

*“The Love that Dare not Speak its Name”:
The Concept of the “Outcast” in
Tennessee Williams’s Trilogy*

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For Mom, Dad and Ghazi
without whom...

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Abstract

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The aim of this study is to explore some of the possible motives behind the social denunciation and the inevitable tragic end of the heroes in three of Tennessee Williams’s plays: *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Digging beneath the symbolic sacrificial charm with which Williams wraps the death of his heroes, the study attempts to unveil the nature of their crimes from the perspective of their patriarchal societies. The thesis concludes that it is precisely the ways in which the hero deviates from the traditional image of the “ideal man” and the doctrines of masculinity in Cold War America that result in his social stereotype as an unbearable outcast and in his ultimate death.

The three plays are studied within the framework of sex-role theory and male homosocial desire theory. Sex-role theory primarily sets men and women in binary oppositions and implicitly assumes that the characteristics of each sex are equally valued and complement each other

in a balanced way. Male homosocial desire, on the other hand, is a measure of male bonding practices and a method of emphasizing the structure of men's relations in a patriarchal system. Unlike the previous theory, it admits the different power levels between men and women and views women as exchangeable property for the consolidation of bonds between the men who "possess" them. It argues that the maintenance of patriarchy is dependent upon heterosexual relations.

Cold-War America has consistently limited the concept of masculinity within a strict framework of the white, heterosexual male whose emblem is power, competence, efficiency, dominance and achievement. Williams's attempts to destabilize mid-century notions of masculinity and femininity is accomplished, in part, by his ability both to expose the often murderous violence that accompanies the exercise of male authority and to valorize female power and to support the female's right to express her sexual desires. By the same token, his works undermine the hierarchical structure of masculinity itself by disclosing the contradictions on which its normative formulation is based and by celebrating various subjugated masculinities.

In the chosen texts, Williams breaks a taboo by revealing the fragility of the concept of masculinity upon which patriarchal systems are based. *Suddenly Last Summer* raises the homosexual potential often denied in a patriarchal ideology as it threatens the basis of male bonding. In *Orpheus*

Descending and *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams presents examples of couples that reverse the very principles of the sex-role theory with a symbolically castrated male and a phallic female. In a Cold War America where there seemed to be a need to redefine the “real” American masculinity, Williams responds by deconstructing the very notion of masculine identity itself.

Introduction

Tennessee Williams Revisited

“To begin with, I turn back time.” Here I want to make a move similar to Tom Wingfield’s in the *Glass Menagerie*: to begin by looking backward. Almost twenty years after his departure, when it may seem that nothing has been left unsaid about him, Tennessee Williams continues to bask in a nationwide obsession with his work. His best-loved plays still dominate the American repertory, half a century after thrilling audiences for the first time. Now, in the third millennium, it is not only *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that are winning over audiences but also Williams’s lesser-known works. In short, Williams seems to speak in a way that rattles through time.

On the artistic level, Williams inhabits a central place within the American theater as he animates the middle years of the twentieth century. His centrality is connected with the original nature of his theatrical imagination. The animating principle of Williams’s theater is his celebration of language, a poetic language that makes the word flesh. When David Mamet describes Williams’s plays as “the greatest dramatic poetry in the American language”(124), he expresses the generally held opinion that Williams brought to the language of the American theater a lyricism unequaled before or after.

Williams invigorated his language by refining what he termed his “plastic theater” that incorporated the use of lights, music, sets, and so forth. He intended his new theater to “take the place of the exhausted theater of realistic conventions”(“Production Notes” to *The Glass Menagerie* 7). His plays abound in incidents and scenic elements that shatter the conventions of domestic realism. Williams began his career in an era of scenic innovations in the theater, and the *Glass Menagerie* immediately makes use of elaborate lighting and translucent scenery. The stage becomes a flexible play of light and shade where stage lighting and sound used to interpret words and gestures. Jo Mielziner, who designed the sets for *Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and other first productions of Williams’s plays, found in Williams an “instinct” for visual movement. “If he had written plays in the days before the technical development of translucent and transparent scenery, I believe he would have invented it”(124).

