The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Number 8

The Midwestern Plays of Tennessee Williams

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Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911, but for two decades, from the age of seven until he graduated from the University of Iowa at the age of twenty-seven, Williams lived in the Midwest. He stayed largely in St. Louis but spent three years at the University of Missouri in Columbia and made trips to visit relatives in Memphis and Mississippi. In 1938, Williams moved to New Orleans briefly and then to New York, where he fully launched his playwriting career. He traveled restlessly throughout the remainder of his adult life. Williams is generally considered a southern playwright, but as Robert Bray points out, Williams's South is "as much a matter of cultivated preference as geographical or genealogical inevitability" (963–64), fashioned from memory, fantasy, and deep longing that resonated powerfully in Williams's imagination. The Midwest is also a strong presence, particularly in Williams's early work, and, as Allean Hale has observed, the region played a major role in forming his aesthetic.

¶2 The number of plays set identifiably in the Midwest ranks second only to those set in the South.[1] Most of the midwestern plays were written during the decades when Williams actually lived in Missouri, while the most famous southern plays were written during the playwright's mature years in New Orleans, New York, Key West, and elsewhere. The young Tom, despite winning a number of poetry and drama prizes and seeing his plays successfully performed in St. Louis, was faced with insistent and undeniable realities in the Midwest, particularly related to work and social isolation, which left him feeling deeply ambivalent about the region of his youth. Only in later years could he return to a St. Louis he confessed he had "never left" (qtd. in Hale, "St. Louis Blues" 623).

¶3 Some features in the plays Williams wrote while living in Missouri and Iowa received further development in the later Broadway successes, while other elements set the midwestern plays distinctly apart. From the earliest one-acts, Williams's signature themes of desperate longing for love and rescue, coupled with a sense of despair and marginalization, find full voice. But not surprisingly for a young writer, autobiograph-ical elements figure more prominently. *The Long Goodbye* and *The Glass Menagerie* appear the most overtly based on memory and family dynamics, but plays like *Spring Storm* and even *Not About Nightingales* include characters based on Williams and his family and friends. While later works like *Camino Real* emphasize nonrealistic elements, the early plays show Williams exploring a wide range of theatrical options, including Brechtian, expressionistic, cinematic, and other techniques. Moreover, the midwestern plays deal more directly with political issues such as unfair income distribution, union and workers' rights, health care, and the judicial system—themes that appear only obliquely in later works.

¶4 Williams typically identified the plays set in the St. Louis area as occurring in "a large mid-western American city" (*The Long Goodbye* 203); they exhibit features commonly found in works by other dramatists from the region. The traditional midwestern home, unlike the conventional southern home (cf. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*), is neither hierarchical nor troubled by ancestral ghosts, but nestled firmly in its environment. In both *The Strangest Kind of Romance*[2] and *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), the fiery red of industrial America seems part of

the action, flaring its power and presence just offstage at key intervals. Midwestern characters are typically reliable, competent, and straightforward; stage action focuses on emblematic daily rituals of cooking, eating, cleaning, working, and going to sleep. Since Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, and particularly with the rise of feminist playwrights such as Susan Glaspell and Rachel Crothers, midwestern plays have evinced a civil rights or social justice emphasis derived from the region's egalitarian social history. Williams's early plays reflect many of the signature themes of this tradition.

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¶5 *Moony's Kid Don't Cry* began as one of Tennessee Williams's earliest one-acts, *Hot Milk at Three in the Morning*, written while he was a student at the University of Missouri at Columbia. Set in the "industrial section of a large American city," the play focuses on a dysfunctional nuclear family, foreshadowing *The Glass Menagerie*. In *Moony's Kid Don't Cry*, however, the father is the central character, and the couple has only one child, a baby. It is the Christmas season, and the house is decorated with a small artificial tree and a "brand-new hobby-horse . . . like the very spirit of unlimited freedom and fearless assault" (5). Moony is "a strongly-built young workingman," who, like the men in *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, works at the oppressive industrial plant. Family tensions hover, as Moony bemoans the claustrophobic trappings that "give me the jitters . . . you know it's too damn close in here" (6). Wife Jane asks herself why she didn't "marry an ape an' go live at the zoo," establishing the zoo motif that Williams utilized so frequently based on his experiences at the St. Louis Zoo (6). Jane nags Moony about being made fun of as "justa star-gazer" at the plant (12). She also taunts him with references to Mr. O'Connor, a former boss who offered her a chinchilla coat. (Here, as in *The Glass Menagerie*, the O'Connor name signifies business success.) Moony, for his part, accuses Jane of having entrapped him in earlier days at the Paradise Dance Hall. This is the same Paradise Dance Hall that appears later in *The Glass Menagerie*, except the location has been moved from "down on the water-front" to across the alley from the Wingfield apartment. Like the Russian and the Little Man in *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, Moony professes exclusive fondness for a "skinny yellow cat." He threatens to leave, but Jane prostrates herself, crawling toward him. She thrusts their baby into his arms, insisting he take it with him. Left alone with the crying baby, Moony begins calming it and finally agrees to stay.

