

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

Queer Semiotics of Expression: Gothic Language and Homosexual Destruction in Tennessee Williams's "One Arm" and "Desire and the Black Masseur"

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Number 8

Cultural Semiotics

In two stories from the late 1940s, Tennessee Williams presents images of subverted male-male desire. In both "One Arm" and "Desire and the Black Masseur," he reveals homosexual desire through aggression, violence, death, and even cannibalism. Writing twenty years before Stonewall, Williams presents desire between men in semi-coded language. He uses metaphors, tropes, and a very particular set of images and symbols. His figurative language in these stories reflects the impact of society's often limiting approach to non-conventional romantic options. The result is an articulation of homosexuality that reveals the downfall of the queer character—a character who reaches this downfall, who is even destined towards this downfall—because of society's limitations and scorn of male-male intimacy.

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Gothic semiotics—especially the significations of darkness, despair, and violence—shape the messages revealed through the figurative language in the stories selected for this study. "One Arm" and "Desire and the Black Masseur" are laden with modern gothic motifs: the setting as a place away from daylight and social convention (cloistered, tomb- and catacomb-like encasements); an ominous mood with suspenseful and dark surroundings; and the restructured dynamic of the master-and-slave relationship that prevails in many nineteenth-century gothic texts. In these stories, through characters that lurk in the subcultural haunts of New Orleans, Williams reveals troublesome representations of desire between men. In some ways these characters and their sometimes grotesque desires can be read as monstrous—deviant, by conventional standards, shamed by their seemingly secret yearnings, and shunned from mainstream society. For many writers of the postwar decades, stories of same-sex attraction are inevitably stories of disappointment and disaster, implying the strong cultural fear of male homosexuality in their contemporary worlds. Many writers make such associations through the use of gothic topoi. Like the vampire or monster of the classic gothic novel, in these stories Williams's characters exist in the margins where only death provides release and figurative deliverance. A parallel is thus solidified: just as sex and death in nineteenth-century literature share an interchangeability, death and desire are entwined in the stories selected for this paper.

Homosexuality/Sadomasochism

The relationship between the body and pain is the predominant gothic signifier in "One Arm" and "Desire and the Black Masseur." Likewise, some of Williams's plays, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, reveal a connection between desire and violence: only through intense physical contact, often painful contact, are emotional connections forged. In *Streetcar*, Stanley's cruelty is entwined in his desire for Stella: the play presents an important binary of desire/violence, a binary that permeates many of the romantic entanglements found in some of Williams's work. As Stanley chases Stella off the stage, Williams writes: "She [Stella] backs out of sight. He [Stanley] advances. There is the sound of a blow. Stella cries out. . . . Something

is overturned with a crash” (57). Stella, however, returns to Stanley, and the text implies that she might somehow enjoy his aggressive behavior. In *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams presents the idea of cannibalism as a code for subverted homosexual desire. Describing the death of her cousin Sebastian Venable, Catherine Holly cries, “They had *devoured* parts of him. . . . They had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs” (87). Williams represents desires in oscillating movement, as he constructs images that gesture toward deeper sociopolitical meanings by using violence as a primary signifier for subverted male-male desire.

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Some of Williams’s work borrows gothic semiotics (atmosphere or language, for example)—but, like other contemporary gothic works, is populated with symbolic rather than actual monsters. The stories’ contours mark the boundaries of desire in mid-twentieth-century America: classic gothic fiction seldom revealed overt same-sex desire, instead masking and heightening it in arrangements that either include or imply pain (see Bruhm and Silverman). The experience of pain, both in classic gothic literature and twentieth-century examples of the form, is not exempt from sadomasochistic satisfaction. Nor is such satisfaction reserved for fictional characters. As Steven Bruhm argues, desire drives “both the victim and the spectator of pain” (*Gothic* 8). The ongoing popularity of gothic fiction suggests that readers—and, arguably, authors as well—receive a subverted and transferred pleasure from the desire/violence binary.