Characterization is one of Williams’s strongest achievements as a dramatist. His people are imaginatively conceived yet so convincing that it is tempting to take them out of context and theorize about their lives before and after the action of the play. Often the protagonist is an outcast, misunderstood and suspected by the community. Unable to claim the position of “hero,” the Williams protagonist is frustrated and disaffected.

There lies a deep disruption in the relationship between the individual subject and the culture of which he is a part. Despite some critics' views which narrowly view Williams as morbid and pessimistic, there is optimism and hope in his plays. His compassion for his characters is boundless; there are few villains in his work. In *Where I Live* Williams writes: "I don't believe in villains or heroes – only right or wrong ways that individuals have taken, not by choice but by necessity or by certain still-uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances, and their antecedents"(15).

Despite Williams's reliance on more traditional modes of dramatic conflict, his plays, even his most popular ones, move toward inconclusive endings, suspending rather than resolving contradictions. He does not attempt to center the action on a heroic male subject who is provided with an illusory stability and substantiality. One can begin to understand Williams's deep antipathy to theatrical realism, and also his status as a postmodernist in his fragmentation of narrative and of the subject, and in his questioning of universal claims. He seems to have anticipated many of the theatrical practices that now pass as postmodernist.

Another important contribution Williams made to the stage of his day was in airing subjects formerly considered taboo, including homosexuality, nymphomania, and rape, all denounced in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by a number of critics who viewed the work as "obscene,"

“a sewer,” and “a cesspool”(Ganz 31). Failing to recognize the lyricism and symbolism of the plays, most of the early critics saw only the subject matter, which they frequently found shocking. Williams defended the “unlocking and lighting up and ventilation of the closets, attics, and basements of human behavior and experience” as an advance in modern theater and insisted that “no significant area of human experience, and behavior reaction to it, should be held inaccessible, provided it is presented with honest intention and taste”(qtd. in Devlin 17).

Tennessee Williams was a writer who called himself a revolutionary and meant it; a playwright who produced a new and radical theater that challenged and undermined the Cold War order, particularly in the way he negotiated the questions of gender and in his defiant attitude towards the dominant and the “deviant” notions of sexuality that have prevailed in the United States since World War II.

This characterization of Williams as a revolutionary is at odds with the portraits offered by many of Williams’s critics. Most ignore the political implications and resonances of his plays as decidedly as they ignore his homosexuality, preferring to deal with questions of characterization and theme, and hypostatizing character psychology to a stultifying degree. For these critics, Williams is the quintessential modern dramatist of desire and sexuality, obsessed with and absorbed by the most deeply private aspects of life. Even Raymond Williams sees Williams’s plays as

an instance of bourgeois art at its most solipsistic, as the very essence of what he calls private tragedy, a drama peopled by “isolated beings who desire and eat and fight alone,” whose emblem is the “animal struggle of sex and death”(119). In contrast, C.W.E. Bigsby considers Williams to be one of the very few who address the social implications of a character’s deterioration and credits the “subversive” quality of sexuality in his work. Yet he characterizes the playwright as a nostalgic rebel and argues that Williams’s “was not a political rejection of capitalism but a romantic’s reaction against the modern”(33).

Unquestionably, there is in Williams’s work an almost constant movement back and forth between the political and the sexual. Although Bigsby is certainly correct to note this strain of romantic rebellion in Williams’s work, I believe that his radicalism is far more complex and vigorous than Bigsby makes it to be, and that it deeply destabilizes mid-century notions of gendered subjectivity and dramatic form. Unlike Bigsby, I believe that the work of Tennessee Williams offers an urgent challenge to the stubborn antitheses between the political and the sexual, and between the public and the private, binarisms so crucial for the normative constructions of gender during the 1940s and 1950s.

