let us look at the text again, "It was because—on the dance floor—unable to stop myself—I'd suddenly said—I know! I know! You disgust me..." [*Streetcar*, 184]. Or in the Signet edition, "It was because—on the dance floor—unable to stop myself—I'd suddenly said—I saw! I know! You disgust me..." [*Streetcar Signet*, 96]. Nowhere does Blanche tell Mitch that she screamed or shouted; she uses the verb "to say," and the fact that it is preceded by the adverb "suddenly" in no way guarantees that anybody but Allan heard her. This is a capital ambiguity if ever there was any.

Some spectators/readers may imagine that Blanche spoke loudly enough for her rejection of Allan to constitute an instance of outing, others do not. The former had better stop and ponder this: even supposing Blanche was heard, who among the people within earshot was actually astute enough to translate "I know! I know! You disgust me..." or even "I saw! I know! You disgust me..." as "I saw you having sex with that man, I know you are a homosexual, you disgust me." This is important because the two contradictory interpretations give different meanings to Allan's suicide. Considering that for a while Blanche "pretended nothing had been discovered," if she merely rejected Allan on the dance floor with some measure of discretion, the whole matter could very possibly have remained their own private business and some arrangements could have been found, including a divorce. If, on the other hand, she did out him, then scandal was inevitable. Obviously if Blanche outed Allan, the outing itself may be seen as the principal reason for his suicide. A great deal of endurance was no doubt needed to survive outing in a small Southern town in the 1940s.

To settle this, the exchange between Stella and Stanley in Scene Seven is not particularly useful:

*Stella:* This beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate. Didn't your supply-man give you that information?

*Stanley:* All we discussed was recent history. That must have been a pretty long time ago.

One could argue that smalltown gossips are rarely restrained, and considering all the things that Stanley learnt about Blanche, it is likely that if Allan's sexual orientation had been public knowledge in Laurel he would have heard about it too. On the other hand, one could use Stanley's answer to contend that Allan's outing was ancient history and thus not so readily discussed any longer. Other ambiguities remain, evidently, due to

Williams's constant precautions to establish a subtle balance, to queer his text just enough to make his point without alienating Broadway audiences, such as what exactly Allan and his friend were doing, and what room exactly they were in. Most people tend to imagine a bedroom and indeed a bed, but it could very well have been a lounge, bathroom or kitchen, or even, of course, a closet. Some queer elements in Williams's early plays may have been grasped at the time only by a few cognoscenti, including gays. Take, for instance, Tom's constant moviegoing in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). He tells his mother Amanda that he goes to the movies because he likes adventure:

*Amanda:* But, Tom, you go the movies entirely too much!  
*Tom:* I like a lot of adventure. [*Glass*, 259-260]

As Michael Bronski explains,

The "adventure" Tom found in movies may have been more than vicarious. Having few places to congregate and socialize, gay men have been meeting in movie houses since movie houses have existed. In gay life, the movies provide not only a psychological escape but a comparatively safe and secure place to meet gay friends and sex partners. [Bronski, 94]

This "tradition" is alluded to in Todd Haynes's recent film *Far From Heaven* (2002). To come back to Allan, whatever the precise circumstances of his death, it is tempting to suggest that he died of homophobia. He was not straight enough and/or butch enough to survive.

***Stanley Kowalski: butchness incarnate***

When Stanley first appears he is carrying "a red-stained package from a butcher's," which he "heaves" at Stella. A Neanderthal huntsman, he's bringing back to the cave the bloody flesh of the freshly-killed mammoth. As Blanche puts it,

There's even something—sub-human—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something—ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in—anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is—Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat from the kill in the jungle!" [*Streetcar*, 163]

Further, the name Stanley comes from "stone lea," which means "stony field" and may evoke the Stone Age. As for Kowalski, it means Smith in Polish, which evokes the butchness of the blacksmith and basically signifies "everyman."

Stanley rarely talks, he "shouts," "bellows," "booms," or "hollers." He rarely gives, puts, takes or draws, he "throws," "heaves," "jerks," "kicks," "slams," or "shoves." All those verbs in the stage directions are there to insist on male violence. Yet, the feminist critics who do not see beyond the negative depiction of masculine brutality are missing a point, if not *the* point: Stanley's brutality is *sexy*. Indeed the spectator/reader who for whatever

reason does not find Stanley sexy must make an intellectual effort and imagine that Stella finds him sexy, and that Williams finds him sexy, that audiences of hundreds, male and female, have found him sexy, otherwise s/he will fail to completely grasp the play. Hence the all-importance of the casting of Marlon Brando on stage and on film. As Camille Paglia writes, "Marlon Brando's raw, brute, comic performance as Stanley Kowalski, in the play and the 1951 film, was one of the most spectacular and explosive moments in modern art" [Paglia, *Sex*, 93]. Who could better embody the following stage directions on stage? I have seen many a Stanley in the theater since, expressing himself in various languages, but none can compare—not even Alec Baldwin in Glen Jordan's 1995 TV version,

He is of medium height, about five feet eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. Branching out from this complete and satisfying center are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humor, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer. He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. [Streetcar, 128]

Paradoxically, this is queer. Why? Because Williams is clearly perceiving this male character as sexy, and presenting him as such, if only paratextually, to begin with. Who else did in 1947 America? Which plays thus offered man as sexual spectacle? (See Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze etc.).