¶5

To understand the reader’s implication in this web of pleasure and pain, it is useful to turn to Robert K. Martin’s analysis of Roland Barthes. According to Martin, Barthes uses suggestions “to establish and define the nature of a homosexual language,” as he further emphasizes: “*remettre chaque texte, non dans son individualité, mais dans son jeu*” (297). And Williams, like Barthes, works in a style that implies a particular *jouissance*, which we shall see in the explorations of Williams’s stories. *Jouissance* is a term derived from French slang for sexual climax and implies a kind of semiotic foreplay in which language and message hold a particular sexual undertone. In “One Arm” and “Desire and the Black Masseur,” Williams creates “visual poetics of sexual affirmation that seek to employ language as a tool for the recuperation of the erotic” (283). Erotic themes are homosexual, and the “visual poetics” are explicit depictions of desire between men. The consequences of Williams’s *jouissance* are environments, characters, and situations that express a voice for homosexuality—with fatal, often violent endings. Williams signals the homosexual through the visual, a pre-Stonewall technique that originally manifests in Oscar Wilde’s writing: the male author’s gaze is cast upon a male subject, as the author’s gaze is replaced with the mind’s eye of the willing reader. For example, in “One Arm,” as Oliver waits for his next trick, this client, in many ways, is the reader. Like paradigms found in the gothic novel, in the stories I will explore, attraction and repulsion work together to form the kind(s) of desire that Williams represents. Desire and the grotesque share a relationship in these works and almost entice the reader to read on. Both the hustler and the masseur seduce not only their fellow characters but also the empathetic reader.

Monstrous Rage: “One Arm” and Homosexual Subculture

In “One Arm,” the homosexual character is doomed from the start, and the narrative reveals a fatal liaison between homosexual discovery and attempted fulfillment. The setting of the piece is New Orleans during the winter of 1939 and the spring and summer of 1940. Oliver, a former boxer and now a hustler, exists in the margins of society; he represents the clandestine world of queer prostitution. Steven Bruhm explores the dynamic of desire and exchange in Williams’s New Orleans:

While the French Quarter [of New Orleans] may well represent sexual freedom, that freedom is, by Williams's own account, shadowed by the adjacent city of puritan ethics and economic commercialism. The libidinal economy is constantly being surveyed by the political economy, so that the two worlds are not divided as much as they are defined by each other. ("Blackmailed" 524)

Although one might argue that *no* part of New Orleans could accurately be described as a place of exclusively "puritan ethics," pleasure *is* bought in the Quarter, which functions as a space of otherness: unbridled passions and desires take place in the ominous reconstruction of this part of the city.

¶17 "One Arm" illustrates that the homosexual is not a singular person, but a plethora of people who yearn for male-male intimacy. Before his death, Oliver receives a flood of letters from past clients; these letters keep him company during his prison sentence, signifying his loneliness. Williams gives homosexual desire a subject and a voice: the letters, sent from a large number of men, present homosexuality as a part of reality, a reality that society attempts to extinguish with Oliver's execution.

¶18 "One Arm" is a claustrophobic story: the life of the city is absent, and what takes its place is a reflection of a semi-closeted queer world that exists in the margins of the city. This subculture is a retreat from mainstream culture, an environment that offers Oliver fleeting freedom. The text houses Oliver in New Orleans's Vieux Carré ("the ancient part of the city") and likens him to a god from classical antiquity—thus alluding to a time when homosexuality (in certain forms and fashions) was more accepted ("One Arm" 7). In contrast to the other hustlers, who "exhibit the anxious energy of sparrows," Oliver is still and sculpted "like a broken statue of Apollo" (7). Like Apollo, Oliver is noted for his beauty; and like the Greek mythological character, Oliver's existence and suffering share an important relationship: in this story, like "Desire and the Black Masseur," homosexuality and pain can be considered synonymous. He loses his arm in a car accident, knows only fleeting and unfulfilled love, and is not granted his last wish, a homosexual relation with a minister. His death, by execution, confirms his status, like Apollo, as a kind of tragic hero.

Intensity/Desire

Along with the eroticism that dominates most of the text, Williams's work reveals a detectable homophobic discourse that reflects mid-twentieth-century mainstream society. Homosexuality is explained as a change of status, from an adequate position in society to an inadequate one. Prior to the accident, Oliver is a "farm boy" from Arkansas who joins the Navy to escape a "coarse and startling affair with a married woman" and becomes "the light heavyweight champion boxer of the Pacific fleet" (7, 9). The text remains loaded: the navy and gay subtext may trigger something in the willing reader, while the boxing career and affair signal something different. However, the car crash transfigures Oliver. No longer a boxer, no longer perfectly formed, he becomes a homosexual hooker, "abruptly cut off from his development as an athlete and a young man wholly adequate to the physical world he grew into" (9). Oliver is "lost," and his queerness is likened to a "fugitive kind" (9, 11).