¶6 In this short, densely packed dramatic work, Williams made particular use of tensions he had experienced in his own homes in the Central West End of his youth, with special emphasis on the father. This paternal perspective contrasts sharply with the absent fathers of many of his later plays, particularly those set in St. Louis. Moony is more working-class than Williams's actual father, and the factory Moony works in is decidedly more pernicious than the International Shoe Company offices. But *Moony's Kid Don't Cry* enacts much of the family anger, frustration, and desire to escape that the young Tom witnessed at home. The oppressiveness at both home and work propels Moony outward. Only a "skinny yellow cat" and the gentle insistence of a crying baby give him reason to stay.

¶7 *A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot*, a short vignette in a comic vein, establishes Williams's empathy for romantic longing. Two women in garish outfits arrive at a St. Louis tavern in a taxi with almost no money and a desire to find some men for an evening's companionship. They are attending a Sons of Mars convention in the city and speak a colorful colloquial dialect. Williams captures the flair of their language beautifully, and we see his gift for creating striking female characters who "trash-talk" each other yet clearly have a lasting bond. After

rather too critically assessing each other's personal faults, the two women prepare to leave the empty establishment, when who should arrive but two madcap Sons of Mars. This short piece functions more as a colorful sketch than a play, but it reveals Williams's gift for flamboyant language and female characterization, along with desperate longing and a penchant for the grotesque that attracted so much notice in later years.

¶8 Some of the same elements emerge in *Hello from Bertha*, another short play set in an East St. Louis brothel. Here, the tone is more serious and more desperate. In a decadent room with peeling paint and garish furnishings from a bygone era, Bertha, an aging prostitute, lies gravely ill. She hasn't turned a trick for two weeks, but to the chagrin of Goldie, the madam, she can't or won't leave. Bertha refuses to go to the hospital or to a Catholic retreat for women and even accuses Goldie of stealing the last few dollars she had stashed under the tray on her dresser. Bertha's case is desperate, but all she can think to do is to dictate a note to an old flame named Charlie, saying simply "Hello from Bertha" (193). The man in question owns "the biggest hardware store in the City of Memphis" (192) but is long since married and settled. In this poignant piece, Williams depicts an isolated, impoverished character reaching out for a rescue that will not, cannot come.

¶9 *The Dark Room*, like *Hello from Bertha*, centers on a woman whose life has become dysfunctional, only this time the woman is young, barely fifteen. A social worker named Miss Morgan, a "neat, fussy spinster engaged in social service," visits the teenager's mother, Mrs. Pocciotti, "an avalanche of female flesh, swarthy Italian," to discuss the precarious family situation (15). Mrs. Pocciotti's husband hasn't worked in eight or nine years and now lives at the City Sanitarium: "His head was no good" (16). The teenaged daughter, Tina, has not emerged from her room for six months, since her boyfriend Max broke with her to marry a German girl at New Year's. Tina lies in her room entirely in the dark and will only eat food brought by Max, who continues to see her although he is married. At the end, we learn that Tina remains entirely naked in her room and by now is noticeably pregnant. Miss Morgan insists that Tina must be taken away, accusing Mrs. Pocciotti of contributing to her daughter's delinquency.

¶10 Much younger than the prostitute Bertha, Tina has apparently declined into a similarly dysfunctional state. The situation recalls the fate of Williams's sister Rose, who had been moved to a Catholic home several years earlier. The family in *The Dark Room* lives in denial, while Miss Morgan's well-meaning ministrations seem useless and beside the point. Craziness has come to inhabit the family home; the mother can only continue her obsessive sweeping, calling out, "I dunno!" In both *Hello from Bertha* and *The Dark Room*, Williams features what became a signature motif in many later plays: the threat, or necessity, of being taken away to a mental hospital or charitable institution.

¶11 Rescue in these plays seems to wear a midwestern face of respectability, hard work, and middle-class stability. But for the most part, such rescue only tantalizes, pulling away—if it ever was truly available—at moments of greatest need. In *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, one of the richest and most compelling of Williams's shorter midwestern plays, a character called simply "The Little Man" takes a room in "a small industrial city of the middle-western states" (135). The landlady tells him that the previous occupant of the room, a Russian, developed tuberculosis from working at "the plant," pulsating menacingly just outside the window and "broke down" (137). The Russian maintained an extraordinary affection for a cat named Nitchevo that he let sleep in his bed. In one of Williams's most political passages, the landlady's father-in-law rages against the industrial system that has emasculated him and ruined his life. The Little Man, in turn, loses his job at the plant because his hands are too shaky for assembly-line work.

¶12 In the end, the unemployed Little Man is left searching in the alley for the cat that the landlady, in her unfulfilled sexual jealousy, has thrown out. The only remnants of previous tenants are the cartoonish names and portraits hastily scratched on the walls. A new tenant, a crude boxer, moves in with his gloves, exhibiting no tolerance for the eccentric weaknesses of his precursors. The ending is somewhat obscure, but *The Strangest Kind* offers a powerful portrait of working-class frustration and alienation. Sexual desire is thwarted less by personal inadequacy than by an economic system that numbs, emasculates, and impoverishes. This kind of political argument largely disappears in the later plays, but those set in the Midwest wrestle with the gritty realities of "red brick" America, where factory life pulsates through the veins of workers and their families.

