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Picaro Tom Goes Catfishing: The Proleptic Importance of "Gift of an Apple"

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Tennessee Williams's short story "Gift of an Apple" languished in obscurity and rejection in his lifetime, and its fate has not changed much since his death. First published in 1985 in *Collected Stories*, "Gift" was probably written in 1936; that, at least, is the date New Directions assigned to it (*Collected Stories* 69). Less likely, "Gift" may have been written earlier than 1936 when Williams was taking a course in story writing at Washington University or when he was employed at the Continental Shoe Company. In point of fact, we do not know precisely when Williams wrote "Gift"; the typewritten drafts and fragments of the story at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center are undated (Ransom).[1] Regardless of its date, "Gift" warrants a much more favorable, more informed response than being labeled merely as an unsuccessful story from Thomas Lanier Williams's apprentice years, of interest only for its archival rather than artistic merits. Very little critical attention has been paid to the story. In his cursory inclusion of it in his study of Williams's short fiction, Dennis Vannatta concedes that "Gift" is one of the "best among" (27) Williams's early stories but concludes that Williams was "not yet able to dramatize vividly or passionately" his own sexual "alienation" (18–19). Although we can compare "Gift" to "Ten Minute Stop," for example, which also portrays a boy hitchhiking on a trip, and to several other early stories, "Gift" occupies a distinct place in Williams's early canon for its overt emphasis on different types of sexuality. As I intend to show, this story sheds light on the problematics of sexual identity and indeterminacy that would be at the center of much of Williams's work. Equally important, "Gift" deserves a more noteworthy place among Williams's early works because of its compelling cinematic qualities, exemplifying his emerging talent in expressing interiority through spatial imagery and a decidedly filmic point of view.

¶2 Biographically, the young, unnamed narrator in "Gift" is not necessarily synonymous with the frustrated young Tom Williams living a purgatorial existence in his mother's repressive St. Louis home in 1935–36. To be sure, there are intriguing references in "Gift" to a disappointed sister, a fire escape, a rebuking mother's voice, and a religious celebration turned into "soot" and accompanied by a "screaming" train (67)—all distant prefigurements of *The Glass Menagerie*. But the narrator is not a smoldering Tom Williams. Instead, he is a persona, or projection, for the quintessential picaro version of a later Tennessee Williams—vagabond, iconoclast, and sexual rebel. Like so many of the signature characters found in his early and late canon, Williams uses the narrator in "Gift" to construct an imaginary self. Williams wanted the invented life of the young hitchhiker in "Gift"—he coveted sexual experiences, worldliness, and freedom. In essence, the young Tom wanted to "escape from the imprisonment of family" (Leverich 351). In 1936, the figure of a hitchhiker for Williams was a symbol of escape and adventure he desperately craved. As poet Bin Ramke has observed, "A self is a catalogue of lacks" (Ramke 96), an observation appropriate for Williams. According to Robert Bray, "If there is one leitmotif to be found among [Williams's] stories, it may be Williams's idea of 'incompleteness,' a void occurring in those characters who lack something in their own constitution or in their relationships" (Bray

44). Like his unnamed narrator, Williams also wanted to go on a journey and come back changed, to fill his "lacks" with adventure. That the hitchhiking in both "Ten Minute Stop" and "Gift" are, in all likelihood, imaginary is not important; these stories offered a fictional surrogacy for the St. Louis-weary Tom, eager to get on the road to fame and to freedom.

¶3 But Williams's own cross-country trips would have to wait until early 1939 when, accompanied by his friend Jim Parrott, he traveled from New Orleans to California, encountering a wide and bizarre assortment of people and places along the way, similar to those in "Gift." While in California, Williams did become a hitchhiker, and it was most likely there that he had his first homosexual experience, in Laguna Beach, with a "picked up acquaintance" (Leverich 308).[2] In describing the vagaries of hitchhiking and sexual encounters along the way, "Gift" seems to be almost a déjà vu experience played in reverse, since the narrator anticipates a Williams who longed in 1935–36 to be worldly. As Harold Pinter claimed in his Nobel Prize speech, "Sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror—for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us" ("Art, Truth, and Politics" 27).