¶10 "One Arm" marks the paradigm of the acknowledgement, decline, and destruction of male-male desire in an intolerant society. Williams combines gothic language and cultural stigma to emphasize destructive perceptions of male-male desire. Like the gothic monster of the nineteenth century, the homosexual is created, recognized, feared, hunted or ostracized, and finally destroyed. Oliver—deviant, deformed, and deranged—represents homosexual desire as diseased and destructive. It remains unclear whether Williams is critiquing or embracing this idea—perhaps he is doing both, showing us the double-bind that Oliver reflects: boxer and straight versus

hustler and queer. John M. Clum has suggested that Williams's depictions of homosexuality attempt to "cover the disease" of homosexual desire (*Displacing Homophobia* 66). Williams may include this vacillating sexuality to reveal the homosexuality/homophobia dynamic present in the pre-liberation decades. Oliver's past with a married woman may imply his desire to cover up his own sexuality, until he actually is faced with death. Moreover, according to Clum, the way that Williams chooses to illustrate homosexuality in his plays "demonstrates Williams's political naiveté: for him, homosexuality was merely a sexual issue, thus incongruent with his 'social' interest" (152). Certainly, in "One Arm," homosexuality emerges as a bizarre, even occult practice. And by linking homosexuality with prostitution, Williams suggests that queer desire is tantamount to sexual deviancy.

¶11 But it is possible to discern a strain of political commentary in "One Arm." Oliver's role—both hetero- and homosexual—is to serve as an object of exchange: bet-on as an athlete and bought as a prostitute. Steven Bruhm argues that "economic laws move in to suppress homosexual behavior" in *Suddenly Last Summer* ("Blackmailed" 532). Comparably, in "One Arm," the "regulation of homoerotic desire in the city" suppresses homosexual interaction, forcing it to exist in the borders—in dark corners and presumably cheap hotels—as an exchange of cash for services rendered. New Orleans functions as "the site of exchange: the exchange of erotic pleasure" (524). During his boxing career Oliver is not (to the reader's knowledge) gay. Once he loses his arm, Oliver assumes a new "calling" and related "commodity value" (10). His heterosexual past is exchanged for a homosexual present. Because of the transforming car accident he cannot return to his athletic profession; his only source of income is prostitution. His resulting angst surfaces as uncontrollable rage. During the filming of a blue movie he hits the woman he is working with, kicks the camera, and later strikes his host's "inclined head eight times with a copper book-end, the final stroke splitting the skull" (10). Williams depicts homosexual experience as clandestine and violent, and this can be seen as a metaphor for hidden desires and the intensity of repressed homosexual yearnings. Oliver as queer Other is forced into society's margins, denied "traditional" sources of income and outlets for desire, and destined to imprisonment and execution.

¶12 Other, more affirmative readings of homosexual experience are also possible. During his imprisonment, Oliver discovers his erotic qualities and confirms his sexual desires in a Whitmanesque manner:

Auto-erotic sensations began to flower in him. He felt the sorrowful pleasure that stirred his groin in response to manipulation. Lying nude on the cot in the southern July, his one large hand made joyless love to his body, exploring all of those erogenous zones that the fingers of others, hundreds of strangers' fingers, had clasped with a hunger that now was beginning to be understandable to him. (19)

As Oliver realizes the potential of his body, the text announces his homosexuality: he experiences a degree of fulfillment from the power of his own form. Despite this breakthrough, the text continues to align same-sex desire with solitude and punishment. Oliver can only fulfill his homosexual yearnings by himself. His experience of love is essentially narcissistic. The link to classical archetypes, already established through earlier references to Apollo, is further developed here through Williams's choice of the verb "flower," which ties Oliver not only to the mythological Narcissus but also to other beloved young mortals from mythology, such as Hyacinth. Perhaps the Greek mythological references are employed to highlight Oliver's true sexuality, or at least his preferred sexuality, which ultimately martyrs him as a queer hero.