¶13 A somewhat different feeling emerges in *The Long Goodbye*, first performed in February 1940 at the New School in New York City. This is a more overtly autobiographical work that prefigures important elements of *The Glass Menagerie*. Set "in a tenement apartment situated in the washed-out middle of a large mid-western American City" (161), the action focuses on the valedictory thoughts of the central character, Joe, clearly modeled on the author. Striking fantasy elements appear: Joe twice imagines his mother, who died of cancer, still remonstrating from the bedroom and also envisions his sister, Myra, who is based on the author's sister Rose, going out for a date though she now lives far away. These illusions feed in and out of the current actions even as the movers casually load up the artifacts of Joe's past. Joe plans to place his belongings in storage, but it's not clear where he's going or why—only that writing is his constant obsession and that he needs to go somewhere, anywhere, however unknown. This launching out into the unfathomed recalls the concluding scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, but there is more focus on the acts of reading and writing in *The Long Goodbye*. And in this one-act, Williams provides a touching portrait of Joe's friendship with Silva, an Italian-American exhibiting qualities of the author's friends.

¶14 *Fugitive Kind*, not to be confused with the later film entitled *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) based on *Orpheus Descending*, was Williams's second full-length play. (The first, *Candles to the Sun*, takes place in Alabama.) Produced in 1937 by the Mummers in St. Louis and set in the Central West End, where Williams had lived for some years in different locations, *Fugitive Kind* features a production-unfriendly large cast but an interesting episodic structure and fascinating mix of personalities. Along with *Not About Nightingales* of the following year, it is one of the most political of Williams's plays. As his friend Clark Mills aptly observed, it recalls Maxim Gorki's *The Lower Depths* (1902) (qtd. in Hale, *Fugitive* xvi). It also recalls both Bertolt Brecht's heavy-handed Chicago play, *In the Jungle of the Cities* (1921–24), and Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, an expressionist play of 1916. In fact, the text specifically mentions expressionism, offering dramatic insight into Williams's reading and thinking during this early period.

¶15 Like other of Williams's midwestern plays, *Fugitive Kind* takes place "in a large Middle Western city," this time "in the lobby of a flophouse" (3). Union Station is mentioned as being nearby, and the cathedral bells chime expressionistically, while the flophouse itself seems displaced from its respectable Central West End location to someplace nearer the seedier districts adjacent to the Mississippi River. In this as in later plays, Williams freely combines realistic and symbolic elements in order to maximize theatricality, in some cases at the expense of literal truth. Also grafted onto the play is a gangster-like milieu derived from Williams's viewing of contemporary films (Hale, *Fugitive* xiii ff.).

¶16 As in *The Strangest Kind of Romance* and *The Glass Menagerie*, the industrial city pulsates just offstage: "we are always conscious of the city as a great implacable force" (3). Outside, "a stair is visible with a red bulb

on the first landing" (3). Again recalling *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, action centers on an assortment of transients, many of whom deliver what was to become for Williams a signature "lyric aria" in the unfolding of events. Following Brecht, each scene is given a descriptive title, as in "A Big Group Picture, All Smiling," "This Town's a Jinx," and "They Won't Ever Catch Our Kind." The structure is free flowing and episodic, evoking the musical interweaving of Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*. The central romance between Terry and Glory, driven by a passion too intense to survive, is too improbable to serve as the unifying spine of the play, but *Fugitive Kind* nonetheless provides an engaging portrait of a gangsterized St. Louis of Williams's imagining, as well as a prefiguring of dramatic concerns to come.

¶17 One of the character types who will disappear from the later plays is Leo, an intellectual Communist kicked out of college for his radical stance. In Leo, Williams combined his own removal from the University of Missouri by his father for failing ROTC with aspects of politically engaged friends he met in connection with the Mummers. Although not the romantic lead, Leo has an important role in the play's denouement. Glory scorns Herman's middle-class sobriety in favor of outlaw-on-the-run Terry, who glitters with the ill-gotten lucre of his gangster exploits and offers the promise of glamour. As in so many of Williams's plays, however, the hoped-for escape and rescue do not materialize; the rebellion, both political and personal, fails; and Glory is left to be consoled by the intellectualized words of Leo—fitting conclusion for a playwright who found solace and transfiguration in the incantations of language.

¶18 The Communist-inspired tirades against capitalist oppression and industrial mechanization that appear in both *The Strangest Kind of Love* and *Fugitive Kind* will disappear almost entirely in later plays, becoming imbedded instead in the psychosexual conflicts of personal longing. Compared to Williams's later Broadway successes, the early midwestern plays are astonishing in their political dimensions. But the pattern of romance at the margins—desire set in a context of confinement, often intensified by exile—continues into the later work. Rescue, or rebellion, may tantalize or seduce but without lasting benefit; indeed, in this play, the results are tragic, both for the tantalizer and the willingly tantalized. The ironically named Glory, in the course of being tempted, becomes permanently exiled from a society and a familial context that cannot sustain her. In the throbbing, emotionally colorful world of *Fugitive Kind*, everyday necessities of working, making money, and maintaining a household remain at war with unquenchable desire and the drive to transcend mundane boundaries.

¶19 *Not About Nightingales* (1938–39) is one of the most expressionistic of Williams's plays and the first signed "Tennessee" (Gianakaris 74). Dedicated to Clarence Darrow and set in a "large American prison" (1), the play is based on an atrocity at the "model prison at Holmesburg, Pennsylvania," in which four rebellious inmates were tortured to death (x). A cry against injustice and misguided authority, *Nightingales* lacks the emphatic political ideology of *The Long Goodbye* or *Fugitive Kind*. The play has a distinctly cinematic feel: Williams makes perhaps his most extensive and haunting use of choruses as a theatrical mode of expression, and in Brechtian fashion, an announcer states the symbolic title of each scene.