Some critics and biographers are keen to establish biographical connections here, insisting that a Stanley Kowalski existed, that he was a colleague of Williams's at the shoe factory or something; or that the character was inspired by Williams's father, the "man who fell in love with long distances" [Menagerie, 235]. I don't believe that is important. What matters is that here is a splendid rooster, a "richly feathered male bird," a peacock, a cock. Obviously Williams is thinking of the word "cock" at this point and elsewhere in the play, fully aware of its polysemy. Stanley is a walking penis. In Kazan's film Brando's entire body sometimes evokes an erection. Again, old-style feminist criticism is not so helpful to deal with this. Things are never black or white in a Williams play. What the spectator/reader needs to remember is that the term "macho" used to be a compliment, and remains one in certain circumstances. Of course, Stanley is a phallocratic and chauvinistic upholder of the patriarchy. Of course, he wants women to serve him and he sees them as potential sexual preys. But he gives pleasure to women. He does not only take it. It might be presented as somehow condescending, but at a time when female orgasm was only whispered about in limited spheres, when 25,000 years of male oppression had not yet been challenged by 1960s feminism, a man who worries about female pleasure and is sufficiently knowledgeable in female physiology to actually be an "efficient" lover is a rarity:

*Stella:* it isn't on his forehead and it isn't genius.

*Blanche*: Oh. Well, what is it, and where? I would like to know.

*Stella*: It's a *drive* that he has. [*Streetcar*, 147]

Stella likes watching her husband bowl. "Well, that's where she's at, watchin' her husband bowl," says Eunice [118]. And that's where she's at indeed, enjoying the spectacle of her virile man playing with phallic bowling pins and testicle-like bowling balls in his brightly colored cock-like bowling shirts and bowling jackets, her masculine husband who belongs to "a different species" [124], who was a Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps. She "wasn't just blinded by all the brass," she tells Blanche [125]. No, not just. But those decorations did impress her. Like Mae West, no doubt she "loves a man in a uniform." At the beginning of Scene Six, Blanche and Mitch "have probably been out to the amusement park on Lake Pontchartrain, for Mitch is bearing, upside down, a plaster statuette of Mae West, the sort of prize won at shooting-galleries and carnival games of chance" [*Streetcar*, 175]. Unlike Mae West, Stella married "a man in a uniform" and stayed with him, rather than go off and explore the bodies of several, the way Blanche did in Laurel.

The reference to Mae West is significant, of course. She had a promiscuous femme fatale image and was a self-professed "fag hag," who knew exactly what she was doing (at least until the 1950s), unlike Blanche. Mitch is carrying the statuette upside down, which points to Blanche's lack of control, topsy-turvy life and approaching downfall. At the end of Scene Ten, Stanley "picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed," her head limply hanging down [*Streetcar*, 215]. That drives her further away from reality, and her mind is upside down. Could this statuette be a reluctant homage from Williams, aware—as he clearly was—of the queer subversion Mae West practiced in her heyday in her camp theatrics and drag politics?

So Stella is in love with Stanley, as she tells Blanche in Scene One [*Streetcar* 124]. She explains,

*Stella*: When he's away for a week I nearly go wild!

*Blanche*: Gracious!

*Stella*: And when he comes back I cry on his lap like a baby... [*She smiles to herself*] [*Streetcar*, 125]

That love is totally sexual, obviously. The orgasms Stanley "gives" her are like a drug; and this explains the ending of the play to a degree that too few critics acknowledge. In Scene Three Stanley actually hits Stella [*Streetcar*, 152]. In Scene Four, she tells a bemused Blanche: "I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of" [*Streetcar*, 158]. And then, famously: "There are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant" [*Streetcar*, 162]. All this, naturally, was very much downplayed in the film. The elaborate expressions of Stella's desire for Stanley are reduced to Blanche saying "What you're talking about is desire, just brutal desire," and Stella answering "I told you, I love him." Practically gone too is the notion that Stanley would be all right for a one-night-stand, but not to live with on a long-term basis. Not appropriate for Hollywood fare.

Things get more complicated when we find that Stanley is equally dependent on Stella's companionship and body. When she disappears

upstairs at Eunice's he howls like a wolf in the moonlight, expressing the bewildering force of his need in a hair-raising scene. Like Stella he loves the sex they have together. He may be a macho pig, but he loves her, in his way. This adds to his sexiness to make it more difficult to simply dismiss him as an insufferable caveman. Indeed, the matter of the spectator/reader's possible sympathy for Stanley is one of the most interesting bones of contention of Williams criticism, considering the way his house is invaded and his couple is threatened by Blanche's presence. Can one sympathize with a rapist? Can one feel sorry for him when he howls in the night, even though he has just beaten Stella? Does the play fully work for someone incapable of at least some measure of sympathy for that wife-batterer, or at least a modicum of understanding of this howling wolf?

Catherine Orenstein writes: "In modern times, the wolf is the symbol of manhood, a womanizer (as the dictionary notes), and the patron saint of bachelordom. [He] exudes testosterone, and the wolf whistle, or sometimes a howl, is an almost universally recognized mating call" [Orenstein, 186-187]. Later, she adds: "Taken to an extreme [...] the manly wolf also carries associations of feral machismo and misogyny" [Orenstein, 189]. Some of this matches Stanley, but even though he gives way to his "feral machismo and misogyny" when he rapes Blanche, even though he is unfaithful to Stella (at least once), he is not actually a bachelor, and one may suppose that he does not actually make infidelity a habit, thus echoing the actual nature of wolves, who tend to be monogamous.

Stanley is also a roaring lion, he is the king of the jungle (Blanche perceives the New Orleans tenement as a jungle). "Remember what Huey Long said—'Every Man is a King!' And I am the king around here, so don't forget it!" [*Streetcar*, 195]. But of all the animal analogies, including Blanche's general denouncement of what she sees as Stanley's animal instincts, the one which is most efficient is the cock. Soon Stanley undertakes to remove his shirt as often as possible in the play, showing off his sweaty deltoids and pectorals, sometimes showcased by a vest or clinging T-shirt. Again, the spectator/reader disgusted by the sweat makes a mistake if s/he doesn't consider that other people—like Stella or Williams—might find it attractive. Stanley asks Blanche: "My clothes're stickin' to me. Do you mind if I make myself comfortable?" [129].<sup>6</sup>

If presenting man as sexual spectacle is queer, it is also feminist. Gladiator movies of the 1950s also showed a lot of shaven muscular man flesh, but they had a vaguely historical alibi. Valentino had been offered to the gaze before, but not quite in the same avowedly sexual way. In 1968, Franco Zeffirelli shocked audiences worldwide with his long shot of Leonard Whiting's buttocks in *Romeo and Juliet*. Nowadays such practices are common, but they divide feminists: there are those who claim that feminism will have won when female nudity is not exploited anymore in movies and commercials (neo-puritan unrealistic wishful thinking), while others believe that feminism will have won when male nudity is equally exploited—which

---

<sup>6</sup> I strongly suspect this is among other things meant to function as a camp joke; as it is rather easy to imagine legions of male and female fans of Brando's (at least mentally) screaming, "yeah, take them off!". No actor had ever appeared wearing so little on the American stage before.