Scathing (Comm)unions

In the story's closing pages, Williams presents a final iteration of the homosexual experience, one that moves beyond auto-eroticism. A young minister visits Oliver in his cell, and Williams fills the void between them with sexual tension. The text builds toward sexual interaction but sublimates that possibility through symbolic fantasy.

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The visit to Oliver's cell reminds the minister of his childhood visits to a zoo, where a muscular panther sparked "shameful" erotic fantasies. Despite a sign warning of the beast's savagery, the panther appeared "radiant" to the child. At night, he "would cry himself to sleep for pity of the animal's imprisonment and an unfathomable longing that moved through all of his body." Now, as he watches Oliver rubbing his foot, the minister is reminded of his "obsession" with the panther and the erotic vision that came to him one night. In the dream, he removes his clothes and lies on the forest floor anticipating the panther's arrival, "outstretched and spread-eagled" in absolute "trust and submission." The panther arrives and covers him with "stroke[s]" from his tongue. Although he awakes from this dream in "shame," he experiences the "aching initial of Eros" (22–23). The god that blesses the minister's desire is not a heterosexual Christian one, but a bisexual pagan god from ancient Greece. Again, the language of antiquity informs Williams's homosexual discourse: just as Oliver is a modern Apollo, the panther is guided by Eros to transform the sacred Christianity of the minister into a pagan, bestial, and queer practice.

¶15

This sequence triggers another that draws even closer to the actualization of homosexual desire. As the minister recalls the panther's "radiant scrutiny" he receives the "clear gaze of the boy" (23). Williams is playing with the idea of cruising: both the panther and Oliver display a look that the minister finds attractive and welcoming. Although the minister hopes to discuss "Eternity" with the condemned criminal, Oliver changes the focus of the visit and begins to talk about his career as a boxer and the loss of his arm (24–25). Transfixed by the young prisoner's virility—and possibly inebriated with desire from the recollection of his closet fantasy—the minister agrees to rub the sweat off of Oliver's back. In the heat of proximity, Oliver discloses his past as a "whore" (26). The sound of "an invisible drummer" is revealed as his own "heartbeat," and the minister attempts to suppress his desire with barbitol heart tablets—only to find that the tablets have "oozed together in a white paste" (26–27). The liaison ends as Oliver "arch[es] his body and pull[s] his shorts further down," exposing his "narrow and sculptural flanks" (27). The minister "spring[s] from the cot," halting the exchange (27). Faced with rejection, Oliver finally speaks from his heart. He explains that he has received a pile of letters from past clients, "bills" from people he owes "[n]ot money, but feelings." He continues, "I have feelings, too. I am lonely and bottled up the same as you are" (27). Through fantasy and psychological suggestion, Williams unites the criminal with the minister.

¶16

The next day brings Oliver's execution. He dies on the electric chair, the letters resting "companionably in the fork of his thighs" (28). In death, as in life, Oliver is denied a respectable place in society: his body remains unclaimed and is donated to a medical college. The narrator explains that Oliver's beauty was meant "to stand in a gallery of antique sculpture, touched only by light through stillness and contemplation, for it had the nobility of some broken Apollo that no one was likely to carve so purely again" (29). Refused the space to embrace his desires, Oliver becomes a gothic monster and is destroyed by the world that created him.

The Eroticized Other: Subjectivity/Desire in "Desire and the Black Masseur"

In “Desire and the Black Masseur,” Williams presents an odd, incredibly queer main character who insists on finding comfort in “things that swallowed him up” (83). Throughout the story, the term “desire” signifies same-sex attraction and specifically refers to Anthony Burns’s craving for abusive intimacy. The first indication of the nature of Anthony’s desire is a reference to his lifelong love for the cinema: inside a film theatre, Anthony feels “like a particle of food dissolving in a big hot mouth” (83). Williams establishes a Freudian link between desire and consumption, observing that the cinema “licked at [Anthony’s] mind” (83–84). Caleb Crain argues that “the mouth is every child’s first erogenous zone . . . [and] orality provides the child with his first set of defense mechanisms for resolving anxieties caused by his differences with the outside world” (“Lovers of Human Flesh” 35–36). Anthony’s oral fetish will be only partially fulfilled in the theatre. His adult anxieties will manifest through nervousness and related backaches—and he will be driven to treat his bodily pain with an equally painful therapy. This therapy (massage) not only introduces Anthony to his wish-fantasy (Freud) or fetish (Lacan); it also brings him to the heightened satisfaction of full, oral consumption.

