

The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

“The Ghost of a Man”: The Quest for Self-Acceptance in Early Williams

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Number 4

Scholarship on the works of Tennessee Williams from a gay perspective is increasing every year, but thus far, there has been little attention to his one-act plays.^[1] John Clum, author of *Acting Gay*, focuses primarily on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*; his analyses, while provocative, fail to account for the complexity of Williams’s gay subjectivity even when he tempers his harsher commentary in *Still Acting Gay*, a revision of the earlier work. That Tennessee Williams was a product of his own time is clearly evident in his own ambivalence about writing openly gay plays in the pre-Stonewall era. However, by studying plays written as early as the recently published *Not About Nightingales* suggests, it becomes clear that homosexuality was an issue he wanted to explore openly even at the beginning of his career. An examination of three plays from the first published edition of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other Short Plays* provides a case in point.

^{¶12} In many works Tennessee Williams attempts to negotiate his own identity as a gay subject. As with his more effective full-length plays, the closet clearly serves as a central trope of *Auto-Da-Fe* and *Something Unspoken*, both one-act plays which appear in the collection. More problematic as a “gay” text is the unusual tale *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, which explores the relationship between a man and his cat. Through the use of stereotypes and symbols signifying a gay subtext in these plays, Williams encodes his own same-sex desire as well as his voice as a gay subject. While quite different in plot and tone from one another, these early plays demonstrate a similar symbolic function of disclosure and revelation—and the playwright’s attitudes toward self-acceptance and self-denial of his gay identity.

^{¶13} Written about 1941, *Auto-Da-Fe*^[2] may be labeled a “closet” drama in that “homosexual,” “gay,” and comparable words do not appear. Elsewhere, I have attempted to define the closet as a protective space which one inhabits for fear of disclosure and which one may use to lie to others or to one’s self.^[3] Looking at this play from this perspective, a contemporary reader especially will recognize that the young postal worker’s conflict concerns his own homosexuality and his inability to cope with this fact of his life. Thus, early in his dramatic career, Williams explores the problem of achieving self-acceptance as a gay man. This play clearly adds fuel to John Clum’s critique of Williams as a self-loathing homosexual, but the drama seems far more complex than such a reading might suggest.

^{¶14} Playing on the stereotype of the gay male as a mama’s boy, Williams establishes at the beginning that the main characters, Eloi and his mother, Madame Duvonet, still live together even though Eloi is in his late thirties and well within his adulthood. Throughout the play the mother dominates the son, criticizes him for being unkind to the boarder, and reinforces the stereotypical and Freudian view of gay men as mama’s boys. Operating primarily through innuendo and using a passing reference to Sodom and Gomorrah (“cities destroyed by the justice of fire”—code for a commonly interpreted biblical condemnation of sodomy), the play discloses the hidden secret of Eloi, his homosexuality—and his difficulty of accepting himself as a gay man.

^{¶15}

A photograph serves as the central symbol of the unacknowledged sexual identity of Eloi—the “closet” surface of his existence. While working as a postal worker, he obtains a photograph with two naked figures in it. A religious fanatic, Eloi is uncomfortable with the “lewd photograph” (116) and cannot admit to his mother what exactly appears in it. Although the play never discloses the gender of each figure in the photograph directly, Williams nevertheless makes it clear that a young university student is sending the picture to an “opulent” antique dealer (code for homosexual) from the French Quarter of New Orleans, the play’s setting. Presumably, a younger and older man are pictured.

¶16 Curiously, Eloi visits the young university student purportedly to warn him about sending naked photographs in the mail, but the student understands Eloi’s motives better than Eloi understands himself. In this passage Eloi at some level recognizes that the student has suggested that he is making sexual overtures when Eloi says to his mother, “And then the sender began to be ugly. Abusive. I can’t repeat the charges, the evil suggestions! I ran from the room” (117). Thus, the photograph is used as a catalyst for the growing self-awareness within Eloi of his own homosexuality. Furthermore, it is one of the earliest representations of the taboo nature of the gay male gaze in Williams’s plays, which I have defined elsewhere as redirecting “the traditional heterosexual man/woman dichotomy to center on the male body, blur the distinction between heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman, active/passive, and subvert traditional representations of the male (and gay male) subject” (“The Truth” 107). Also, the threat of blackmail from the young man parallels the plight of many closeted gays of Williams’s generation; fear of disclosure was commonplace.^[4]

¶17 Another important symbol in the play is the roomer. When the play begins, the audience learns that Eloi distrusts Miss Bordelon, the boarder, whom he suspects comes into his room and “roots through my things” (107). Miss Bordelon, while never appearing on stage, functions to suggest that Eloi rightfully fears disclosure. Her name hints at the word “bordello” and calls into question the alleged purity of both Mme. Duvenet and her son. For if the boarder belongs in a bordello, the rooming house of the Duvenets closets them from the truth about her as well as themselves. The rooming house thus becomes a physical symbol of Eloi’s closeted identity—his denial of himself. While seemingly paranoid to the reader, Eloi’s fears become justified at the play’s end when Williams indicates that the boarder has slammed the door inside the house (120).