¶4 "Gift" helps us to understand Williams on both sides of the mirror: the would-be adventurer writer and the hitchhiker character who takes the journey Williams could only imagine in 1935–36. Even more important, in this neglected, early story we can see the structure of Williams's imagination at work, incubating characters, places, images, and plots for the plays to follow. The 19-year-old narrator crafts "Gift" into a road story of what happened to him one late sunshine-drenched afternoon in the area below the "low hills" of New Mexico. He describes meeting a fat Italian woman who gives him an apple and with whom he hopes to have sex to satisfy his passion (and, perhaps, to get more food). Ingeniously, Williams builds "Gift" around two archetypical sexual events—the Fall from the Garden and the fall from marital fidelity, deftly inverting the conventions of the fabliaux. The woman in "Gift" is miserably unattractive both as Eve and as the promiscuous wife. "Gift" also contributes to Williams's lifelong interrogation of sexual desire by presenting a cavalcade of sexualized images documenting his attraction to grotesque characters, his representations of gender and sexuality, and his linking geography with identity.

¶5 The most important image in the story, of course, is the apple the old woman gives the narrator. The narrator describes it in graphic sexual terms: "The hard red skin popped open, the sweet juice squirted out and his teeth sank into the firm white meat of the apple. It is like the act of love, he thought." The narrator concludes, "He licked the outside of his lips and felt them curving into a sensuous smile" (66). Although Williams may have recalled the famous scene in *Tom Jones* where eating is both a prelude to and a parallel with sexual ecstasy, the incident in "Gift" unmistakably alludes to Adam's relishing the apple from Eve. Similarly, the apple contains the seeds for the narrator's eventual disappointment and rancor, just as it did for Adam. As the narrator learns, though, the act of eating the apple is a *trompe l'oeil*, a titillating surrogacy for what he hopes for—more food, sex—but will not receive. He and we (his captivated audience) find out on one level that the "gift" is not prelude but peripeteia. Yet, spinning the postlapsarian saga around, Williams parodies Edenic bliss in "Gift." The old woman is hardly a wiley and tempting Eve; she possesses none of the charm that ensnared Adam. She is made more in the image of the snake than the angels. As poet Christine Gelineau puts it in "Ordinary Time": "What situation would Eve have imagined / as her teeth cleaved the apple? / Was the choice really between death / and an eternity of self-limitation?" (150). In "Gift," the gritty, unromantic old woman (Eve) chooses the

latter. But the young hitchhiker, ironically enough, is ecstatic at the end of the story about the knowledge he receives from her rejection of him.

¶6 Also reflecting Williams's early signature style, "Gift" contains haunting animal symbolism that he would use throughout his canon, e.g., *Not About Nightingales*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,and *The Night of the Iguana*. The fetishized animal in "Gift" is the unlikely catfish who reminds the narrator of the "huge and blackhaired" Italian woman whom he first notices as she comes out of her crowded trailer. Seeing her, he recalls the time, as a youth, that he pulled a five-gallon bottle from the Sunflower River and "inside was a large catfish. . . . It must have swum in when it was a minnow and somehow grown up inside" (64). Resisting his friends' plan to break the bottle open and eat the catfish, the hitchhiker argues that "there was something not normal about a catfish that had grown inside a bottle" (64). Comparing this "old dago slut" (68) to a catfish establishes her as an early, freakish occupant of Williams's menagerie of the southern grotesque. Though he meets her in the arid New Mexico landscape, she emerges from Williams's memory of the South, for the Sunflower River runs through a number of Williams's works set in his boyhood Delta. But what is most important about the catfish is the narrator's preference for and protection of it for being "not normal," the *sine qua non* of so much of Williams's work to follow.

¶7 Williams brilliantly turns this catfish comparison into a polyphonic signifier, resonating with a cluster of clues about the old woman's character. In several pivotal places, the narrator reminds readers that the catfish is the perfect representation for the Italian woman's grotesque appearance. "She had a face like the catfish" and, like the fish, "coarse hairs along her upper lips" and "dark eyes" (64–65). Like a fish coming up for air, "she blew out air through her nostrils and curled up her lips" (67). She ate "rich, oily meat," a further allusion to the catfish's flesh (68). Even her trailer is troped with catfish-like details. She is trapped in her cramped living quarters just as the ugly catfish was caught in the bottle. Williams's fascination with grotesque sexual appearances, already evident in "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll," surfaces here, much as it later would in "Dark Room" and "Desire and the Black Masseur." The Italian woman might also be viewed as a shadowy prefigurement of the long line of bedraggled women whom Williams frequently wrote about, e.g., Bertha in *The Long Goodbye*, the Strega in *The Rose Tattoo*, the Fräulein in *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, Trinket Dugan in *The Mutilated*, or Leona in *Small Craft Warnings*.

