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Warring Desires: Sex, Marriage, and the Returning Soldier

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“Marriage is an economic arrangement in many ways, let’s face it, honey.”

— Ernie Pyle, *Brave Men*

“We have got to conduct ourselves like men.”

— President Lyndon Johnson on the Vietnam War (1964)

Tennessee Williams was thirty-nine when the Korean War broke out in June 1950. *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Summer and Smoke* (1948) had already given him considerable success as a mainstream American dramatist. When the first U.S. combat troops, 3,500 marines, arrived in South Vietnam on March 8, 1965, significantly escalating the country’s commitment to the war in Southeast Asia, the playwright was nearly fifty-four, the commercially successful years of his career behind him. Neither conflict receives extended treatment in his work, perhaps because he had identified his own success with a more domestic scope—chiefly American, primarily concerned with the intensity of home life, its lies and evasions, its sexual dynamics. Yet in *Period of Adjustment* (1960) and *Green Eyes* (1970), Williams chose to write about the returning soldier’s rehabilitation, partly with a sense of moral outrage but mainly with a view to charting the breakdown of marital relations and the impact of war on sexual desire.

¹² *Period of Adjustment* or *High Point over a Cavern: A Serious Comedy*, premiering at the Helen Hayes Theatre in New York on November 10, 1960, is about the reunion of two Korean War fighter pilots, Ralph Bates and George Haverstick.¹ Both men are now married, but the play will imply that tensions in their domestic lives, particularly of a sexual nature, are attributable to their combat experiences and a consequent crisis of masculinity. George has only just started his honeymoon, and Ralph has been deserted by his wife, Dorothea, following his resignation from an insulting desk job at her father’s business, Regal Dairy Products. The position had been offered to him as a sweetener, an incentive for taking an aging and reputedly frigid daughter on the understanding that her father, Mr. McGillicuddy, will eventually succumb to a catalogue of ailments (diabetes, gallstones, a missing kidney). Dorothea has taken their son, Ralph Junior, back to her parents’ home, confirming what Ralph sees as an excessive, emasculating attachment to the child.

¹³ George has fared little better with his new wife, Isabel. She was formerly his nurse in Barnes Hospital, St. Louis, where he was recovering from a neurological condition caused by his experiences in Korea.² He has a visible tremor—referred to throughout the play—which has gone untreated by medical specialists because it is judged to be psychosomatic. Hailing from a puritanical background fostered by her father, Isabel is troubled by George’s drinking and repulsed by what she sees as his rapacious sexuality on their wedding night. When George drops her off on Christmas Eve at Ralph’s suburban bungalow in Memphis (the sole setting of the play), before departing to buy a bottle of champagne, she fears that she has been discarded. Ralph attempts to reassure her by explaining that couples have to go through a natural period of adjustment. However, when George returns at the start of the second act, the excessive camaraderie between the two ex-servicemen convinces Isabel that she has once again been overlooked.

^{¶14} Unable to adjust to his postwar situation, Ralph plans to fly out to a new life in Hong Kong. Alerted to this, the McGillicuddys appear to gather up property they regard as rightfully their daughter's; Dorothea, who has accompanied them, resolves to stay and talk through the marital difficulties, partly because she feels she has been too impulsive in walking out and partly because the expensive beaver coat Ralph has bought her for Christmas seems to speak of his underlying devotion. Isabel, also of a mind to abandon her husband, is persuaded to stay too, her hostile attitude to George's sexual advances softening into a sensitive understanding of his genuine psycho-sexual problems. The men make plans to move to Texas to raise longhorn cattle for use in films—and it seems likely, by play's end, that their wives will join them.

^{¶15} Also taking newly married life as its context, *Green Eyes* is set in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The play is a short one-act, its only characters being a honeymooning couple from the rural South, Mr. and Mrs. Claude Dunphy, and a waiter in the hotel. Claude is a soldier on leave, due to return to Vietnam in five days' time; he has been psychologically scarred by killing innocent civilians. The previous night, we learn, Claude sought oblivion in the bars of Bourbon Street and lost sight of his young wife. She met up with a sailor on shore leave, a man with "enawmus green eyes" (162), and proceeded to have violent sex with him, first in the street and then back at the hotel.³ She now has scratch and bite marks on her body, which she initially attributes to her husband's "sex-starvation" (152) and drunken amorousness of the night before. Yet when Claude informs her that she will receive none of his army paycheck, she gleefully relates the truth behind her battle scars. Branding his wife a whore, Claude claims that the sailor must have had "nigguh blood" (162). As the couple vows to get rid of each other, Claude suddenly senses the intensity of his wife's desire, sees it as a force he can draw from, holds her against her will, and starts to rip her clothes from her as the scene dissolves into a blackout.