¶18 Anthony can only fulfill his desire through the development of an alternate identity. He lives two lives: a white-collar clerk who suffers “from a vague sort of ache near the base of his spine” (86) and a willing participant in an interracial, sadomasochistic relationship. John M. Clum has suggested that in Williams’s work, “the cloudiness of homosexuality remains an object of terror, not in the act, but of public exposure” (162). Although Clum’s analysis is keyed to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, it speaks directly to “Desire and the Black Masseur,” where terror of public exposure both defines and confines male-male intimacy. In “Desire,” unspeakable desire may be spoken only in (semi-)coded language and expressed only through sadomasochism, cannibalism, and other forms of brutality. In the underground baths, sexual and racial boundaries are crossed, and moral boundaries are challenged through violence.

¶19 In *Male Subjectivity in the Margins*, Kaja Silverman turns to Freud to define the origins of pain and pleasure, examining childhood “fantasies of being bound and beaten” (188). Silverman argues that within a sadomasochistic relationship one partner assumes a parental role—a position of authority—while the other assumes the position of a misbehaving child. In “Desire,” abuse is presented as a power play while desire—actualized only through abuse—is a secret, violent, and private pleasure. Sexuality is thus displaced through the metaphor of pain. Masochistic relationships presuppose a process of “desexualization,” with sexuality stripped “of all functionality, whether biological or social” (187, 193). Masochism reacts against “normal” (presumably conventional and hetero) sexual interaction; sexuality’s functionality—its components of love, attachment, and intimacy—disappears. In “Desire,” sexual interaction is reduced (or magnified) to its most excessive physical components, as beatings and cannibalism take the place of romantic intimacy.

¶20 Williams presents desire as an excess: “something that is made to occupy a larger space than that which is afforded by the individual being” (84). Desire seems too much for the small person introduced to us as Anthony Burns (Vannatta 48–49). The narrator describes Anthony as “[t]he timidest kind of a person” and observes that he “had no idea of what his real desires were” (84). Lurking in the hidden recesses of his mind, homosexuality is Anthony’s oral fetish, revealed throughout the course of the story—but perhaps only to the reader, rather than to Anthony himself, who remains alienated from his subconscious.

¶21 “Desire and the Black Masseur” asserts an inextricable bond between psychological disorder and homosexual desire:

His desires, or rather his basic desire, was so much too big for him that it swallowed him up as a coat that should have been cut into ten smaller sizes, or rather there should have been much more of Burns to make it fit him. (84–85)

The text foreshadows the physical grandeur of the masseur who fulfills Anthony's desire. Exhibiting a pre-Stonewall sensibility, Williams's language yokes yearning and "guilt," with desire articulated through "the surrender of self to violent treatment by others" (84–85). Silverman suggests that when a "fear of punishment gives way to the wish for it . . . cruelty and discipline come to stand for love" (195). Accordingly, Anthony gives in to his desire for punishment and becomes fatally addicted to it.

¶22 Williams blurs the lines of liaison as three binaries—parent/child, teacher/student, and master/slave—exist both independently and interchangeably throughout the text. The arrangement of linked opposites is illuminated, in part, by what Silverman explains as "the male subject's *homosexual attachment to the father* . . . the libidinal economy of the negative Oedipal complex" (194–95). Anthony's attachment to his masseur may be seen as Oedipal displacement; the son's traditional rivalry with the father is replaced by a focus on the father as love object. For his lover, Anthony chooses someone who can assume the necessary parental—fatherly—role.

¶23 The subject of Anthony's desires is quite literally his Other. Embracing racial stereotype, Williams mates his small, meek, white protagonist with a gigantic man of color. During his first visit to the baths, Anthony's curiosity is immediately drawn to the black masseurs, who exhibit "force," "resolution," and "authority" (87). The metaphoric language of pre-Stonewall homosexuality is further complicated through the crossing of moral and racial boundaries. Anthony compares the masseurs to "great black palms" capable of seizing "bolts of lightning" and throwing "them back at the clouds" (87). It is their strength, their size, and their blackness that attract him. The language of masculine attraction resonates here, as in "One Arm," with archetypes from classical Greek mythology. It also resonates, disturbingly, with the type of sexual objectification described by Fritz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks* (140–209). Fanon argues that "[t]he white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast; if it is not the length of the penis, then it is the sexual potency that impresses him" (170). Certainly, Anthony's yearnings for potency prescribe his choice of erotic partner—and the cannibalistic ritual at the conclusion of "Desire" is permeated with racist imagery.