¶8 Developing the image even more fully, Williams uses the catfish to demonize the old woman's sexuality. The catfish in a bottle is a highly risqué, even wicked sexual metonymy for the *mons veneris*, the hairy, whiskered *cat*fish trapped in the narrow opening of the neck of the bottle, suggesting the woman's gross anatomy. Living in his mother's prudish University City home, the young Tom Williams created with this defining symbol a devilishly clever piece of pornography. In 1935–36, Williams looked at sexuality through a bottle darkly. Like the flapping, whiskered catfish, the old woman projects an orotund, gastric, all-consuming sexuality. She has "huge jaws" (66). Oily, fat, and destined to be diseased, she symbolically could sabotage the young man's spirit.

¶9 As if parodying the voluptuous but errant wife in a fabliau or, worse yet, the seductiveness of a forbidden succubus temptress, Williams paints the Italian woman's sexual interest in the young hitchhiker in graphically unnatural terms. She is the illicit lover, physically and morally. She exhibits a predatory quality in her amorous movements. Her eyes "went on down his body" (67). Stirring, she "lifted her hand from her lap and placed it on the back of his head. Ran the fingers down his neck and under the collar of his shirt." The narrator "recoiled

from the touch" (68). Williams's imagery suggests an unloosed, slithering snake. When the woman learns the narrator is just nineteen, the age of her own drunken son, "She grunted as if she had just been stuck with a pin" (68). Her desire has been thwarted; the hitchhiker is too young for her. The narrator explains her decision: "Such women make little rules for themselves, more sacred than Holy Law" (68). Given the old woman's lustful intentions, it is comically ironic to invoke the seriousness of Holy Writ to interpret her disappointment.

¶10 The catfish descriptions also reverberate with the racial encoding that infuses Williams's canon. He stresses that she is "loose-fleshed and brown" (65), the dark Other. When the old woman mentions her son has "gone into town to get drunk" with his father, the narrator unsurprisingly concludes that "dark races grew up early" and immediately remembers "the little Greek girl that lived in his block at home" (66–67). It is as if the sexually adventuresome Tom Williams (through the anonymity of his persona) intended to shock his audience with carnal knowledge of racialized women young (an eleven-year-old Greek girl) and old (the brown "dago" woman). The fact that the girl belongs to one of the "dark races" helps the narrator justify his own seemingly incredible sexual drive. Tom Williams, the emerging writer, is having a jolly good time reveling in escapades that might have astonished or offended reviewers at *Story* or *American Preface*. In the hitchhiker's embedded narrative, the Greek girl is linked to the Italian woman as a representative of the dark sexuality that Williams saw in African Americans (e.g., Big Black, the Masseur), but also engrafted onto several of his Italian and Hispanic characters—Rosa Gonzales in *Summer and Smoke*, Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*, and Silva Vacarro in *Baby Doll* (Kolin 3–4). Though not Italian or Hispanic, Stanley Kowalski in *Streetcar* is also a racialized character, as George Crandell has argued (Crandell 339).

¶11 The worldly hitchhiker describes his sexual encounters with this Greek girl in imagery that maps the subterranean haunts of yet another member of the "dark races." "Back in the alley night after night behind her father's restaurant, between the ash pit and the three huge garbage pails. Mmmm. Panting for breath. With the hard concrete and all those cold wet smells. Potato peelings and cantaloupe rinds and damp coffee grounds" (67). Here the narcissistic young man shares with readers his love among the rinds in a sexualized setting that anticipates the polluted cities in *Fugitive Kind*, *Menagerie*, *Streetcar*, *The Mutilated*, and *Red Devil Battery Sign*. Yet even at this early stage of his career, Williams demonstrates an interest in the material as well as the psychic reality of place. While the incident of eating the apple that the old woman gave him parodies the primal fate of Adam and Eve, the garbage bower signifies the consequences reserved for the narrator's unchecked sexual appetite and the girl's unnatural availability. The narrator portrays himself as a backstreet Don Juan, sexually experienced and indefatigable in the pursuit of his passions. His "night after night" visits paint him and the girl with the same tarbrush. The "garbage" in the dark "alley" situates him in the trash heap of conventional respectability, underscoring the Darwinian world of forbidden sexuality that the young Tom Williams could only imagine in 1935–36 but was eager to experience.