I believe is imminent. Brando's body in Kazan's film is still a striking sight today, in spite of the more recent competition, notably in the post-forced-shower scene, complete with torn wet tee-shirt and Kim Hunter's hands running down his rippling back.

So Stanley's aggressive masculinity is opposed to Allan's gentleness, but it is somewhat queer too. Indeed it would not be too far-fetched to see in him a representation of butch "rough trade," an echo of the sex-machine straight gigolos Williams occasionally encountered and tended to call simply "trade." In the 1940s he cruised places like Times Square alone or with Donald Windham, picking up sailors and GIs [Windham, 114; Chauncey, 24]. In the 1930s and early 1940s, "as the gender and class character of Forty-Second Street changed, it became a major locus of a new kind of 'rough' hustler and of interactions between straight-identified servicemen and homosexuals" [Chauncey, 16]. And isn't Stanley's virility too copious to be entirely unsuspecting? As Al LaValley writes,

The real homoerotic content of both the play and the film came through in Williams's quirky love-hate relationship with Stanley Kowalski, as well as in Brando, the young stud star. Partly it was a conflict of adoration for Brando as the natural man against the cruel and callous character he had to play, also partly a mixture of fear for rough trade and the attraction to it [sic], the belief that some sort of Greek beauty is embodied in it. [LaValley, 68]

#### *Harold Mitchell: False Hope*

Stanley's sweat is opposed to Mitch's. In Scene Six, Mitch confesses: "I am ashamed of the way I perspire. My shirt is sticking to me" [*Streetcar*, 178]. This reinforces two essential differences between the two men: Mitch is not sexy, and Mitch is half a gentleman (only half, of course, as the following events will show). Much is made in the play of their not being "the refined type," but there are degrees. Perfect casting by Elia Kazan for the play in New York in 1947 and in the film in 1951: Marlon Brando as Stanley is butch, rough, tough, and gorgeous; Karl Malden as Mitch is manly too, but not quite so spectacularly, and he is acceptable-looking at best (some would say ugly). Mitch is more sensitive than Stanley: he has a dead girlfriend in his past (who allows Williams to quote Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Scene Three), he lives with an ailing mother—both of which largely account for his better manners. Are they not also the result of his being aware of the fact that he is not irresistibly attractive?<sup>7</sup> I do not quite agree with Judith J. Thompson who writes that "Blanche attempts to elevate Mitch to the romanticized status of the idealized Allan Grey," [Thompson, 35] even if Mitch is "superior" to the others [*Streetcar*, 146] and more sensitive, and even if she says "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!" at the end of Scene Six [*Streetcar*, 184]. I myself tend to believe that she is only too aware of the abyss that separates the teddy-bearish Mitch from the glamorous Allan, but knows she cannot afford to be too picky. The name Mitchell can mean two things. When it is an equivalent of Michael it means "who is like God;" its

---

<sup>7</sup> It is of little consequence that a kind and gentle (heterosexual) Harold Mitchell existed in Williams's life—a very good-looking man, judging from his picture [Leverich, 118-119].

other sense is “big.” Blanche fantasizes him as the *deus-ex-machina* who will save her from her predicament, but he will turn out to be simply a big oaf.

So both Stanley and Mitch are opposed to Allan, with Mitch occupying a sort of middle position, establishing a perfect literary balance. Allan has been crushed by the “compulsory heterosexuality” [Rich, *passim*] enforced by the dominant culture, Blanche has been crushed too—although not completely yet when the play starts—and Mitch appears in Scene Six as if he could be Blanche’s salvation. Picture a spectator/reader completely ignorant of Williams’s work: s/he could very well remain hopeful, expecting a happy ending. But when you are familiar with Williams’s world, you know that he is going to forsake her.

Mitch is tolerant at first of Blanche’s idiosyncrasies, he agrees to see her only in poor lighting, he “respects” her, contenting himself with small displays of affection and placidly hoping for more. But when Stanley tells him about her past, he rejects her. In Scene Nine he “tears the paper lantern off the light bulb,” then he “turns the light on and stares at her” [*Streetcar*, 203-204]. Having thus exposed Blanche, he accuses her: “Oh, I knew you weren’t sixteen any more. But I was a fool enough to believe you was straight” [*Streetcar*, 204]. At the end of the scene he “places his hands on her waist and tries to turn her about” [*Streetcar*, 206]:

*Blanche*: What do you want?

*Mitch [fumbling to embrace her]*: What I been missing all summer.

*Blanche*: Then marry me, Mitch!

*Mitch*: I don’t think I want to marry you any more.

*Blanche*: No?

*Mitch [dropping his hands from her waist]*: You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother. [*Streetcar* 207]

The last shred of hope Blanche might have clung to thus disappears, as Mitch is “Stanleyized,” loses his grammar, and turns out to be a macho pig too, as well as a potential rapist (like every heterosexual man, some radical feminists would say). The spectator/reader may easily imagine at this point that Blanche’s screaming is what saves her from rape. Mitch was prepared to “miss” sex as long as he presumed her “clean,” but now that he has found out she has a rich sexual past, he cannot see why she should not comply. Just like Stanley, Mitch judges people according to Victorian double standards: men may have multiple sexual experiences, but women should be virgins until marriage and chaste after widowhood. If they do not obey those rules, they are whores. Men may want to have sex with whores, but they don’t want to marry them; respect and desire do not necessarily go together, far from it.