¶24 A Fanon-based reading discovers no individual identity for the black masseur, only a series of racialized sexual stereotypes. The text presents a role-play hierarchy with the masseur assuming the traditionally masculine role of aggressor and Anthony assuming the subservient—and conventionally feminine—role. The first time the two meet, Anthony enters the massage room holding a sheet "delicately up from his small-boned, womanish feet" (88). Awaiting the start of the massage, Anthony feels as if he has been enveloped "in a heat and moisture such as the inside of a tremendous mouth" (88). His oral fixation is on its way to a frightening fulfillment.

¶25 Despite the story's overt racism, it is possible to detect a societal critique. The story both reflects and reverses the racial order of mid-twentieth-century New Orleans; although the black man serves the white, control is ultimately in the former's hands. Anthony's masseur becomes "the mainstay of his preoccupations and his desires" (Fanon 170). He assumes a role of authority and control: his first words to Anthony are "Take off your clothes" (87). Anthony observes that "the black giant's eyes appeared not to see him at all and yet they had a glitter not present before, a liquid brightness suggesting bits of wet coal" (88). Like the panther in "One Arm," the masseur is noticed first for his prowess and then for the look in his eyes. Williams emphasizes visual

exchange in both texts. To gaze is to desire, and to desire is to court destruction. Just as classic gothic literature presents a hero—or, more often, heroine—drawn (not unwillingly) into congress with a gothic monster, Williams's modern gothic utilizes fear and desire as interchangeable narrative engines. Williams's imagery remains unredeemably racist, but his philosophy—that the objectified “Other” attains subjectivity through desire—contains seeds of redemption.

Satisfaction, Pain/Pleasure, Cannibalism

David Savran finds Williams's presentation of homosexuality rife with contradiction (81). Rather than celebrating homosexual love, or even fleeting passion, Williams describes desire between men in a language that demeans it. Death and homosexuality go hand in hand: Williams's work acknowledges homosexual desire but reflects the (overwhelmingly negative) perceptions of homosexual intimacy that marked American attitudes of the late 1940s and 50s. Homosexuality is exhibited as an “unresolved tension” where desire, abuse, fetish, and destruction merge (Savran 83). Clum, too, finds evidence of a “homophobic discourse” throughout Williams's writing (150–53). Both critics build their arguments on biographical foundations, speculating that Williams's own homosexual yearnings, scorned as they were first by his parents and later by mainstream society, stamped and even stunted his work.

¶27 Both “One Arm” and “Desire and the Black Masseur” find Williams articulating the dialectic of desire and fear: homosexuality and homophobia exist both in unison and direct opposition (Sedgwick 184–85). Anthony and the masseur illustrate a complex meshing of opposites. Anthony subverts his desire and expresses his physical needs through his oral fetish; the masseur represents desire but cannot express desire as sex, only as violence. In a sense, the two are perfectly matched: Anthony loves to be beaten, and his masseur loves to beat him. The narrator's commentary dances on the edge of satire but must, in the end, be read straight: “The giant loved Burns, and Burns adored the giant” (90). The story articulates what Silverman argues is a specifically “Christian Masochism,” where pathology, social factors, and self-referential masochistic desire intertwine (195–96). As Silverman suggests, and the text reveals, “the psychic economy of moral masochism is strikingly self-contained” (196–97). Anthony's desire is fulfilled through violence, his beatings marking a personal and psychological triumph.