¶12 But Williams does not stop with the sexually explicit details pulled from the garbage pail of the narrator's previous life. As he would do later with such skill, Williams mixes religious and sexual imagery: lying on the concrete with the Greek girl, the narrator remembers "bits of ash pressed into the palms of his hands" (67). The references to "ash" and "palm" inevitably suggest the Christian signifiers associated with Palm Sunday at the beginning of Holy Week (concluding with Holy Saturday, when the last scene of *Orpheus Descending* occurs). "Ash" and "palm" also symbolize an orgiastic crucifixion for the little Greek girl and the bold, sexually hungry boy who tops her in the alley "night after night." The narrator goes on to admit: "But the hardness around them

making the comfort inside her sweeter. Only eleven years old she was. And the nervous spasms and groanings. Not normal perhaps" (67). The "groanings" carry not only sexual but also spiritual meaning. With this incident, Williams incorporates and links the three most powerful signature elements of his works—the sexual, the racial, and the spiritual.

¶13 What Williams's narrator gazes upon, synthesizes, and analyzes in his encounters with the Greek girl and the Italian woman may seem, on the surface, like expressions of a relatively unmediated heterosexual desire. This young hitchhiker hopes to have sex with the old woman who, though she is as unattractive as a catfish, nonetheless presents an opportunity for his male pleasure, his "Mmmm." To justify seeing the Italian wife as a sexual partner, he fantasizes: "He thought of the woman being here in this spot all summer. Sleeping at night on a cot by the side of the road with the moon looking down at her big dark female body and her arms thrown out to receive the cool wind like a lover, her flesh moist with sweat" (66). The narrator's conventional imagery appears to adhere to clear-cut gender lines—the feminine moon and the masculine wind. Williams includes other signs of the narrator's masculine desire as well. Engaging her in conversation, "he hitched at the belt of his trousers," a pre-copulatory gesture. Moreover, "he removed his pocketknife from his pants" (66), an unmistakable phallic symbol, to pare away the apple she gives him, a feminine orb he can devour.

¶14 But also at work in "Gift" is a network of displaced homosexual imagery undercutting heterosexual desire, aroused through but also thwarted by the old woman's refusal to have sex with the narrator. Though Williams's first homosexual experience was at least three years away at the time of this story's composition—and though he had a heated sexual affair with Bette Reitz in 1938 (Leverich 249)—the narrator's expression of ambiguous sexual identities and roles uncannily prefigures Williams's own sexual encounters a few years after he submitted "Gift" to *Story* magazine. Suggestively, "Gift" begins with the narrator identifying and then castigating homosexuality. Describing being picked up by drivers going east, he reports, "Half of the time if one of them stops he's a queer and you have to be groped all over to pay for your ride" (63). This comment is preceded by the narrator's admission that the dusty condition of the road and a "series of disappointments made it hard to muster that gay, inviting smile which makes [drivers] stop (63). Though the use of the word "gay" as slang for homosexual is dated much later than "Gift" by the *OED*, the word may have been familiar to Williams through the earlier slang of "gey cat" used to describe a catamite young hobo, just the type of hitchhiker that drivers may have picked up (Harper). In any case, the narrator's ostensibly homophobic reaction may reflect Williams's own dubious view of homosexuality at the time (Clum).

¶15 That sexual dislocation/instability is developed at greater and more obvious lengths in the imagery the narrator uses to characterize the old woman and her view of him. Williams subverts her feminine sexuality by attaching male signifiers to descriptions of her house and her body. (The genesis of later works, too, would involve changing gender roles; for instance, as Gilbert Debusscher has pointed out, the Princess Kosmonopolis was a sailor in early drafts of *Sweet Bird of Youth*.) As the catfish comparisons make grotesquely clear, the "old slut" is like a palimpsest with masculine physical features underneath—"hairs along her upper lips" and on "her chest where the neck of the underslip sagged down" (65). The "underslip" carries undeniable sexual implications for the narrator, suggesting Williams trying to come to terms with conflicted desires. In using her body as a sexual site, the narrator enters the world of a sexuality that does not neatly, or comfortably, dichotomize desire into male and female.