¶20 Dramatic action centers on Eva, an attractive young woman desperate for a job since "the business recession set in" (14). She develops a relationship with Canary Jim, an inmate who mediates uneasily between his cellmates on the one hand and the special favors accorded him by the Warden on the other. Jim seems modeled on the author in important respects, especially his preference for "five syllable words" (82). At the beginning of act 2, Jim attacks Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" for dealing with "sissy stuff" (98) instead of more important

issues. Eva, now working as the Warden's secretary, just happens to have a volume of Keats on hand and reads Jim a complete sonnet. Their relationship unfolds as the spine of the play, but at times it seems contrived and Eva's character—not typical for Williams, whose females ordinarily shine— insufficiently realized.

¶21 But the main impulse of the drama involves a piercing cry against injustice, which takes a variety of forms. Mrs. B arrives from Wisconsin to visit her son Jack, who used to send regular letters but has been silent for two weeks. She breaks down, accusing the Warden of torturing and killing her boy. Later on, tensions escalate as the prisoners, led by Butch, reject their unpalatable food and organize a hunger strike. The Warden threatens to counterattack by placing the ringleaders in "The Klondike," a steam room where radiators can be raised to higher than 140 degrees. Eventually, he follows through on his threat, inmates die in excruciating pain, Jim jumps out the Warden's window—to freedom or death, we are not sure—and the sobbing Eva is left holding Jim's shoes.

¶22 The prison is located on an island, symbolizing geographical isolation and confinement. Alcatraz or Rikers may come to mind, but reference is made also to Chillicothe (Missouri), so the setting clearly serves an iconic function. Everyone becomes a prisoner at some point. Eva is trapped by the lecherous intentions of the Warden, who in turn becomes cornered and then killed in his office by rampaging inmates. Outside the prison, the all-day excursion steamer *Lorelei* offers ironic counterpoint, suggesting romantic escape and society's obliviousness to the desperate plight of prisoners. Williams's metaphor of prison atrocity attacks not only penal injustice but also mechanistic social norms that ignore the aching needs of individuals.

¶23 As the title implies, singing is crucial in the play. Jim rejects the nightingale as a "sissy" but is himself labeled a "canary" until—in the face of the Warden's perfidy—he joins the inmates in Klondike hell, assisting Butch's escape. Chanting in the play ranges from Sailor Jack's singing of French songs to the loud protest refrains of "They Killed Ollie." Screams of desperation in the steam room descend to whimpers and excruciating silence as prisoners die and others struggle desperately for breath at the room's only air hole. At the end, "Music from the Lorelei swells. Flame-shadows brighten on the walls. Shouting and footsteps are heard. Troopers rush in" (163). And then the loudspeaker intones, "Aw there, it is! Y'can see it now, folks. That's the Island!" (163).

¶24 A haunting work, *Nightingales* recalls O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and Georg Kaiser's plays—but bears the unmistakable imprint of Tennessee Williams. The announced title of Episode Ten ("Hell—an Expressionistic Interlude") serves as an early title for the entire play and marks a nightmarish chapter in the playwright's development. As with *Fugitive Kind*, the play requires a large cast and staging demands are considerable. But *Not About Nightingales* nonetheless offers a searing indictment of penitentiary injustice and reveals a side of Williams not seen in other works. With its use of experimental theatrical techniques, it takes an important place among what Allean Hale terms Williams's midwestern "proletarian plays" (qtd. in Roudané 20).

¶25 *Stairs to the Roof* (1941) is just as expressionistic as *Nightingales*, but here the expressionism serves an entirely different purpose. The play is more fantastic and carnivalesque on the one hand and more ideological on the other, opposing the mechanization of corporate life in a manner that recalls Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923). Indeed, the workers are called Messrs. P, D, Q, and T, and a character named Mr. E laughs ironically at the end of each scene. In the final tableau, Mr. E steps forward as a white-bearded God figure and urges the play's protagonist, Ben Murphy, to leave for another planet and propagate through "monosexual reproduction" (95). This extraordinarily imaginative play, with its cleverly interwoven plot, presents a full-scale

attack on mechanization that leads to a fantastic spectacle of millenarianism. It is hardly surprising that *Stairs to the Roof* remained unproduced for more than half a century—nor that its premiere performance, at the University of Illinois-Urbana, came in the millennial year of 2000.

¶26 At the same time, *Stairs* also represents Williams's processing of autobiographical history after he left the Midwest. While most of the earlier full-length plays were conceived in the Midwest, *Stairs to the Roof* involves a reconfiguration of the past written from a distance. Focusing on "Continental Shirtmakers," the play is clearly based on the author's experience working at his father's International Shoe Company beginning in the summer of 1931 and continuing off and on until he collapsed in January 1935 (*Plays* 1011). The protagonist, Ben, is a total misfit at the company, given to escaping up the stairs to the roof to think and get a good view of "the bluffs across the river" (7). Ben harshly attacks industrial capitalism, and even his hair seems "rebellious" (12). In this play, the choruses are all machine-like, composed of anonymous workers "reciting numbers to each other, antiphonally, in high and sing-song voices" (3). In the author's "Random Observations," the play is dedicated to "all of the other little wage-earners of the world, not only with affection, but with profound respect and earnest prayer" (xxi).