¶18 Early in the play, his mother hints at Eloi’s real “problem” when she suggests that “A person would think that you were concealing something” (108). Because he cannot face his sexual desires for the young man, who is only nineteen, Eloi is not content simply to destroy the picture as his mother suggested. At play’s end Eloi sets fire to the house; an explosion is heard, and Eloi and the boarder are burned to death inside. He must purify himself—what Signi Falk calls “retribution” (33)—and the boarder for seeing the truth of homosexuality. The “fiery light,” as Williams refers to it, represents Eloi’s desire for cleansing after gazing at the nakedness of the two figures whom he desires (120). In this action Williams refers to the blinding light of truth,^[5] a motif running throughout his works, and alludes to the biblical story of Noah and his sons, who are forbidden to see their own father’s nakedness—the male body. In an analysis of Williams’s short fiction, Reed Woodhouse classifies Williams as a “carnal” gay writer and points out that “His characters have bodies, his narrators and the other characters . . . are intensely aware of those bodies” (38). What Eloi is unwilling to accept is himself as a body—as a sexual being.

¶19 Ironically, the purification also enables Eloi to break free from the shackles of the closet. If the boarding house is the closet of protection from the outside world, it is also the closet of protection for Eloi. By burning

his symbolic closet, Eloi illustrates the dangers of the closet—the problem of being cut off from one’s own sexual identity—while at the same time representing the freedom of burning down the closet door. This ambivalent view of homosexuality prevails, for the play ends with the fire—with Mme. Duvenet shouting “The house is on fire!” (120).

¶10 *Auto-Da-Fe* is a study in repression and disclosure. The gay subject is clearly present, but he cannot cope with his sexuality in a positive way; for, very much like Williams himself, his religious upbringing dictates that he must purify himself from his “sinful” thoughts and identity. Eloi is so afraid of accepting his homosexuality that he is willing to die to preserve his secret; as a loving son, he can also protect his mother from the truth and preserve the family’s good name. Peggy Prenshaw says the play illustrates “very well self-condemnation and guilt that attach to sexuality, especially if anything is thought perverse or abnormal about it” (18); and Neal Lester suggests that Eloi’s tragedy is “his failure to realize the complexities of the human condition and of his own emotional needs and physical desires” (8).

¶11 As a play about a young man tormented over his homosexual inclinations, *Auto-Da-Fe* foreshadows such later Williams’s treatments of the gay subject as *Suddenly Last Summer* (Sebastian Venable) and *The Night of the Iguana* (Miss Fellowes). A number of elements of the play anticipate later representations of gay subjectivity: the intimate relationship between mother and son (cf. *The Glass Menagerie*), the problem of the closet, the difficulty in accepting one’s sexual and human side, and the desire for punishment.

¶12 In contrast, *Something Unspoken*, written at some time before 1953, reflects the problem of acknowledging one’s own lesbianism—one of Williams’s few treatments of the lesbian subject. Nevertheless, the play subtly explores the problem of self-acceptance for homosexuals. Not only does this work draw on the historical oppression of the “other” via the long-term relationship between Cornelia Scott and Grace Lancaster, but it also indirectly portrays the social disapproval of overt female sexuality within the context of a Southern genteel tradition.

¶13 In a play reminiscent of Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* for its treatment of a lesbian/quasi-lesbian companionship, Williams acknowledges the life-affirming nature of the two women’s relationship. Cornelia, the main character, has seemingly come to terms with the nature of her love for Grace, her younger secretary and companion of fifteen years. Despite the distraction of the Confederate Daughters’ election, Cornelia is ready to acknowledge “something unspoken” between them. In a relatively bold statement for its time, the matriarch tells Grace: “It’s just that I feel that there’s something unspoken between us that ought to be spoken” (233). A strong Southern spinster, Cornelia has dominated the Southern community of which she is a part for many years and is displeased that the Daughters of the Confederacy, a symbol of her heritage, is being taken over by women unaccustomed to Southern tradition. Despite the fact that Robert Bechtold Heilman calls Cornelia “a tyrannical woman operating in the context of New Orleans ‘Garden District’ values” (77) (the play actually is set in Meridian, Mississippi) and that she has played the dominant role in the relationship between her and Grace, Cornelia shows love and devotion for Grace—as well as an openness and honesty associated with later gay representation in drama and film. Her willingness to acknowledge the truth of their love for one another indicates her desire to equalize and validate their relationship.