In Scene Eleven, Mitch worsens his case. The naïve spectator/reader may still hope, against all odds, that the appalling preparations for the removal of Blanche to a psychiatric institution will shock him into some rescuing reaction. Instead he inarticulately says to Stanley, seemingly apropos the poker game: “You... you... you... Brag... brag... bull... bull” [*Streetcar*, 216]. And after the arrival of the doctor and the matron he contents himself with this,

*Mitch [wildly]*: You! You done this, all o’ your God damn interfering with things you—

*Stanley:* Quit the blubber! [*He pushes him aside*]  
*Mitch:* I'll kill you! [*He lunges and strikes at Stanley*]  
*Stanley:* Hold this bone-headed cry-baby!  
*Steve* [*grasping Mitch*]: Stop it, Mitch.  
*Pablo:* Yeah, yeah, take it easy!  
 [*Mitch collapses at the table, sobbing...*]. [*Streetcar, 224*]

Mitch is a coward. So are Pablo and Steve, but at least they were not closely involved with Blanche the way he was. All three are probably aware of the fact that Stanley has raped Blanche. Mitch's use of the verb "to interfere" reminds the spectator/reader of Stanley's ominous line in Scene Ten: "Come to think of it—maybe you wouldn't be bad to—interfere with..." [*Streetcar, 215*], just as Eunice is, and of course Stella, who pretends that she does not believe it. All five are technically accomplices, all five are upholders of the patriarchy that has imposed violence and silence on women for millennia. Eunice and Stella have some sort of excuse, being silenced women themselves, Pablo and Steve have not, and Mitch even less.

The discourse on masculinity conveyed by the lines above is capital. Mitch was initially seen as much more of a gentleman than Stanley, though not quite a gentleman of the sort Blanche used to mix with back home before her gradual downfall. A gentleman, *pace* feminists like Marilyn Frye [5-7], oppresses women less. A gentleman shows chivalry and defends women against aggressions of various kinds, fighting if he has to. Mitch makes a desultory gesture of attack, but very quickly lets Pablo and Steve restrain him, and simply sobs. Stanley sees him as a pathetic blubbering fool and calls him a cry-baby. Mitch represents no threat to him, he is not manly enough. The more masculine of the two, that is, the bully and the rapist, wins. Stanley not only dominates the females around him, evidently, he also has a strong ascendancy on his male friends who look up to him the way lesser wolves respect the leader of the pack. Stanley is the bowling team leader.

### *Blanche DuBois: the madwoman in the tenement*

#### *1. Blanche as sexual outcast*

Arguably, Blanche Dubois is the most stupendous female character ever to grace the American stage, but what I mean to discuss here is the political implications of the character. The personal is political, as the feminist slogan goes. Blanche is all about gender and the constraining gender roles of the forties. To sum up, she was once a Southern Belle, with most of the implications of the cliché but not all: she had a brain, used it, and was even an intellectual of sorts. She eloped at an early age, rather than wait for the "proper" age to marry "properly." She discovered her husband was a homosexual, he killed himself, and she began to lead a promiscuous life.

Thus, she dramatically stopped conforming to society's expectations. Instead of behaving like a "proper" widow she had sex with numerous men. In 1947 men could have as much sex as they liked and risked at worst being called Don Juans. Things were different for women. There has been some progress since, but not that much, as double standards still thrive in the

United States. In 1947, if a woman became blatantly promiscuous, she was even seen as mad. As Stanley puts it: "The town was too small for this to go on for ever! And as time went by she became a town character. Regarded as not just different but downright loco—nuts" [*Streetcar*, 187].

For various reasons I have developed elsewhere [Guilbert, *passim*] the patriarchy conveniently associates sexual promiscuity in a woman to commonness and vulgarity. After he has "found out" Laurel's "truth" about Blanche, Stanley says: "That girl calls *me* common!" [*Streetcar*, 185]. And then he adds: "Well, so much for her being such a refined and particular type of girl" [*Streetcar*, 188]. This is of course does not make sense outside the context of the dictatorship of rigid gender roles. In terms of class and style, Blanche is totally uncommon, whereas Stanley is unquestionably common. Indeed, the traditional interpretation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a play about Old World vs. New World, Old South vs. New South, Old America refinement and culture vs. New America vulgarity and barbarism, etc., rests on such certainties.

Elia Kazan, for one, needed those certainties, as evidenced by his notes on the play. Susan Sontag reminds us that,

In order to direct the play, Kazan had to discover that Stanley Kowalski represented the sensual and vengeful barbarism that was engulfing our culture, while Blanche DuBois was Western civilization, poetry, delicate apparel, dim lighting, refined feelings and all, though a little worse for wear, to be sure. Tennessee Williams's forceful psychological melodrama now became intelligible: it was about something, about the decline of Western civilization. Apparently, were it to go on being a play about a handsome brute named Stanley Kowalski and a faded mangy belle named Blanche DuBois, it would not be manageable. [Sontag, 100]

I do not think Kazan would have found *A Streetcar Named Desire* manageable either if he had thought of it as a very queer and/or feminist play, the way I do. This does not mean he was virulently homophobic, just initially not particularly acquainted with what he calls "the gay world" in his autobiography,

I had never come close to a homosexual before, even though there were two fine such fellows in the Group Theatre, good friends of mine. But I was so square that I would still ask myself who does what to whom when faggots bed together. A year later I made up my mind to find out, so I double-dated with Tennessee in the company of a young lady, one couple to each of his twin beds, and my curiosity was satisfied. [Kazan, 358]

Hilarious, isn't it?