¶27 Unlike in the other midwestern plays, here most of the central characters are married—albeit unhappily. Ben is unable to provide adequately for his wife, Alma, who is pregnant with his child and abandons him once she hears he has lost his job. In one flashback episode, Ben reminisces about an earlier flame, Helen, with whom he could not quite construct a relationship. Ben's best friend, Jim—who recalls Williams's own college friends as well as Silva in *The Long Goodbye* and Jim in *The Glass Menagerie*—has his own marital problems with Edna. Jim finds solace with Bertha, while Ben escapes for the remainder of the play with a character called, simply, Girl.

¶28 One source of oppression is Mr. Gum, Ben's boss and overseer of the mechanization that dehumanizes the workers. Ben feels driven to resist "normal adjustments" in favor of a "new faith"; he seeks to follow "the political party of my heart" (42) and teams up with Girl in a carnivalesque adventure recalling Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Their all-night escapades take them to the zoo, where Ben opens the cages and frees the foxes, as well as to a carnival where the Mummers perform *Beauty and the Beast*, with the Beast taking the form of a Russian *tovarishch* (comrade). Hovering over it all is a gigantic, lighted, golden wheel, first mentioned in Ben's imagination in the first scene but now realized: "*The earth is a wheel—in a great big gambling casino!*" (10). In these scenes, the chorus includes animal roars and chatter, as well as carnival clowns and other performers.

¶29 At the end, Girl returns to the roof and reunites with Ben, feeding Golden Bantam corn to pigeons. She is dressed in white "like a swan" (90), and Ben has long since replaced her boss, Warren, in her affections. A chorus of conventioneers streams toward the roof. Mr. E offers to help Ben colonize a new star, World Number Two, but Ben chooses Girl instead. The lovers disappear suddenly in a flash of light as Mr. Gum and the conventioneers file in, calling, "We want Murphy, We want Murphy!" (98).

¶30 *Stairs to the Roof* is a fascinating, phantasmagoric play, an upbeat counterpoint to the nightmarish vision of *Not About Nightingales*. Like Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, *Stairs to the Roof* centers on a stifled clerk who rebels through love and discovers new worlds—in this case, a heavenly escape rather than a crucifixion. Mr. E laughs cynically like Fatts in Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) or the disillusioned soldiers in Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* (1936), a play Williams saw performed in St. Louis. Compared to *A Streetcar Named*

Desire or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Stairs to the Roof* is much more bitingly satiric and fantastical. Unfortunately, the large cast and complex stage requirements make it challenging to produce. Yet *Stairs to the Roof* remains a rich, evocative work that Williams, in the play's afterword, rightly refused to disavow.

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¶31 *The Glass Menagerie* is by far Williams's most famous midwestern play, and perhaps the most frequently performed of all his works. The premiere took place in Chicago in December 1944 before moving to Broadway, where it would run for 563 performances. This dramatic masterpiece has been studied from a variety of perspectives, largely in terms of autobiographical and stylistic elements, but midwestern influences have largely been overlooked.

¶32 After reading Williams's other full-length midwestern plays, one is struck by *The Glass Menagerie*'s narrow constraints. *Spring Storm*, *Not About Nightingales*, and *Stairs to the Roof* are all open-form plays with multiple settings and dozens of characters. *Fugitive Kind* takes place in a single location but seems likely to burst out of the flophouse that barely contains its many varied inhabitants. *The Glass Menagerie*, by contrast, features only four characters and confines its action to the Wingfield apartment "at an alley in St. Louis" (394). The setting does radiate outward; the "turgid smoky red glow" (413) of the fire escape represents "the slow and implacable fires of human desperation" (399), recalling the pulsating factory in *The Long Goodbye*. Across the alley, the Paradise Dance Hall snakes its music into the conversation between Jim and Laura somewhat like the romantic *Lorelei* of *Not About Nightingales*.

¶33 In terms of characterization, *The Glass Menagerie* achieves a kind of perfection through distillation. Amanda resembles Esmeralda in *Spring Storm*, but she is more desperate, and Williams has captured the rich ambiguities of her personality more forcefully. Many scholars have commented on Amanda's close resemblance to the playwright's mother. Edwina was born and raised in Ohio, though she and her family traveled frequently to Tennessee. When she moved to Mississippi in 1901, she evidently adopted the southern manners of her new home with the enthusiasm of a newcomer. Once installed in St. Louis in 1918, Edwina used her southern manners as leverage to break into local society (Leverich 47–48). Amanda's southernness, like that of her counterpart, has a quality of performance bordering on caricature, resulting from a discernible lack of social ease. When she enters in her outlandish courting outfit in act 2, her desperation to reclaim fading southern glory jostles with the sordid details of a narrative that contradicts her perceived status. Yet Amanda nonetheless maintains "a kind of heroism" (394).