^{¶16} Both plays present war through the emotional and psychological effects on individuals returning permanently or on furlough from Williams does not recreate vivid pictures of what might have occurred in the heat of battle; other than Claude's brief statement that he was ordered to kill screaming women and children, there is no attempt to convey the traumatizing effects of conflict. Furthermore, the plays contain little overt political commentary. George may be convinced that the government seeks to avoid compensation payments for disabled veterans, but neither this nor any other political theme is extensively developed. Williams is more fascinated with the difficulties of resettling into a domestic existence—especially the sexual dynamics of relationships—than he is with the expediency of entering into conflicts overseas or popular opinion concerning their cessation.

^{¶17} This is not to say that Williams did not have opinions on either war. Vietnam was, in his eyes, the continuation of an imperialist expansion that began with Korea. He saw America's participation in these wars as an undesirable flexing of military muscle that altered the country's character forever. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1975, he commented that Korea marked the onset of a "moral decay" that reached its apogee with the manufacture and deliberate destruction of immensely powerful weapons for use in Vietnam, an arsenal that gave America the unenviable reputation of being "the death merchants of the world" (Devlin 292). The whole country, he believed, was trapped by a dearth of humane values engendered by this endless cycle of production and wastage.

^{¶18} If it is possible to make a distinction between them, Williams was always more troubled by military aggression than by the political decisions that led to war and ensured its continuance. In a 1966 interview with Walter Wager, he observed that the "military cruelty"—burnings and napalm spraying—constituted something

“incomprehensibly evil” and confidently foresaw that there would be no gains “worth the life of a single man” (Devlin 128).⁴ And in December 1971, he seized the opportunity to denounce the war at a benefit at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. Here he addressed the immorality of America’s military engagement, stressing the importance of resistance and assuming a role for himself as a protest writer (Rader 114).

^{¶9} Evidence of dissent, though, is far from overwhelming. Williams’s 1965 novella *The Knightly Quest* makes none-too-veiled references to America’s exploits in the Far East—the remoteness of these activities variously ridiculed in the playful names Kwat Sing How, Ghu-Ghok-Shu, Wah Sing Mink, and Krek Cow Walla—as part of a broader satire on the nation’s domestic and foreign policies. In *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, Woman Downtown cynically believes that the war against Asia amounts to “genocide for profits undeclared” (337). And an article, “We Are Dissenters Now,” appeared in Harper’s *Bazaar* in 1972 in support of the People’s Coalition, an organization comprising various radicals and pacifists opposed to America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. However, Williams’s social conscience rarely extended to actual protest. The disquiet he registered, the large political context to which he sometimes alluded, would, more often than not, be overshadowed by personal relationships—sexual politics providing safer (because familiar) terrain.

^{¶10} This is the case with both *Period of Adjustment* and *Green Eyes*, even though each centers on heterosexual marriage, a subject Williams could only experience vicariously. Indeed, he presents marriage not as a settled state where minor disagreements stem from a range of domestic problems, nor as a tired convention where infidelity has become routine, but as something that is almost solely dependent on sexual compatibility.

^{¶11} Both George Haverstick and Claude Dunphy show signs of being inhibited sexually but also have moments when their desires become predatory—partly to compensate for a fear of impotency and partly because they seem to be able to block out their wartime experiences when either sufficiently relaxed or, paradoxically, threatened. George, highly conscious of his shakes, attempts to avert the humiliation he dreads will mark his wedding night by drinking enough to become a sexual aggressor. This also enables him to project his impotence onto Isabel—although her reluctance to sleep with a husband who has become violent is increased by her own conservative upbringing. Williams complicates the relationship by suggesting a frigidity in Isabel that is independent of George’s aggression, a fear of sex derived from excessive love of her father. Isabel inevitably measures men against her father, who has exerted a tight control over her life and inculcated strict morals. He has even attempted to prevent her from becoming a nurse, fearing that, outside of his influence, she will be corrupted by male patients. Isabel is not necessarily looking for an authority figure, but any man she meets must have her father’s strong principles.