So Blanche is not common, she is even uncommon in the sense that not many women dared have a varied sex life in those days in the South. As Deborah L. Tolman and Tracy E. Higgins sum it up,

Women's sexuality is frequently suspect in our culture, particularly when it is expressed outside the bonds of monogamous heterosexual marriage [...]. When women act as sexual agents, expressing their own sexual desire rather than serving as the objects of men's desire, they

are often portrayed as threatening, deviant, and bad. [Maglin & Perry, 205]

It is much worse if the woman who acts as a sexual agent does not limit herself to adult males but debauches an underage boy, like Blanche.<sup>8</sup>

Blanche is also uncommon in that she can never be made to fit a fixed category, in spite of the efforts of the people around her, the spectator/reader and the critics. Just when you think she has definitively been labeled a jaded slut, she indulges in childish fantasies about Shep Huntleigh. Is she a damsel in distress waiting for her white knight in shining armor to come rescue her—or is she an unrealistic but materialistic Southern Belle who thinks she can still command enough seduction to ensnare a millionaire sugar daddy? As Judith J. Thompson writes,

Her romantic attempt to achieve an idyllic union with Allan Grey is reenacted in a diminished version with Harold Mitchell, or “Mitch;” in a fairy-tale version with another “young man;” in a demonic version with the animalistic Stanley Kowalski; in an imaginatively transcendent version with the fantasized “Shep Huntleigh,” and, finally, in a tragically ironic version with the Doctor who escorts her to the mental institution. [33]

Blanche simply cannot, in 1947, survive being a sexual outcast. In this respect, Williams is making a feminist statement; he is also making a very feminist statement: he sums up in Scene Five the plight of women as victims of the Victorian double standards I mentioned above (often coupled with ageism), applied by Mitch,

He hasn't gotten a thing but a good-night kiss, that's all I've given him, Stella. I want his respect. And men don't want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly. Especially when the girl is over—thirty. They think a girl over thirty ought to—the vulgar term is—“put out”... And I—I'm not ‘putting out.’ [*Streetcar*, 171]

## 2. *The Albertine strategy: Blanche as gay man*

As a sexual outcast, the character of Blanche may easily stand for sexual outcasts in general, and notably gay men. Much has been made of Williams's Flaubertian more or less tongue-in-cheek “I am Blanche DuBois.” Maybe too much. However, it is indeed possible to suppose that, the way any writer might, Williams has put a lot of himself in Blanche, including his experience as a gay man. This sort of literary process has become commonly known—for obvious reasons—as the “Albertine strategy,” a phrase that has been heavily used recently, notably in the wake of queer Proust criticism (Proust dequeered his attraction for his chauffeur Agostinelli as he transposed it into his writing, changing a he into a she—some think of it as the “Albertine complex”). A good example of this is the now classic interpretation of the childless couple in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) as really a gay couple. It is a serious mistake, however, to restrict oneself to such queer interpretations. What the reader should do is

---

<sup>8</sup> Blanche's behavior, of course, is linked to the Dubois “family curse” and her guilt complex.

to accept that they provide added interest, a supplementary level of reading (often very entertaining), without ever invalidating the more straightforward straight reading.

So if we stop for a moment to envisage Blanche as a gay man, many elements of her character and biography acquire extra meaning, obviously. Her sexual promiscuity in Laurel becomes the clichéd sexual promiscuity of homosexuals. Her nervousness becomes the nervousness of the closet case, her rejection by Stanley a homophobic reaction, and her debauching a schoolboy then her flirting with the “young, young, young, young—man” who collects money for the *Evening Star* in Scene Five the lusting of the predatory gay man for the “chicken” who makes his mouth water [*Streetcar* 174]. Even her theatrics become the camp resistance strategies of the lone gay man in a straight world.

Lyle Leverich writes,

[Tennessee Williams’s] first moves into the gay world were tentative, arising more out of loneliness and in response to an adventurous curiosity than from sexual desire. [...] He felt that most people were ambiguous sexually and that he was in no sense stereotypical. [...] Like many young men “coming out,” he was regularly going back into the closet, confused by a deep but inactive attraction to women and a drive toward the easier sexual outlet he had found in the company of gay men. [350]

So Williams, like Allan Grey, went in and out of the closet, possibly paying the price for his excursions outside, like Allan Grey paying the price for being “found out” by his wife, and conceivably like Blanche, who when she was promiscuous in Laurel lacked discretion and was labeled “slut” the way a gay man may be labeled “queer.” Her going too far led her to New Orleans, right back into the closet: she is secretive about her recent and not-so-recent past in Laurel, she acts the part of the virtuous woman, etc. Incidentally, there was a time when a “gray boy” used to mean a non-flamboyant homosexual (in other words, possibly closeted); hence the joke at the end of Scene Six when Blanche narrates her husband’s suicide, as quoted above: “Then I heard voices say—Allan! Allan! The Grey boy!” [*Streetcar*, 183-184].

One interesting avenue to explore is the way Blanche could be said to act like a gay man, without actually being or standing for one. This could easily be the result of an identification process resulting from the trauma of her husband’s suicide. Shocked by what she sees as her doing (“It was because—”) [*Streetcar*, 184], she strives to bring him back to life by embodying him, by being him, that is, a gay man. Behaving as she imagines Allan would behave, she has sex with a string of men, including servicemen. Williams himself has evoked this interpretation [Londré, 53].

Yet I insist that she behaves as she *fantasizes* Allan would have behaved. Her fantasy is not necessarily based on any verisimilar extrapolation. If Allan was indeed an *eromenos* to his *erastes* friend, then for all we know he did not feel desire for young boys the way Blanche may picture, and he might even have been faithful to his older friend and not prone to promiscuity at all.