¶34 Laura, meanwhile, recalls both Eva in *Not About Nightingales* and Girl in *Stairs to the Roof*, but she has become even more innocent and decidedly more frail. She is more desperately inverted, reflecting Williams's intense guilt and pain about the lobotomy and subsequent decline of his sister, Rose. The narrator, Tom, resembles a long line of author figures dating back to *The Long Goodbye*, *Spring Storm*, and *Stairs to the Roof*. This incarnation, however, seems more capable of detachment, though Tom's intense drive to escape radiates through the play and ultimately determines the outcome. *The Glass Menagerie* provides a nostalgic gloss on intense experience slightly removed, perfectly blending the author's youthful trials with the more mature artistry of the professional dramatist.

¶35 The gentleman caller, Jim, is the most iconically midwestern figure in the play. While Amanda remains a displaced southern belle and Laura stays trapped in her pathological shyness, Jim represents the pragmatic

dynamism of the heartland. He chastises Tom for lapses at work and enthuses about visiting the Wrigley Building and the Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago. Jim offers a self-confident counterpoint to Laura: "I'm not made of glass" (456). He also brings out the regional in Amanda, who noticeably "southernizes" in his presence. This figure of the "normal" midwesterner, who works, has goals, and seems comfortable in the daily business of life, has appeared before as Silva in *The Long Goodbye* and Herman in *Fugitive Kind*, but Jim seems even more iconic and self-assured. Williams takes pains to label him "a nice, ordinary, young man" (394)—an important consideration, given that critics have denounced Jim's "cravenly opportunistic dream of material success" (Cardullo 25).

¶36 The political dimension of earlier midwestern plays has been reduced considerably in *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom does mention "disturbances of labor, sometimes violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis . . ." (400), but gone is the sometimes strident moralizing of *Fugitive Kind* or *Stairs to the Roof*. And whereas the Midwest functions as the accepted locus of action in earlier works, in *The Glass Menagerie* the region serves to mark the failures of Amanda, Laura, and Tom. The economic and social struggles enacted in this play provide a dramatic springboard for the aspiring playwright's departure and ambivalent, partly nostalgic farewell.

¶37 At the same time, covert references to Tom's "doing things that you're ashamed of" (413), disappearing to movies and elsewhere, hint at Williams's having finally discovered his true sexuality in 1938–39. The playwright wisely hides this development in a play set in a time when marriage was the assumed convention, even by him—but later discoveries like Rose's decline are creatively imbedded in the dramatic action. A number of concrete references to sites in St. Louis and nearby Illinois ground the play in time and place, detailing locations for escape and refuge that the author and his sister and mother relied on for sustenance and survival during this period.

¶38 From the perspective of the earlier midwestern plays, the most startling innovation at the center of the play is the unicorn. This dramatic symbol is remarkable for its delicacy, especially compared to the penitentiary violence of *Not About Nightingales* or the insistent carnival elements in *Stairs to the Roof*. By comparison, *The Glass Menagerie* is a much quieter play. It is also a more wounded—rather than tortured—play. Williams has refined and distilled elements that he used earlier with vehemence, once again relying on the "prototypical 'fugitive'—a sensitive, modern individual who is artistic in impulse and temperament," creating a masterwork that balances intensity and fragility (Davis 195).

¶39 In terms of larger, regional dynamics, narrator Tom functions as a mediator between the decadent, hothouse southernness of Amanda and the self-confident dynamism of Jim. The fledgling writer can no longer follow either model as his own and finds the strain of trying to balance the two unnerving. The Midwest has served as a productive irritant for his genius, offering early literary acclaim and stirring his artistic ambition. But now he must escape to other regions to discover his sexual identity and pursue his calling. Williams first used the name Tennessee in 1938 after he left the Midwest. *The Glass Menagerie* offers a nostalgic portrait of the transformation in identity and purpose that marked his departure from St. Louis for wider horizons.

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¶40 Following *The Glass Menagerie*, midwestern references and features decline in Williams's plays and remain largely subliminal until *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur* (1978). In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), one can

see connections between Mitch and earlier embodiments of a now-familiar type: the midwesterner whose stability cannot, in the end, satisfy the protagonist's desperate, self-destructive hunger.[3] In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), even fewer vestiges of Williams's midwestern period remain: Gooper and his wife represent a particularly oppressive form of stability, while the set design recalls *Fugitive Kind* and other early plays, where realism was always augmented by a jagged symbolism. By this time, the playwright appears to have digested the stylistic experiments of the 1930s and to have abandoned proletarian ideology in favor of personal dramas anchored in sexual hunger and the desire for escape and fulfillment.

¶41 Thirty-five years after *The Glass Menagerie*, having gained international recognition as a southern playwright and seemingly turned his back on the Midwest, Williams returned to St. Louis with *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur*. Of course, Williams had never really left St. Louis, maintaining a close connection to the city even as he lived in New Orleans, New York, Key West, and other locations. He had continued to visit regularly, especially to check in on his ailing mother, who died in 1980 at the age of 95 (*Plays* 1095). He also spent several months at Barnes Hospital in 1969 for treatment related to drug addiction. Although, looking back, he would describe his eighteen months at the International Shoe Company as "my season in hell" (*Stairs* xxi), he also retained happier memories of the Midwest. In his introduction to *27 Wagons Full of Cotton & Other Plays* (1953), Williams celebrates his experience with the Mummers as "that kind of excessive romanticism which is youth and which is the best and purest part of life" (ix). Clearly, Williams's emotions toward St. Louis were ambivalent—and highly productive. His return to St. Louis late in life is surprising only to those who assumed he had ever really left it behind.