^{¶12} Ironically (in view of her father’s fears), Isabel is unsuited to nursing—not because she is vulnerable to male patients, but rather on account of her squeamishness (she, too, has left her job, dismissed because she fainted during surgery). At the end of the play, she has the confidence to redefine herself, not professionally but as someone with universal healing powers: “The whole world’s a big hospital, a big neurological ward and I am a student nurse in it. I guess that’s still my job!” (93). Her romantic notion of working alongside handsome doctors as a Florence Nightingale figure—the initial attraction to the profession—has been replaced by a less selfish and superficial motive, one that permits her, by play’s end, to overcome her timidity and parade her sexuality before her husband.

^{¶13}

Ralph and Dorothea have been married longer than George and Isabel, but the play shows that periods of adjustment are necessary for both couples. Ralph's attempts to reassure Isabel about George's dependability are made with the conviction that his own marriage is irretrievable. In his mind, he has disposed of Dorothea along with the job supplied by her father—the package of civilian life he was able to grasp after his return from Korea, one that seemed to guarantee future riches. Ralph feels that his war record is not properly recognized, that he should automatically command the respect of his fellow countrymen. It irks him that he is not married to a more attractive woman, one for whom he has not had to sell himself short; and he is frustrated that he is unable to bring his son up in his likeness to embody the masculine values of the time.

¶14 The men's dreams of Texas invoke images of traditional masculinity, albeit images created by and filtered through television westerns. Yet Cold War America presents certain obstacles to the performance of masculinity—and proves, in this regard, a less nurturing environment than Korea. While Dorothea and Isabel will likely follow their husbands to Texas, they are not as biddable as the prostitutes the men have visited in the Far East. The wives may not constitute a real challenge to patriarchal order, but they do represent potential threats to their husbands' certainties about sexual performances—and, more widely, to the decade's cozy images of heterosexual bliss.

¶15 Overarching these concerns is a general sense of displacement. As Mr. McGillicuddy points out, Ralph has no opportunity to be a hero in a political stalemate: "A cold-war hero, ha ha, is not such a hero, at least not in the newspapers" (77). Deprived of the oxygen of publicity and the warrior identity that is such an important prop in supporting reintegration, the veteran is shown to be in limbo. His strong sense of personal worthlessness, and the lack of official networks to support him, leaves him figuratively dead. As Ralph says, he and George "repeatedly died in two wars and were buried in suburbs named High Point" (85). Cheap suburban housing developments, dotted across the nation, hang precariously over caverns of emptiness, their subsidence cracks symbolizing the fissures under society's surface.

¶16 In *Green Eyes*, Claude, like George, could be suffering from what is today termed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: the reliving of painful past events and the anxiety and/or depression that this might cause. Though he has no visible palpitations, he seems troubled by the killing mission he was forced to carry out and witness in Vietnam and seeks solace in alcohol. Although the Vietnam War gave rise to many incidents involving needless civilian casualties, it is possible that Williams was responding to the appalling My Lai Massacre of March 8, 1968. Expecting to find Vietcong soldiers in a village in Quang Ngai province, Charlie Company, under the command of Captain Ernest Medina, murdered some five hundred civilians.⁵ One unit, led by Lieutenant William Calley (who would later be charged with war crimes but serve only three years of a life sentence), was responsible for a killing spree conducted "part maniacally, part methodically, over a period of about four hours" (Bilton and Sim 3). Adding to the hideousness of the massacre, the killing was "accompanied by rape, sodomy, mutilations, and unimaginable random cruelties" (3).

¶17 Whereas Ralph Bates expects to be respected as a hero long after returning from combat, Claude has to defend himself from immediate charges of cowardice and a lack of patriotism. His new wife is unimpressed by his sensitivity, feels that he should follow the orders of his senior officer unconditionally, and believes that the Vietnamese victims are no better than animals. Her naïvely unsympathetic attitude is perhaps attributable to her upbringing in the rural South, a world away from the mainstream counterculture that started to organize vociferous, often violent, demonstrations in the late 1960s. She sanctions racism and brutality, even as soldiers

from her country seek to reinforce and expand the type of colonial rule to which Williams objected. In truth, though, politics and her husband's psychological problems are secondary considerations: she is more preoccupied with financial support and fulfilling her apparent need for sadomasochistic sexual relations.