¶16

Appropriately leading the narrator (and readers) farther into a sexually ambiguous/unstable world, Williams has the hitchhiker "think of that hermaphrodite in the sidewalk show at Dodge City. The barker pointing to the woman-man standing in the window, one side of her a fully developed female and the other a man . . ." (65). Williams perceptively gives "Dodge City" as the location of the "sidewalk show." Since a hermaphrodite defies the dichotomous classification of the sexes, a city called "Dodge" is an appropriate name. Such a creature avoids being identified/typed as one gender or the other, hence a dodge. The Italian woman's looks and aggressive, manly behavior situate her, like the hermaphrodite, somewhere between male and female. Further situating the woman in a shifting, masculinized/feminized environment, Williams drapes her trailer—which itself suggests impermanence—with hermaphroditic food imagery. Phallic-shaped "strings of velvety red coxcomb" as well as vaginal-appearing "yellow gourds" hang on the trailer wall (64). Among her wares are "dried ropes of sage, dill, garlic, and red pepper" (65), conjuring up images of aphrodisiacs and dildos. Finally, she is associated with a piece of "rich, oily meat" (68) (one thinks of the masculine Stanley Kowalski throwing a package of blood-stained meat to Stella at the beginning of *Streetcar*) as well as with the "apple" (Eve's calling card).

¶17 Ironically, despite his expressed masculine gestures and desires, the narrator is associated with feminine imagery, indicating that he, too, is immersed in an unstable sexual dynamic. Possibly reflecting Williams's own close association with his sister Rose, the narrator is drawn, in reverie, to memories of "a dress his sister had worn one Easter Sunday." Thoughts of Easter flow into thoughts of "Confirmation," as the narrator recalls the pleasure of eating eggs, an indisputable symbol of women's sexuality (67). With an erogenous female intimacy, he recalls: "Eggs were good hard boiled. The white coming loose from the yellow center. The yellow a round ball, rich and grainy, forming a paste in the mouth and sticking to the teeth so that the taste remained for a long time afterwards" (67). An even more salient identification of the narrator with the feminine occurs as he anticipates sex with the old woman: "Inwardly he recoiled from the touch but he kept his eyes on her face" (68), manifesting his own shifting sexual desire/identity in an approach/avoidance response. When he tells her, "I'm still kind of hungry," she assails his masculinity by grunting: "You got nice skin like a girl's" (68). Her dismissive retort, and his polite response, "Thanks," undercut the masculine bravado of his earlier escapades with the eleven-year-old Greek girl. In fact, with this feminizing comparison, the Italian woman imagistically equates him with the young girl whose nervous sexual awakening he glibly contrasted with his own seasoned experience.

¶18 But the most telling way in which "Gift" looks ahead to Williams's later canon is through its cinematic style and techniques. This early story illustrates Williams's success at shaping a highly visual, spatial style. Like the plays, "Gift" centers on a few key visual images—the apple, the catfish—and radiates outward. Structurally, the story is far more sophisticated than much of Williams's other early fiction because he adroitly incorporates such filmic elements as high and low angle shots, light and dark contrasts, symbolic sounds, and splashes of color. Appropriately, the omniscient narrator puts great emphasis on seeing, on bringing other people and places into focus. Boasting of his ability to attract passing drivers' notice, the hitchhiker offers both a thematic and technical explanation for his cinematic engagement in the story: "You do it with your eyes mostly" (63). Eye imagery is of paramount cinematic importance in "Gift," with the narrator's eye functioning as a handheld camera or, better yet, a Steadicam strapped to his back. Williams's prose becomes the lens through which we receive the narrator's cinematic perspectives. When the young hitchhiker states that "he smiled and narrowed

his eyes but she looked away" (67), his observations suggest the focusing of a camera, its lens opening and shutting to capture the right image. Incorporating the camera's eye in his narrative scan, Williams also introduces the "I" of his projected persona—and thereby self-reflexively makes a movie of the desires of his own hidden life, a fiction of a fiction, so to speak. Given the relative sexual inexperience of its unworldly author in 1935–36, Tom Williams filmed his excursions into desire in "Gift."