¶42 At first glance, *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur* bears some resemblance to *The Glass Menagerie* and is in fact based on a teleplay written "almost twenty years before," *All Gaul Is Divided* (*Plays* 988). Set in the "middle or late thirties" (119) in a lower-middle-class apartment in St. Louis, the play once again involves a cast of four waiting for a gentleman caller. But there the resemblance ends. *Lovely Sunday* features an all-female cast with no obvious author figure; the major theme of the artist escaping the Midwest is missing; and the tone resembles the dark comedy of Pinter, albeit with a leavening of class satire. Verna Foster calls the play "a wry farce," noting that productions "that allow the grotesque its full force" seem more successful than those that eschew the grotesquery (155). No escape is sought beyond the amusement park in Crève Coeur or the upscale apartment on Westmoreland Place. Overall, *Lovely Sunday* offers a fascinating gloss on "the roads not taken" by Tennessee Williams. While not entirely satisfying as theatre, the play reshuffles the cards in Williams's play deck, with surprising results.

¶43 Dorothea, a young civics teacher, lives with Bodey, an older German-American woman who has worked at the International Shoe Company—where the playwright worked—for some twenty years. In Dorothea, we get a hint of what might have happened to Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, or even to Williams himself, had either stayed in St. Louis. Bodey suffers hearing loss as a result of a calcified ear. A visitor, Helena, warns against an operation called "fenestration," employed on an elderly acquaintance to correct the same problem: "it involves a good deal of danger and whether or not it was successful could not be determined since she never recovered consciousness" (140). This surgery bears a haunting resemblance to the "bilateral prefrontal lobotomy" performed on Rose in 1943 (*Plays I* 1013). Dorothea, meanwhile, resembles the Rose figure of Myra in *The Long Goodbye*—attractive, confident in her sexuality, too strongheaded for her own good, but also subject to fits of frailty. We learn later that Dorothea has been diagnosed with "neuro-circulatory asthenia" (155).

¶44 Dorothea waits throughout the play for a phone call from Ralph Ellis, new principal at Blewett High School where she teaches. They recently enjoyed a sexual liaison in the reclinable seats of his car; Dorothea assumes the integrity of his marital intentions, though no one else in the play does. As we discover later, Bodey has hidden the society page of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* announcing Ralph's marriage to a woman of considerably more means. Bodey hopes to spare Dorothea from this harsh reality by redirecting her attention to a picnic carefully orchestrated for Sunday afternoon: she invites Dorothea to accompany her and her twin brother Buddy on the streetcar to suburban Crève Coeur, where they can enjoy the amusement rides and Dorothea can appreciate the company of "a really solid character" (126). The war between pretense as compassion, and truth telling as weapon, carries over not only from *A Streetcar Named Desire* but also from a number of other Williams plays.

¶45 Yet the real drama, surprisingly, deals not with a gentleman caller but with class antagonism. Bodey's apartment is resolutely lower middle class, with garish colors and disturbing taste. Bodey herself dresses stylelessly, talks awkwardly with a German-American accent, and savors her working-class food: "born and raised in a kitchen" (191). Dorothea's taste is a cut above Bodey's; Helena describes her as having "a lingering symptom of your Southern belle complex" (186). The central conflict lies in Helena's attempts to remove Dorothea from this "nightmare of colors" (184) to a shared apartment in fashionable Westmoreland Place, where there is a baby grand piano and Dorothea can experience "how the privileged classes live" (191). Williams also explores the intersection of class and ethnic identity. German, both as language and as culture, dominates in *Lovely Sunday* in surprising ways, symbolizing both lack of romance (133) and earthbound common sense. Bodey's German sensibility contrasts and clashes with the French airs of Helena. (Dorothea speaks a smattering of both French and German, indicating her dual affinities.)

¶46 At first Dorothea is enchanted with Helena and with the idea of moving. Despite financial concerns, she senses that the new living arrangement might impress Ralph. Bodey, however, notes that Helena has "the eyes of a predatory bird" (126); she later compares her to a "hawk or buzzard" (172) and "a well-dressed snake" (173). But Helena remains undeterred in her efforts to rescue Dorothea from this sordid environment, restore her fragile health, and offer her a chance to meet the right sort of people.

¶47 The most haunting presence in the play is Sophie Gluck, a German-speaking girl from upstairs whose mother died the Sunday before. She wanders around aimlessly, refusing to return to her apartment and mumbling "Das Schlafzimmer ist gespukt!" ("The bedroom is haunted!") (176). "The Gluck" seems to represent Williams's sister Rose after her debilitating lobotomy; Helena says bluntly, "Appears to be catatonic" (176). Sophie lingers as a specter and remains a lost soul in need of care.

¶48 In the end, once she learns that Ralph has chosen to marry another, Dorothea embraces Sophie and welcomes her to stay in their apartment. Dorothea leaves to join Bodey and Buddy on their picnic outing in Crève Coeur, abandoning Helena to her upper-class life in the Central West End. It is possible to see Dorothea as a new twist on the "Williams" character: an ambitious, educated individual who chooses—unlike Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*—to stay in St. Louis and assume the permanent care of a wounded soul. From another perspective, Dorothea, Bodey, and Sophie Gluck could each be seen to represent different stages in the mental decline of Williams's beloved sister, Rose. In either case, *Lovely Sunday* serves as a rewriting of an old script with a more upbeat ending in which the pivotal character rejects the allure of impossible romance in favor of

down-to-earth (German) sensibility and commitment to responsibilities. This play both begins and ends in attachment to the Midwest.