¶18 As in *Period of Adjustment*, mutual sexual satisfaction is afforded huge significance. Unable to forgive what she perceives as Claude's cowardice and his withholding of money, the girl thinks nothing of betraying her husband immediately, not even waiting for his return to Vietnam—the possibility of being caught no doubt contributing to the thrill of the sex. The sailor's sexual performance is so good that she is desperate to follow him, prepared to throw off her marriage completely. Before the girl reveals her sexual exploits, the Dunphys have a series of arguments that suggest underlying problems in their relationship—accusations of dishonesty, jealousy, and violence—and threaten to bring them to the brink of separation. From the outset, they seem to operate as individuals rather than a couple, each declaring separately their intention to get up out of bed. They bicker over calling room service for breakfast, lighting a cigarette, sightseeing, and the precise circumstances in which a middle-aged couple are having breakfast on the hotel's patio—a symbol of love and togetherness they are unlikely to emulate. For all his distress at killing women in Vietnam, Claude harbors aggressive feelings towards his own wife. He hopes that if he does not beat her up then some other man will, labeling her a prostitute who would not be out of place on a Bourbon Street corner.

¶19 When Larry Blades outlined some of the behavioral problems of Stanley Kowalski, “the decommissioned warrior under stress,” at the 2008 Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference, he referred to incidents in scenes three and five of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in the context of typical situations and modes of behavior identified by the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (1). Following Blades's argument, Stanley's drinking and violence are not just part of the male world he seeks to hang on to as a married man, but indicate increased hormone levels and, as a result, heightened stress following the trauma of Salerno. Furthermore, Stanley is desperately trying to rebuild a meaningful home environment while under attack from a hostile presence: Blanche. For Claude, the threat is posed by his own wife. Questioning his virility and patriotism, she takes the first opportunity to be unfaithful to him and is able to use the cloud of Claude's inebriation to accuse him of sleeping with a stripper. She makes him out to be the sexual transgressor before mocking his inadequacies: his “Feelin' me like a melon t'see if I'm ripe” (156) is a sorry attempt at lovemaking. At the height of their argument, she tells him to masturbate into a foxhole (poking fun at his frustrations as a soldier) because he cannot have her or any other woman. Then, of course, there is the implied inferiority to the green-eyed sailor, the size of whose eyes represents an unobvious code for his impressive phallus.

¶20 The same green eyes are a sure sign of “nigguh blood” (162) to Claude. He defends the Vietnamese he has killed against his wife's ignorant claims that they are animals—but when threatened sexually, his nemesis is (as he sees him) African American and riddled with venereal disease. A backwoods racist, Claude states authoritatively that “A whore fucked by a nigguh *is* burned black” (163): she is no longer useful/desirable to white men, her pigmentation figuratively cauterized. It would appear at this point that Claude, like Ralph and George, has mentally rid himself of a woman he no longer finds useful. Like George, who has suddenly decided to look up his former war buddies, Claude has already raised the possibility that he may console himself in the company of a fellow soldier while his wife goes sightseeing on her own, no doubt believing that male companions will be both more loyal and understanding. However, unlike the conciliatory resolution of *Period of Adjustment*, the conclusion of *Green Eyes* finds Claude converting his desire for violent retribution—“You'll

know it's finished when I knock your teeth in, you whore!" (162)—into a sadomasochistic scenario in which he pleads on his knees to be burned by the scorching heat of her desire before tearing her "*flimsy wrapper*" (164). The absent sailor becomes a real presence, a fantasy so potent and tangible that the girl is reduced to uncontrollable sobbing and rendered incapable of resisting Claude's strength. In a moment of great intensity, Claude figuratively shares his wife with his most despised sexual adversary: a black man. The soldier sent to halt the advance of Communism in an unstable foreign country, whose army routinely employed chemicals such as Agent Orange to flush out its enemy, returns to find his own wife possessed and colonized.