¶19 "Gift" is a story of gazes, sexualized looks, blinks, and perceptions, both masculine and feminine, of landscapes and people, present and past. Like a roving camera, the narrator documents what he sees and where and how he is seen in turn. Reflecting Williams's cinematic style, we can almost feel the tension in the war of eyes between the young hitchhiker and the old woman. When the narrator first describes her, his eyes take readers, like a camera, where our eyes could not go but his desire can. "The back of the trailer faced him and as he approached it he could see through canvas flaps the shape of a woman" (64). A little later, we learn that "she went back inside. He saw her stoop over the basket again and take out another apple" (66). Her eyes, meanwhile, are almost predatory, symbolizing a position of power over him. Coming to the trailer, "He started to walk on by but caught the woman's dark eyes staring out at him through the canvas flaps. He stopped in the road . . ." (64–65). Later, he records, "Her eyes did not stop at his face. They went on down his body. He could almost feel them. He leaned back quickly in response to the suggested caress" (67). In prose suggesting a low-angle shot, the camera looks up from the young man's eyes as they follow her and are dominated by her image above in the frame. "She came out on the small platform. He heard the boards groaning slightly beneath her weight. She stood above him blinking with the sun in her eyes" (65). In yet another "frame," she runs her "fingers down his neck and under the collar of his shirt," and when she gives him "a slight, playful kick with the toe of her dusty slipper . . . . He looked up at her and saw it was no use to argue" (68). Her presence and control are defined and magnified by her vertical relationship to the narrator.

¶20 Obviously, the old woman does not have "Bette Davis eyes," but her glances prepare us for the female gaze for which Blanche DuBois would be (in)famous in scene 2 of *Streetcar*. Asking Stanley "How do I look," she flirtatiously enlists his help to button her dress, but when he cannot, she declares, "You men with your big clumsy fingers. May I have a drag on your cigarette?" (277), sizing him down and up. The woman's sexualized, feminine gaze in "Gift" may suggest a similar desire for the young narrator, but it is a *trompe l'oeil*, an illusion he comes to denounce when, at the end of the story, seeing her trailer, he transforms it into her grave: "His eyes went down once more to the trailer's peaked roof . . . . The old woman was in there like a catfish caught in a bottle" (68). From this perspective, which brings visual closure to the encounter, the narrator projects that "She would die someday. Some ugly disease like cancer." (68). Functioning like studio cameras, he and the old woman capture each other with their eyes in sexualized frames and angles that suggest the Hollywood dynamics that enlivened Williams's imagination and style.

¶21 As these examples of eye imagery suggest, "Gift" is framed from beginning to end with a strong sense of the cinematic. At the start of the story, Williams visually informs readers that they are entering a crucial juncture of the narrator's cross-country journey. "Gift" opens with a high-angle shot, "in which the camera is positioned *above* or at a high angle *above* the subject" (Dick 363) as the narrator comments that he is "leaving the range of low hills" and is now progressing down to the plane. As we accompany him, with the hills as backdrop, we see, hear, and feel the sights and sounds around him, including the "rhythmic thudding" of his backpack and "the sun very hot on the back of his neck" (63). As if framing the conclusion of the narrator's stopover at the old

woman's trailer, the last two paragraphs return us to the journey with which the story began. Williams's prose supplies another panoramic shot: the narrator "went on down the road," departing the trailer where he has been spurned. "He saw ahead of him, dimly, white frame buildings spotted with faint yellow light" (69), a synesthesia of symbols of his new hope and faith in his own sexual being. This last image is reminiscent of a freeze frame often found at the end of a film. The frame buildings, with their symbolic white color and the waning golden light, are frozen like a photograph in stark contrast to the image of the woman's sexualized trailer overrun with hermaphroditic imagery. The image of the "golden light" stays with us and the narrator as he continues his journey east with the "fresh and sweet" (69) taste in his mouth from the apple. His longing for a pure presence is fulfilled, ironically enough, by rejecting and being rejected by the Other.

¶22 Williams also incorporates a series of "memory flashbacks" (Dick 249) essential to the filmic techniques of his narrative. At least three such flashbacks occur, and the young hitchhiker introduces each with a careful eye to its place in his story, effecting a clear and coherent transition between past and present. The most significant flashbacks, of course, focus on the comparisons between the old Italian woman and the catfish. The way the narrator moves from the present (seeing the woman) to the past (recalling the catfish) is reminiscent of a *dissolve*, where one shot fades away as another fades in. "He thought of a bottle that he had once pulled out of the Sunflower River" (64) becomes the filmic cue for a dissolve-like transition. The woman fades in the narrator's eye (or camera) as we simultaneously see him and his friends diving, finding the bottle, and pulling it up to the surface. Through Williams's visual prose, the woman fades out or even overlaps into the catfish frame. Several catfish flashbacks, some of them only momentary, or the length of a side glance, are included in Williams's filmic diegesis in "Gift." Through these visual references, Williams imparts crucial information to readers as if they were in the movie theatre of the narrator's mind.