So she is looking for Allan in herself, but she is also looking for Allan in others, which is in no way contradictory, as homosexuality has by definition strong narcissistic connotations. When she debauched her pupil back home, she was no doubt pursuing Allan's youth through him. The beautiful young man collecting for the *Evening Star* reminds her of Allan. In the play, Blanche tells him after she has pressed her lips to his: "Run along now! It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good and keep my hands off children. Adios!" [*Streetcar*, 174]. In Kazan's film this is reduced to: "Run away now, quickly. Adios. Adios." This omission contributes greatly to the dequeering of Blanche, for the original lines are extremely camp.

Williams is always careful to remain just this side of pedophilia, but a bit of pederasty does not worry him. Such notions, of course, are terribly relative. What is condemned as pedophilia in the Western world is perfectly normal practice in some other parts of the world, where girls are married off at eleven or twelve years old. There is also the matter of the evolution of mores in the West to consider. I believe if a playwright wanted to produce the same effect on an audience today that the story of Blanche's debauching a seventeen-year-old schoolboy produced on a 1947 audience, s/he would need to change the age of the boy to thirteen, or maybe fourteen. The words Blanche says to the young collector are an instance of typical self-deprecatory Camp. In some productions their tremendous humor is lost on the audience. Not only does the film get rid of "It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good and keep my hands off children," it also replaces the "run along now" with "run away now, quickly." So whatever vestiges of Williams's queering might have been preserved in the camp, ultra tongue-in-cheek "run along now" without the rest is shattered by the purely melodramatic and reeking-of-supermarket-psychoanalysis "run away now, quickly." The dangers amusingly evoked by the exchange in the play, real and imagined, for Blanche and for the young collector—clearly reminiscent of the schoolboy scandal back home—would have become something almost boring in the film if it hadn't been for that inspired piece of casting of Wright King who does convey innocence as well as look gorgeous, helping the viewer to imagine Allan's no doubt similarly gorgeous face.

So Blanche is like Allan, in that she is rejected by Stanley in the same way she rejected Allan, but she is also like Tennessee Williams. She too is a sort of *poète maudit*. She too has a lot of casual sex. But maybe she is not such a success as a gay man. As she puns herself: "I don't think I've ever tried so hard to be gay and made such a dismal mess of it" [*Streetcar*, 175].

One of the most persistent homophobic stereotypes that the dominant culture spreads about gay men is that they are such sex maniacs that they are ready to have sex with anything that moves and has testicles. This blatantly contradicts another stereotype, that of the aestheticism of gays. That vision of gays as indiscriminate potential ravishers of any male (including underage ones) within their field of

vision accounts for the leniency of American courts trying queer-bashing cases and excusing “homosexual panic.”<sup>9</sup>

Williams is aware of the popularity of such ludicrous stereotypes and uses them in his plays. Hence the Tarantula Arms predator joke [*Streetcar*, 204] and the “I’ve got to be good and keep my hands off children” joke. [*Streetcar*, 174] So gays, Blanche and Tennessee Williams may practice aesthetic discrimination (indeed everything in Williams’s work shows that he was immensely susceptible to beauty, and Blanche constantly shows that she is an aesthete in *A Streetcar Named Desire*), but that does not stop them from indulging in sexual promiscuity.

Donald Spoto writes: “From his late twenties to the end of his life, whether he had a stable relationship or not, he sought sexual partners incessantly” [Spoto, 98]. It should be noted that Williams’s three long-term partners died tragically, like Allan.

### 3. *The Albertine strategy: Blanche as drag queen*

In a footnote, Leverich quotes an interview Williams gave to the *Gay Sunshine* in 1976,

I don’t understand transvestites, I think the great preponderance of them damages the gay liberation movement by travesty, by making a travesty of homosexuality, one that doesn’t fit homosexuality at all and gives it a very bad public image. We are not trying to imitate women. We are trying simply to be comfortably assimilated by our society. [288]

If he were alive today, Williams might conceivably be more careful with his vocabulary, and make politically correct distinctions between cross-dressers, transvestites, drag queens, etc. This interview established once and for all that he did not particularly like drag queens, and thought—as many politically-minded gays today—that they gave homosexuality a bad name. Nevertheless, his female characters have often been seen as really men in drag, especially Blanche DuBois and Alexandra Del Lago.

Jack Babuscio recollects

[This has been used by various critics] to denigrate both Williams [...] and the gay sensibility [...]. This interpretation is nowhere more relentlessly pursued than in Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Haskell perceives Williams’s women as products of the writer’s own “baroquely transvestised homosexual fantasies.” By no stretch of the imagination, she argues, can they conceivably be seen as “real” women. [52]<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Added to the ludicrous notion of homosexuality as a catching disease, that vision of gays also accounts for such campaigns as Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children, launched in 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Well, that is what you may think if you are an essentialist feminist believing in some fundamental innate feminine nature. However, if you are a constructionist feminist like myself, you do not worry about such considerations. If there is no such thing as natural femininity, and if gender is the product of performance and performativity, then the difference between a drag queen and a genetic woman is nothing but a slight divergence in chromosomes.

So let us examine what substantiation there is for readings of Blanche as drag queen. First and foremost, there is the tragedy of the ageing queen, which Williams has explored a great deal in his work [cf. *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*...]. Ageing sovereign, ageing Southern Belle, ageing movie star, ageing drag queen, it's all the same. Such creatures have banked on glamour, dealt in hyper-femininity for years, and find their powers of seduction faded. Whatever their financial means, they "sell" illusion, as Blanche acknowledges. Let us not forget that the word "glamour" is etymologically linked to "grimoire"—meaning magic, basically.

Blanche confesses: I'll tell you what I want. Magic! [Mitch laughs] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!—*Don't turn the light on!* [*Streetcar*, 204]. Drag queens do little else. Drag queens, like Blanche, tend to don piles of rhinestone jewelry and cheap tacky furs, because they can't afford diamonds and mink stoles, unless they reach stardom like RuPaul or enjoy private sources of income. As they get older, they tend to avoid harsh lights. They "can't stand a naked light bulb" [*Streetcar*, 150]. They become more appearance-conscious than ever. What can be more tragic than the fading of beauty for a glamorous drag queen? There are numerous references to this tragedy in the play [*Streetcar*, 120, 122, 123, 136].