¶14 The play uses the “wall” to represent symbolically not only the barrier in communication exhibited in the relationship between the two women, but it also functions as a symbol of the “closet” to which their relationship has been confined as a result of society. In trying to avoid admitting the nature of their feelings for one another,

Grace tells Cornelia, “Also I know that when a silence between two people has gone on for a long time it’s like a wall that’s impenetrable between them” (234).

¶15 Despite her status as a woman of the Old South, Cornelia comprehends the unusual nature of their affection toward one another and admits that her identity has been kept private for years: “People who don’t know me well are everybody! Yes, I think even *you*! . . . *Am I sentenced to silence for a life-time?*” (232). Cornelia can no longer allow the love between the two women to go unacknowledged: “How blind of you not to see how desperately I wanted to keep you here forever!” (237). Regardless of Cornelia’s attempts to make Grace face the truth of the nature of their relationship with one another, the play ends with the “something” still not articulated.

¶16 Grace tells Cornelia, “But I do know some things are better left unspoken” (234), suggesting her acceptance of illusion as a way of life and her own internalized homophobia. Grace will not allow Cornelia to profess the truth about their relationship, for she tells Cornelia, “I’m not strong enough, bold enough, I’m not—” (235). The last line which Grace utters symbolically voices the truth, but she still cannot “name” her love: “What lovely roses! One for every year!” (238). Roses, as tokens of affection, certainly convey the romantic nature of the women’s friendship and represent an attempt to confront the closeted nature of their relationship. Grace cannot admit her love for Cornelia openly, but the text clearly suggests that Grace’s self-realization of her lesbian feelings has taken place. Suggesting the positive, affirmative nature of the play, Neal A. Lester calls it a “celebration” of “an attraction between older women” (7).

¶17 In each of these plays, Williams exposes the potential “problem” of speaking about something so private and frightening as homosexual feelings. Each play describes the difficulty of self-acceptance and self-acknowledgement. Both of these plays demonstrate the effects of silence and utterance on an evolving sense of self within gay men and lesbians. In neither case can the characters fully accept themselves as human beings in need of love and connection. Whereas the earlier play, *Auto-Da-Fe* portrays homosexuality as a taboo which the gay subject is often unable to acknowledge because of religious and social constraints, in *Something Unspoken* at least some acceptance of Cornelia’s lesbian identity has been realized.

¶18 More problematic and complex when read as a gay text, *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, written at some time around 1946, deals with the relationship between the young factory worker and his cat—with whom he develops a kind of love. This play is a revised version of “The Malediction,” a short story which was first published in 1945. While the literal details of the story might suggest bestiality—as the landlady facetiously suggests—the play actually encodes homosexuality through the metaphorical relationship of the weak, tubercular man and his cat.

¶19 A common stereotype of gay men is that they tend to choose those animals as pets which are perceived as feminine and unmanly—as something women would more appropriately possess. Anyone who has ever seen the films of *Midnight Cowboy* or *The Boys in the Band* recognizes the homosexual through his effeminate mannerisms and his adorable poodle dog. Cats themselves are often associated with feminine sexuality, so perhaps this is the root of the assumption (at least until more recently) that gay men like cats better than dogs, which “real men” like (an interesting parallel to the use of the “cat” in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). *The Strangest Kind of Romance* exploits this stereotype and is not really a play about a man and a cat. By drawing on stereotypes of the gay man, Williams attempts to encode gay subjectivity. In actuality, the play could be read as a commentary about the interplay between the feminine and the masculine—androgyny—within the gay male and within relationships between humans and animals.

¶20

Again set in a rooming house, the drama discloses homosexuality only indirectly. In the play Williams recalls his rooming house experiences in New Orleans in the days when he was just coming out—a fact that Lyle Leverich explores in his biography, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. The room here again symbolizes the protection of the closet. Of himself, Little Man confesses his problems with identity to the landlady: “The body is only—a shell. It may be alive—when what’s inside—is too afraid to come out! It stays locked up and alone! Single! Private!” (146). As long as Little Man is in his room with Nitchivo, he can feel secure and invulnerable. He can find the protection of the closet.