¶28 The interactions between Anthony and the masseur signify the intensity of male-male desire and its suppression in hetero-normative culture. Like “One Arm,” “Desire and the Black Masseur” reveals the politics of desire as economic—and until the end of the story, Anthony cannot *be* with the masseur unless he purchases his pleasure. In these stories, sexuality is the product, and Williams demonstrates how “goods are exchanged” (Bruhm, “Blackmailed” 530). When Anthony arrives at the bathhouse he pays \$2.50 for a bath and massage. Like the sexuality that is never disclosed in open prose, the massage is never given. Instead, Anthony receives “a terrific whack” in the center of his “soft belly” (89). In this, the first sequence of exchanges between the characters, a blow replaces a touch, a caress, a stroke. The reader wonders at the mechanics of the exchange: not only the subversion of desire, but the means of communication. As the sequence progresses, Anthony is bombarded “with blows . . . as the violence and the pain increased” (89). He grows “fiercely hot with his first true satisfaction, until all at once a knot came loose in his loins and released a warm flow” (89–90). The “warm flow” needs no explaining; like the melted barbitol tablets in “One Arm,” the meaning is obvious.

The paradigm of desire and violence, already well established, shifts in intensity toward the middle of the story. After breaking two of Anthony's ribs, the masseur strikes Anthony with an incredible "blow" that fractures his right leg (91). As Anthony vomits "over the edge of the [massage] table," the manager enters the room, sees Anthony's "many bruises" (91), and dismisses both employee and client. The story's action transfers to "a room in the town's Negro section" (92). Their forbidden desire, discovered in a basement bathhouse in the white area of town, can be completely fulfilled only in the black sector. The racial implications of the text remain indeterminate; Williams may be tapping racist stereotype by aligning black society with licentiousness, or critiquing white society for its lack of Christian forgiveness. The room that Anthony and his partner find faces a church, setting up a familiar Williams overlay of religion and sexuality. Shouting "Suffer, suffer, suffer!" the preacher reminds his congregation of the agony and ecstasy of the crucifixion. The congregation, in turn, "tumble[s] out on the street in a crazed procession with clothes torn open," exclaiming, "The sins of the world are all forgiven!" (92). A neighboring house catches fire, the conflagration an analog of Anthony's last name and a visible symbol of purifying, eviscerating desire.

¶30 This sequence marks a turn in the narrative: once the text returns to the masseur and "his victim," the stage is set for Anthony's deliverance:

He [the masseur] picked up the body, which barely held together, and placed it gently on a clean-swept table. The giant began to devour the body of Burns. It took him twenty-four hours to eat the splintered bones clean. (93)

"Desire and the Black Masseur" is framed by oral fixation, the fetish introduced as Anthony's but concluded as the masseur's. As the masseur "incorporate[s]" what he desires, he assures that "it never escapes him" (Crain 36). In this story, the introduction of the oral fetish is a sign of homosexuality, a sign confirmed at the end of the text as the masseur swallows up Anthony and gratifies his wish.

¶31 Anthony's wish-fantasy, in Freudian terms, manifests as both exotic and taboo sex; his fetish, in Lacanian terms, is confirmed through beatings and cannibalism. Gothic literary tradition provides further tools for unpacking the metaphor of cannibalism. As Crain observes, "the discovery of cannibalism . . . resembles the discovery of homosexuality in gothic novels" (32). The discovery of a queer tendency or homoerotic desire in classic gothic texts often reveals the villain's "irresistible curiosity," a drive that confronts a character with the possibility of homosexuality, in metaphoric form, such as cannibalism (32). Adopting an almost breezy tone, the narrator crafts a tale that unfolds along predictable, sentimental lines. Anthony, smitten, "become[s] absent-minded about his work" (90). "Throughout the winter," the narrator observes, "the violence of the massage increased by fairly reasonable degrees" (91). It would be wrong to read this comment as simple satire. The violence here is eminently purposeful, if not fully reasonable. Only through violence, or so the text suggests, can same-sex desire be simultaneously expressed and concealed.

The Last Course

With their frank depictions of male-male attraction and the centrality of their homosexual subject matter, "One Arm" and "Desire and the Black Masseur" mark a departure in Williams's depiction of queer sexuality. Here, as in his plays, Williams couples homosexual and homophobic discourse. The characters in both stories seek locations in which they can enact their fantasies—only to find themselves destroyed by the actualization of their homosexual desires. Williams presents the homosexual as a modern monster, ostracized from society and

destined to destruction or consumption. Although these stories are neither liberating nor “out,” they do present intensely erotic, physical liaisons between men. Their flaws notwithstanding, the stories usher the reader into once-private rooms where physical intimacy between men may take place. As such, they stand as critical representations of homosexual desire in pre-Stonewall literature.

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