Even Blanche's Scene Four lines about Stanley's animal's habits and Stone Age characteristics become pure Camp if read differently from Vivien Leigh's delivery—the sort of hilarious putdown cabaret drag queens might proffer between musical numbers. Try to "hear" this as a piece of typical "bitchy" camp humor,

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something—sub-human—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something—ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in—anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is—Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! [*Streetcar*, 163]

This is very close to typical (drag) queens' jokes about lower-class and middle-class heterosexual "breeders"—"seed-bearers," in Williams's words.

Further, there are the numerous allusions to Blanche as queen in the dialogue that would be fastidious to enumerate. And of course, if the striking Scene Five lines about running for protection function very well as a somewhat feminist denunciation of the gender order, they may also easily evoke (drag) queens running from bed to bed, validating their existence in the transitory embrace of a stronger man, and feeling terrified when their attractiveness starts fading and they cannot turn in "numbers" any longer, as Marc Almond would say,

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft—soft people have to court the favor of hard ones, Stella. Have got to be seductive—put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and glow—make a little—temporary magic just in order to pay for—one night's shelter! That's why I've been—not so awf'ly good lately. 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... People don't see you—*men* don't—don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection. And so the soft people have got to—shimmer and glow—put a—paper lantern over the light... But I'm scared now—awf'ly scared. I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick. It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft *and attractive*. And I—I'm fading now! [*Streetcar*, 169]

Soft people, that is, queens or gays (*cf.* Allan's "softness") turn tricks, they do tricks, they trick. In gay lingo this sometimes means prostituting oneself, sometimes it simply means picking up strangers for casual sex. Gays are notoriously ageist and the cult of youth is practiced in gay circles on a large scale.<sup>11</sup>

Blanche tells Mitch: "But, honey, you know as well as I do that a single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she'll be lost!" [*Streetcar*, 176]. This sentence speaks volumes about the gender order, obviously, but it also becomes hilarious if read as the camp banter of a queen "with a lot of mileage." And of course, the polysemy culminates into Mitch exclaiming: "But I was a fool enough to believe you was *straight*" [*Streetcar*, 204, italics mine]. Blanche had been *passing* but now she has been found out. Some people are taken in by acts à la Blanche, others are not, or are fooled only for a time. As Stanley puts it: "Some men are took in by this Hollywood glamour stuff and some men are not" [*Streetcar*, 137].

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is very much a play about power. Stanley feels threatened by Blanche. She is intellectually superior, she endangers Stella's devotion to him, she questions his authority, and therefore his virility. So he rapes her—what better way to reassert his virility?—and then locks her away. Vulgarity and cheap machismo win. Whether you see Blanche as "madwoman in the tenement," female sexual outcast, gay man or drag queen, she loses.

### Conclusion

Blanche's splendid final line, "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," has become, "at least among gay males a clichéd expression of homosexual alienation," writes David Van Leer [18]. Whatever *A Streetcar Named Desire* may be about, it is also about homosexual alienation. But it is not a "gay play," and Williams was no gay militant.

Donald Spoto quotes the 1976 *Gay Sunshine* interview Williams gave George Whitmoren,

After admitting that the politics of gay liberation did not much interest him, he continued: People so wish to latch onto something didactic; I

---

<sup>11</sup> Heterosexual men are ageist too, but because women have been brainwashed for thousands of years into thinking women are not ageist, men can always change wives when they reach their mid-life crisis and find young women who are quite willing to tolerate wrinkles, sagging flesh and love handles.

do not deal with the didactic, ever [...] You still want to know why I don't write a gay play? I don't find it necessary. I could express what I wanted to express through other means [...]. I wish to have a broad audience [...]. I'm not about to limit myself to writing about gay people.

Spoto then explains,

[There] was a negative quality, and an underlying resentment, to Williams's attitude to homosexuality in his work. [...] Tennessee Williams in fact hated homosexuality, hated being homosexual, and could never accept those who would come to peaceful terms with being one of a sexual minority. [Spoto, 319-320]

Still, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is, to a large degree, a queer text. Williams may well have been a self-hating queer, but he survived and wrote about it. Is Blanche a survivor? Is she totally destroyed at the end? Is her being committed to a psychiatric asylum "simply" the end result of a truly tragic process? Can the asylum be seen as a form of death or not? Some critics are still arguing the point. Bronski writes,

But the truth is that the majority of his women characters are survivors. Williams himself saw Blanche as a survivor. He claimed, 'I am Blanche DuBois.' It was Williams's life as a gay man that enabled him to create a character who survives by rejecting the sordidness of this world and creating a better one of her own. [Bronski, 115]<sup>12</sup>

Allan, for his part, remains very dead, like Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. At least in that play two of the three dead queers (Jack Straw and Peter Ochello) lived a long and happy life before the play. From the point of view of sexual politics, it is possible to dismiss plays like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* as homophobic, in that they associate queerness and death and speak to the audience from the closet, as it were. Williams himself remained partially closeted until the 1970s, when post-Stonewall "gay critics took him to task for not coming out, which he did in a series of public utterances [and several pieces of writing], all of which document, often pathetically, [his] sense of himself as a gay man" [Clum, "Tennessee Williams," 751]. Indeed Williams has always received an ambivalent reception from gay critics, "who have sometimes found his characterization of gay men depressing and negative" [Hogan & Hudson 578]. Gay critics may also deplore Williams's clichés. John Loughery writes: "When Blanche DuBois tells Mitch about the suicide of her homosexual husband, a boy too sensitive for this world, Tennessee Williams was reinforcing a cliché—loving and well-meant, but nonetheless a cliché" [184].