¶23 Similarly, when the old woman states that her son has gone into town to get drunk, the narrator rewinds his memory, giving readers another flashback, this time to the little Greek girl. Tom Williams's prose is doing sophisticated filmic work here: we picture the woman talking to the narrator about her son, which in turn prompts the narrator to visualize the Greek girl. It's as if the two shots come into focus, separate, and then merge or overlap—the image of the Italian boy receding as the eleven-year-old girl advances into the narrator's and our sight. Juxtaposing these two events/characters, Williams entertains audiences/readers with different angle shots through his filmic prose. In the narrator's flashback, the Greek girl seems to appear beneath him in the alley covered with "potato peelings and cantaloupe rinds and damp coffee grounds" surrounded by the "ash pit and the three huge garbage pails" (67). As this flashback fades, it contrasts with the narrator now describing himself on the steps of the old woman's trailer, looking up at her. Visually, he has changed positions with the young Greek girl, who was once at his mercy as he is now at the old woman's.

¶24 The narrator introduces another flashback when he sees the sun "sending . . . pale orange light between the feathery masses of pale grey cloud," which makes him "think of a dress his sister had worn one Easter Sunday" (67). Like the image of the catfish and the incident with the little Greek girl, an event from the past claims the present. Through the narrator's eye, we see "Streets paved with gold. . . . The black rails. Fire Escape? No. Tracks of the viaduct. And the train screaming by. . . . The soot flying in. Confirmation" (67). The highly expressionistic description of these events looks toward the sets and imagery of *The Glass Menagerie*, with its legendary screen devices. Cinematographically, we may even see in these events a "jump cut," or "abrupt transition from one location or time frame to another" (Dick 363), Easter to Confirmation to the now of the New

Mexico landscape. Again, Williams's keen, cinematic sense of the visual helps create two very different yet highly complementary shots. Just as the sun is fading away into "feathery masses of pale grey cloud," the narrator's camera-like eye opens as if in a dream sequence to the image of his sister's dress. Williams ominously introduces terror ("screaming" trains) and soot ("black rails") into an intended idyllic day.

¶25 Harold Pinter claims, again from his lecture on "Art, Truth, & Politics," that "a writer's life is a highly vulnerable, almost naked activity" (27). The young Tom Williams showed his own naked vulnerability in "Gift of an Apple" by explicitly describing various sexual encounters and identities that were far removed from his life experiences when he wrote this story. Yet through a nameless hero who, ironically, is defeated in obtaining yet another sexual experience, Williams may have redeemed and preserved his own idealized purity. This early story, which reveals much about Williams and his talents, contains a file drawer full of the animal symbolism, grotesque characters, and filmic techniques for which his plays would bring him worldwide acclaim. Boldly stamped with his authorial signature throughout, "Gift" helps to open up the complex space which the young Tom Williams inhabited in the 1930s and from which he emerged as Tennessee Williams.[3]

Notes

[1] Williams does make two key references to the story in his *Journals*. In the entry for March 11, 1936, Williams recorded: "Feel as tho my writing is all a lot of trash—except the one story 'Gift Of an Apple'—Maybe it will turn out to be the same when 'Story' sends it back" (11). We do not know how long he had been working on "Gift" before submitting it for publication, but he did not have to wait long for the rejection from *Story*, which would return twenty-one other Williams manuscripts over several years. The second *Journal* entry, dated March 19, 1936, reads: "'Gift of an Apple' goes to 'Amer. Pref.'" (18). But *American Preface*, which was sponsored by the University of Iowa and edited by Wilbur Schram there, also rejected the story.

[2] According to Gener, "The Parade, or Approaching the End of Summer," an early one act play, written in 1940, revised/completed in 1962, and first staged in 2006 by the Shakespeare Company (Minneapolis) on the Cape, in Provincetown, shows that Williams clearly came out of the closet in this lost play about his elegiac love affair with Kip Kiernan. But "The Parade" follows "Gift" by four years and a great many of Williams's travels. It would have been too provocative to be staged in 1940, or in the subsequent two or three decades as well.

[3] I am deeply grateful to Allean Hale for critiquing an earlier draft of this article.

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