¶21 The future of the couple's marriage is hard to predict; indeed, the audience is not asked to consider the future, the steaminess of the closing moments being everything. The ability of sexual desire to obliterate all else, to suspend domestic life and render questions of morality irrelevant, is ultimately the focus of this short play. Vietnam may complicate the couple's relationship, giving further grounds for disagreement and accounting for Claude's mental and physical absence, but the war is essentially a plot device and not the dominant issue.

¶22 In both of the plays discussed in this essay, Williams depicts the returning combatant in complex terms. On the one hand, the combatant is shown to be another archetypal misfit, desperately trying to find a connection. His heterosexual marriage is hampered by an inability to resettle into civilian life, the barometers of which are healthy sexual relations and a willingness to respect women as something more than mere objects. On the other hand, he bears the physical and mental scars of the innocent abroad, manipulated by a government intent on policing remote areas of the world and paranoid about the threat of an insurgent Communism. Used to the company of men and accepting without question the orthodoxies of masculinity, Ralph Bates and George Haverstick cling desperately to concepts of themselves as proud, robust lovers and heroes who merit special respect, both at home and in the workplace. Unable to gain satisfaction in their current situations, they turn to the old myth of the West—not so much as a means of reconnecting with former traditions and reclaiming a close tie with the land, but as a way of riding the national wave of western nostalgia. Denied appropriate validation of their service overseas, they embrace another masculine stereotype—that of the cowboy appearing on the ubiquitous household television set.⁶

¶23 Like Ralph and George, Claude Dunphy is an unwitting victim of a dubious foreign policy. Anxious about returning to a war zone where he is required to murder innocent civilians, Claude is equally destabilized by an errant wife who questions his manhood and, at the slightest opportunity, threatens the trust of a marriage that has barely begun. He is under siege—not by antiwar protesters, but by his wife's brutal fantasies and materialism. The play's alternative title, *No Sight Would Be Worth Seeing*, comments on the anticlimactic experience of sightseeing in New Orleans, while also implying that Claude will have to accept his wife's dalliance and incorporate her fantasy in his own lovemaking. Only when he has made this adjustment can he face his other demons in Vietnam.

¶24 If, as Cassie Carter contends, masculinity in *Period of Adjustment* "is an absolute that has been corrupted by female influence and modernity" (208), it has also been problematized in both plays by America's ambivalence towards war veterans, who, after Korea and Vietnam, find themselves nonentities or, worse, symbols of a nation's guilty conscience. Though neither play consistently addresses larger political issues, the war legacy permeates characters' every action. Williams's bold image of a crumbling domesticity teetering on the brink of a precipice in *Period of Adjustment* cannot be divorced from the foreign policies that would come to haunt America through the sixties and beyond. For Williams, could prove to be a very serious comedy.

Notes

¹ *Period of Adjustment* was first produced at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, but this was a work in progress, a series of tryouts. The early version of the play was written in 1957.

² Ironically, Williams would be temporarily committed to Barnes Hospital by his brother, Dakin, in 1969.

³ In interviews given in 1970 and 1973 (with Tom Buckley and C. Robert Jennings respectively), Williams referred to his infatuation with a fellow student at the University of Missouri, known only as “green eyes” (Devlin 170, 231). His desire for this roommate was so intense—Williams recalls that he only had to be touched on the arm to have an orgasm—that he surely had him in mind when later writing a play about such an explosive encounter with a stranger. Perhaps the Green Berets, the U.S. Special Forces serving in Vietnam, also helped to suggest the war background.

⁴ Williams may be deliberately echoing the senator of Alaska, Ernest Gruening, who, in voting against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, commented that “all Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy” (*HistoryPlace.com*).

⁵ Annette Saddik explains that the text she has used for *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays* is based on the script sent by Audrey Wood, Williams’s former agent, to New Directions on September 17, 1971. It incorporates changes Williams had made in a later version, *No Sight Would Be Worth Seeing*. Allowing for the delay in exposing the events of My Lai, Williams’s indirect reference must have been a very topical one.

⁶ Gavin Hastings points out that fighter pilots in the Korean War “considered themselves the elite, despite the irony that their prospects of survival were significantly better than those of the ground attack pilots” (310). He also explains that veterans from many member countries of the United Nations could count on a lukewarm reception on their return, Korea being viewed as “a running sore, belatedly cauterised in July 1953” (409).

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