Allan killed himself. Blanche rode the *Streetcar* named Desire, transferred to the *Streetcar* called Cemeteries and got off at Elysian Fields. Like Allan, she did not survive. Williams did, and what a good thing it is for literature. But as the last line of the play has it: "The game is seven-card stud" [*Streetcar*, 226]. In 1947, studs rule, "real men" control the game, and queers or dissolute women lose. Things are better today, notably thanks to

---

<sup>12</sup> I myself see her "removal" at the end of the play as a form of death. I do not believe she will marry the good doctor or open a boutique in the Vieux Carré after a little bit of shock therapy.

decades of more or less queer novels, films, and plays, including the variously queered and dequeered (by Williams, by Kazan, by critics) *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

## REFERENCES

- BABUSCIO, Jack. "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Gays & Film*, Richard DYER (ed.), London: BFI Publishing, 1980, 40-57.
- BRONSKI, Michael. *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984.
- BRONTË, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin Classics, 1996.
- CHAUNCEY, George. "The Policed: Gay Men's Strategies of Everyday Resistance in Times Square," in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, Brett BEEMYN (ed.), New York & London: Routledge, 1997.
- CLUM, John M. "Tennessee Williams," in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, Claude J. SUMMERS (ed.), London: Bloomsbury, 1997, 750-753.
- . *He's All Man: Learning Masculinity, Gayness, and Love from American Movies*. New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
- . *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*. New York: Martin's Griffin, 2000.
- DEVLIN, Albert J. (ed.). *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi, 1986.
- EASTHOPE, Antony. *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*. London: Paladin, 1986.
- FISHER, James. "The Angels of Fructification: Tennessee Williams, Tony Kushner, and Images of Homosexuality on the American Stage," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 49:1 (Winter 95/96), 13-33.
- FRAYSSE, Suzanne. "A Streetcar Named Desire: Une lecture nommée désir," *EREA*, 1:1 (Winter 2003): 52-58, <[www.e-rea.org](http://www.e-rea.org)>, forthcoming.
- FRYE, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983.
- GAGE, Simon, Lisa RICHARDS & Howard WILMOT. *Queer: The Ultimate User's Guide*. London: Unanimous, 2002.
- GARBER, Marjorie. *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*. London: Penguin, 1997.
- GILBERT, Sandra M. & Susan GUBAR. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988.
- GOODMAN, Lizbeth. *Literature and Gender*. New York & London: Routledge, 1996.
- GUILBERT, Georges-Claude. *Madonna as Postmodern Myth: How One Star's Self-Construction Rewrites Sex, Gender, Hollywood and the American Dream*. Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland, 2002.
- HOGAN, Steve, & Lee HUDSON. *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.
- JOHANSSON, Warren, & William A. PERCY. *Outing: Shattering the Conspiracy of Silence*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1994.
- KAZAN, Elia. *A Life*. London: Pan Books, 1989.

- KOESTENBAUM, Wayne. *Cleavage: Essays on Sex, Stars, and Aesthetics*. New York: Ballantine, 2000.
- LAVALLEY, Al. "The Great Escape," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, Corey K. CREEKMUR & Alexander DOTY (eds.), London: Cassell, 1995, 60-70.
- LEVERICH, Lyle. *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. London: Sceptre, 1996.
- LONDRÉ, Felicia Hardison. "A Streetcar Running Fifty Years," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, Matthew C. ROUDANÉ (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 45-57.
- LOUGHERY, John. *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities. A Twentieth-Century History*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.
- MAGLIN, Nan Bauer, & Donna PERRY ( eds.). *Bad Girls, Good Girls: Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- MILLER, D. A. "Visual Pleasure in 1959," in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, Ellis HANSON (ed.), Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1999, 97-125.
- MILLET, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Abacus, 1972.
- MIZEJEWSKI, Linda. *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- ORENSTEIN, Catherine. *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- PAGLIA, Camille. *Sex, Art, and American Culture*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- . *Sexual Personae*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- PLOOSTER, Nancy. "Silent Partners: Lost Lovers in American Drama," in *Queer Frontiers: Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Graduate Student Conference, University of Southern California, March 1995*, <<http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/queerfrontiers/queer/papers/plooster.html>>.
- PREVIN, André & Philip LITTELL. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. 3 CDs and booklet. Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon 459 366-2, 1998.
- RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.
- RICH, Adrienne C. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Chicago: Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4 (1980).
- SAVRAN, David. *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- . "By Coming Suddenly into a Room that I Thought Was Empty: Mapping the Closet with Tennessee Williams," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 24.2 (1991).
- SEDGWICK, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.
- . *Tendencies*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- SINFIELD, Alan. *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth-Century*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1999.
- SONTAG, Susan. *A Susan Sontag Reader*. New York: Vintage, 1983.
- SPOTO, Donald. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997.

- SUPPE, Frederick. *Gay and Lesbian Philosophy*. Lectures F. University of Maryland, 1996, <<http://carnap.umd.edu/queer/F1996Lectures.html>>.
- THOMPSON, Judith J. *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.
- TINKCOM, Matthew. "Warhol's Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, Fabio CLETO (ed.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, 344-354.
- VAN LEER, David. *The Queening of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society*. New York & London: Routledge, 1995.
- WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Other Plays)*. London: Penguin Classics, 1976. [Cat]
- . *The Glass Menagerie (A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays)*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.
- . *Small Craft Warnings (Period of Adjustment and Other Plays)*. London: Penguin Plays, 1982. [Small]
- . *A Streetcar Named Desire (A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays)*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000. [Streetcar]
- . *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New York: Signet, 1972. [Streetcar Signet]
- . *Suddenly Last Summer (Baby Doll and Other Plays)*. London: Penguin Classics, 1968. [Suddenly]
- . *Sweet Bird of Youth (A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays)*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.
- WINDHAM, Donald. *Lost Friendships: A Memoir of Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, and Others*. New York: Paragon House, 1989.
- WOODS, Gregory. *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1998.