¶49 *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur*, written just a few years before Williams's death, brings the playwright's midwestern chapter to a surprising close. In a way that has not been fully recognized, the Midwest ran like a river through Williams's playwriting career, if sometimes deeply underground. The early one-acts set in the St. Louis area embody many of the prevailing themes that Williams dealt with throughout his life. A sense of woundedness and marginalization by a harsh, often mechanized society never really left the playwright. Yet the full-length midwestern plays also underscore less appreciated sides of Williams: his constant theatrical experimentation with subtitles, choruses, dialects, cinematic scene changes, and other techniques; and his profound attraction to expressionism, an aesthetic that never entirely left him despite being subsumed into the predominant realism of his signature plays. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, for instance, the choruses are heard offstage, yet the jagged, open-air set reminds us that realistic space cannot contain all the playwright's intense emotions.

¶50 The midwestern plays, on the whole, are much more political than the more canonical works, with rants against the dehumanizing effects of contemporary industrial capitalism replacing "the elegiac magnolia steeped" atmosphere of other Williams works (qtd. in Gianakaris 70). Some critics have dismissed the political elements as symptomatic of Williams's infatuation with Clifford Odets, Irwin Shaw, and German drama of the 1930s. Allean Hale offers a more insightful analysis, pointing to the young playwright's association with Clark Mills and Jack Conroy in connection with *The Anvil*, a proletarian magazine that became "one of the most successful literary journals of the thirties" ("Tom" 14–15). The premiere of *Candles to the Sun* (1937) ended with the singing of "Solidarity Forever," and Williams "sent out both *Fugitive Kind* and *Not About Nightingales* to Federal Theatre headquarters hoping they might be produced nationally" ("Tom" 18, 20–21).

¶51 A careful reading of these early midwestern plays indicates Williams's profound identification with the outcast and the downtrodden, a predilection he never lost. Moreover, *Fugitive Kind*, *Not About Nightingales*, and *Stairs to the Roof* (among others) all bear the unmistakable stamp of Williams's individual genius, despite the influence of other writers and various ideologies. A more plausible explanation for the political emphasis of this period is that Williams responded to the social dynamics of his time. As World War II unfolded and the national climate shifted to more personal and domestic concerns, Williams changed focus—as did Odets and many others—and enjoyed spectacular results. This postwar period also corresponds to Williams's full discovery of his sexuality and its power to enchant and destroy.

¶52 For much of his life, Williams saw the Midwest as a kind of "Other" against which he needed to rebel and from which he sought to escape. Part of his distaste arose from the industrialized economy of St. Louis, with its dusky, assembly-line factories. On the other hand, his iconically midwestern characters are typically described as "nice, everyday" people, like Jim O'Connor in *The Glass Menagerie* (394). These characters work, have steady jobs and incomes, and pursue recognizable goals. They seem to know where they are going and feel confident knowing they belong. But this social world was not a fraternity to which Williams could ever belong. And the Midwest could never rescue any of his wounded, marginalized characters, no matter how tantalizing the promise of stability. Only in *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur*, written late in life, could the pivotal character, Dorothea, choose the option that seems stable, a bit tepid and unglamorous, but reliable. The lust for romance finally settles down.

¶53 The Midwest provided a crucial irritant to Williams's creative genius. It was a region—an insistent reality both familial and social—he continued to struggle with. This contrasts with the South of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Summer and Smoke*, and other plays, a region of both "polished manners and violence" (Hugh Holman, qtd. in Prenshaw 3). Yet as Davis points out, Williams's South is "actually a pseudo-history of the region . . . . A particular myth . . . [that] functions as a mediating image by means of which his dramatic characters understand and measure their lives and current situations" (201).

¶54 The Tennessee Williams we know and admire cannot be imagined without his long relationship with the Midwest, a relationship that continued long after he left and anointed himself with a new name in 1938. While more work needs to be done analyzing the complicated threads of this heritage, the plays discussed here provide ample testimony to the depth and breadth of Williams's midwestern genealogy, which served to ground his conceptions and prefigure later work. As the dénouement of *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur* suggests, the Midwest may, after all, be a suitable place for the playwright to remain, buried in St. Louis beside his beloved sister and Ohio-born mother.

Notes

[1] Allean Hale lists seventeen Williams plays set in St. Louis in the appendix to "Tennessee Williams's St. Louis Blues," and another half dozen or more have unclear or undefined settings. Some of these, however, are sketches or lost plays, and others are unpublished, so I focus here on eleven of the midwestern plays easily available to most readers.

[2] Dating the actual writing of these early one-act plays is difficult. *The Strangest Kind of Romance* and *Hello from Bertha* were first published in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other Plays* (New York: New Directions, 1945) but date from the late 1930s. *The Long Goodbye* opened at The New School in New York City in February 1940. *A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot* appeared in volume VII of *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1971), but the date of composition is unclear.

[3] For a fuller discussion of midwestern elements in the southern plays, see the appendix to Allean Hale's "Tennessee Williams's St. Louis Blues."

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