¶21

As Old Man tells him, there is a “rare and beautiful trust” between him and his cat—a trust that demonstrates the “warm and complete understanding of two or three in a close-walled room with the windows blind to the world” (149-150). As this passage suggests, the play’s language emphasizes being closed in by and frightened of exposure from the outside world—an experience not uncommon for gay men even today. However, Nitchivo, the alley cat with whom Little Man becomes infatuated, takes his fascination and care for her for granted. Assuming the cat is so devoted that she would never leave him, Little Man brags, “She hasn’t forgotten how dangerous life can be for a lonely person” (148). The theme of the loneliness of the human spirit appears here in conjunction with the relationship between Little Man and the cat. Ren Draya points out that the story demonstrates Williams’s “skill in evoking the loneliness and terror of a vulnerable individual” (651).

¶22

Even from the beginning Little Man is encoded as a gay stereotype, a man who is “dark and more delicate and nervous in appearance than laborers usually are” (135). He refuses the sexual advances of his landlady—choosing instead the cat as his partner. The landlady comments: “You’re not a man at all, you’re a poor excuse” (152). Through each character Williams is able indirectly to critique assumptions about what behavior is “natural” and “unnatural”—a frequent argument in the debate over homosexuality. As the landlady says, “What we musn’t do, is disregard nature. Nature says—‘Man take woman or—man be lonesome!’ . . . Nature has certainly never said, ‘Man take cat!’” (144). In an almost campy tone, Little Man retorts, “Nature has never said anything to me” (144). Through this exchange Williams calls into question what “natural” behavior is and thus undercuts arguments that homosexual relations are “the strangest kind of a romance” (144).

¶23

Nevertheless, as always, there are intruders on Little Man’s private existence—another roomer, Mrs. O’Fallon; the landlady, who represents what Old Man calls “the mad, insatiable wolves in the hearts of men!” (150); and the Old Man, a symbol of Walt Whitman, the gay sage and a symbol of God. The roomer and the landlady function similarly to Miss Bordelon in *Auto-Da-Fe*; they interfere with the privacy of the couple’s relationship and disrupt the fantasy world or closet of the “mismatched” lovers. The Old Man symbolizes the wisdom of eccentricity and the problem of suffering and martyrdom. A Christ figure, he is taken away as a lunatic and becomes a martyr: “Cupidity and Stupidity, that is the two-armed cross on which you have nailed me!” (151).

¶24

In addition, Old Man collects bottles—which become a symbol for the souls God will take to heaven in time. The Old Man—Walt Whitman—seems to be the God figure who endorses the unusual relationship between Little Man and Nitchivo. In Williams’s world God supports love, no matter how strange and, unlike the landlady who considers the relationship “unnatural,” saves Little Man by having Old Man find Nitchivo at the play’s end. Old Man also represents the voice whereby the Little Man throws off the shackles of the closet and embraces his affection toward his cat and the comfort of the landlady, who has other things on her mind. Williams suggests the necessity of freeing oneself from the closet by uniting with another being in this line:

“I’ve lived too long in a room that was nothing but windows and always at noon and with no curtains to draw. Turn out the light” (152). Embracing the darkness, Little Man clings to the woman for connection to another lost soul in the dark. She lulls him to sleep like a child, with some suggestion that she seduces him, though in Scene IV, Little Man, in some ways an innocent, claims she visited him only to sing and “wonderingly” considers Boxer’s innuendo that their relationship might have been otherwise.

¶25 Little Man’s heterosexual adventure—if one can call the landlady’s lullabies and caresses for him at night such a thing—is subverted by the gay playwright. He is no heterosexual, and he is certainly not stereotypically masculine, as his encounter with Boxer, who could be a stand-in for Stanley Kowalski, makes clear. As if to reinforce the cat as a feminine symbol, Boxer says, “My relations with cats is strictly—*laissez faire*! Know what that means, buddy? Live and let live—a motto. I’ve never gone *out* of my way . . . to *injure* a cat. But when one gets *in* my way, I usually *kick* it!” (154). In this passage the reference to *laissez faire* and the word play of “in” and “out” here and throughout the play almost suggest that Williams is toying with the concept of “coming out”—of crossing the boundaries which society has thrust upon him as a gay man and a writer in America. These lines from Boxer also indicate that a “man” in the traditional sense dislikes cats and is even cruel toward them and those like them, including Little Man.

¶26 Once Little Man enters the life outside the room and goes to the factory, where he becomes nothing more than a machine, he risks losing his relationship with Nitchivo and his protected space. Similar to Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine*, this play critiques the dehumanization of the proletariat. As Nancy Tischler writes, “This little man, symbolizing all little men everywhere similarly entrapped, spends his days in the factory and his nights with his cat, which offers him love and security” (38). After Little Man loses his beloved Nitchivo and is fired from the factory—also a symbol of a closeted, dehumanizing existence—the landlady, whom he has embraced at the end of Scene Three, becomes the vicious bitch Old Man has portrayed her as being. She turns Little Man out of his room and is responsible for the cat’s disappearance. True to Williams’s form, the landlady must admit her participation in the destruction of the shell of a man as well as the cat: “Imagine! Holding me responsible for a sick cat. . . . I guess I am. But who isn’t? (157). Everyone is accountable for their actions toward the fragile and the defenseless in Williams’s world.

¶27 Ironically, Little Man finds his cat and resumes their relationship. The play ends as the landlady refers to them as “The funniest pair of lovers! The ghost of a man—and a cat named Nitchivo!” (158). Reminiscent of Carson McCullers’s portrayal of the grotesque and quasi-homosexual relationships in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, *The Strangest Kind of Romance* makes a plea for tolerance of difference and human compassion. Even the landlady at the end says she is glad the two have found one another again and the play ends happily, with the music “louder and triumphant” (158). Of course, the relationship to which Williams’s title refers is clearly encoded as a metaphor for gay romances—and even those between humans and cats. Concerning Little Man, Felicia Hardison Londré has observed: “His term of occupancy of the room is similar to a passage through life, with its sufferings temporarily obliterated by carnal satisfaction, but with spiritual solace gained through a ‘strange kind of romance’ with another lost being, a cat” (49).

¶28 In this play Williams also employs gay intertextuality. From the beginning, the voice of Walt Whitman is heard. The Old Man is described as resembling Whitman, and he waxes philosophically throughout like the poet becoming the Over-soul in “Song of Myself.” Espousing a quasi-transcendentalist view of nature, he tells his daughter-in-law, the landlady, and Little Man: “Even a sparrow—leaves an empty nest for a souvenir” (140). A

blind seer, he finds the cat for Little Man after she has been lost. The references to Whitman, spokesman for the “love that dared not speak its name,” reinforce the value of unusual and strange relationships (to society, which is often not *laissez faire*) which the play espouses. Another example of gay intertextuality appears in the play’s epigraph to Hart Crane’s “Chaplinesque,” in which the speaker refers to “a kitten in the wilderness” as a part of life’s journey and the problem of human isolation and identity.

¶29

In each of these works, Williams experiments with themes related to the negotiation of the closet which he develops more fully in such plays as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Small Craft Warnings*. While looser in form and characterization, these early plays suggest Williams’s constant ambivalence about and struggle toward self-acceptance in a period of widespread homophobia and oppression. Analyzing these three early plays, which appear in the original edition of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays*, reinforces the thinking of many contemporary critics that examination of the gay subtext of Williams’s works seems far from complete.

Notes

¹ In addition to Clum’s two books, recent studies offering “gay” readings of Williams’s plays include “From *Summer and Smoke* to *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*: The Evolution of the Queer Alma,” also in Clum; Nicholas de Jongh, *Not in Front of the Audience*; James Fisher, “The Angels of Fructification: Tennessee Williams, Tony Kushner, and Images of Homosexuality on the American Stage”; in Mark Lilly’s *Gay Men’s Literature in the Twentieth Century*; David Savran’s *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*; Dean Shackelford’s “Is There a Gay Man in This Text?: Subverting the Closet in *A Streetcar Named Desire*,” in *Literature and Homosexuality*; Dean Shackelford’s “The Truth That Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*”; and Michael R. Schiavi’s “Effeminacy in the *Kingdom*: Tennessee Williams and Stunted Spectatorship.”

² The term, which literally means “act of faith” and originates with the Spanish Inquisition, refers to the burning of heretics and points to the conflict between the flesh and the spirit—the body and God—at the heart of many Williams plays.

³ In the essay “Is There a Gay Man in This Text?” I suggest that the “closet” is a central trope throughout the Williams corpus and define the term in the following manner: “a hidden secret, which may or may not be revealed to the self or others; a disguise and pretense to protect the self; a means of escape from the everyday world of harsh reality; or a shell of protection to lie to or avoid the rejection of others” (136). For assistance with theorizing the “closet” as a trope in Williams’s plays, I am especially indebted to Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Butler’s “Imitation and Gender Insurrection.”

⁴ Neil Miller’s *Out of the Past* chronicles the effects of witchhunts during the McCarthy era and the threat of blackmail. A film set in the 1950s, *Advise and Consent*, directed by Otto Preminger, particularly points out the vulnerability of politicians with any “gay” background to blackmail.

⁵ Among Williams’s plays, this motif is most memorable in the scene in which Mitch removes the paper lantern in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. However, this idea runs throughout the Williams corpus and is especially important to an understanding of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Orpheus Descending*.

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