Having said this, it seems obvious that my purpose is no less than applying the tactic of deconstruction criticism which is defined by Terry Eagleton as:

the critical operation by which such binary oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown partly to undermine each other... Woman is the opposite, the other of man: she is non-man, defective man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male first principle. But equally man is what he is by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite, defining himself in antithesis to it, and his whole identity is therefore caught up in the very gesture by which he seeks to assert his unique, autonomous existence.

(115)

Despite Williams's commitment to a theater of resistance, he was never a political activist. He was never associated with the American Communist party, never considered his political views "of particular importance in his work" as an artist. In his *Memoirs* and in interviews dating from 1940s until the end of his life, he insisted on his continued commitment to radical political change: "I was a socialist from the time I started working for a shoe company [1931-34]"(293). Insistently, he underscored the broadly social foundation for the personal tragedies with which so many of his plays are concerned, pointing out that the individual subject is not an isolated monad but a component of a "society" that insistently "rapes the individual." Time and again he stated his fierce opposition to social and political tyranny, to the Vietnam War, to racism, to the oppression of women and to the persecution of homosexuals. In his *Memoirs*, he several times describes himself as revolutionary in both "personal" and "artistic" terms (142).

The purpose of this study is to reexamine three of Tennessee Williams's early plays so as to illustrate how Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth* dramatize most vividly his thematic trilogy of male sacrifice and martyrdom.

In Williams's work "martyrdom" has a blend of Christian and pagan connotations. Val Xavier, the itinerant sexual magnet of *Orpheus Descending* (1957), is immolated with a blowtorch on the night before Easter. Chance Wayne, the hustler hero of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), is castrated on Easter Sunday. In between these two plays and acting as a queer gloss on them is the grotesque parody of the Eucharist in Sebastian Venable's crucifixion and consumption by the street urchins he was involved with in paid acts of sex in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). These three martyrs, Sebastian Venable, Val Xavier, and Chance Wayne, are sacrificed for violating their proscribed roles in the patriarchal sex/gender system.

I want to focus here on the handsome male as a sexual martyr in these three plays, on the dynamics and erotics of the martyrdoms, and more importantly on the ways in which his deviation from the conventional image of masculinity results inevitably in his social rejection. To discuss Williams's depictions of the sex/gender system, one must also examine the relationship of homosexuality and heterosexuality in his work.

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ملخص

الحب الذي لا يجرؤ على ذكر اسمه: مفهوم "المنبوذ"
في ثلاثية تنسي وليمز

الطالبة:
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تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استكشاف بعض الدوافع الكامنة وراء الشجب الاجتماعي والنهاية
المأساوية الحتمية لأبطال ثلاث من مسرحيات تنسي وليمز: فجأة في الصيف الأخير , هبوط
أورفيوس و طائرالشباب الجميل . و في محاولة البحث في أعماق جمال التضحية الرمزية التي
يغلف بها وليمز موت أبطاله, فإن هذه الدراسة تحاول أن تكشف النقاب عن طبيعة الجرائم التي قد
ارتكبتها هؤلاء الابطال من وجهة نظر مجتمعاتهم الأبوية. تخلص هذه الرسالة الى أن الأساليب
التي ينحرف من خلالها البطل عن الصورة التقليدية "للرجل المثالي" و عن المبادئ الأساسية
للكورة في أمريكا أبان الحرب الباردة هي التي أدت الى قبولته اجتماعيا كشخص منبوذ يصعب
احتماله و بالتالي الى حتمية موته.

لقد تمت دراسة هذه المسرحيات الثلاث في اطار نظرية الأدوار الجنسيه (Sex-Roles) و
نظرية رغبة التجانس الاجتماعي الذكوري (Male Homosocial Desire). تضع نظرية
الأدوار الجنسية الرجال و النساء في ثنائية متضاده و تفترض ضمنيا أن خصائص كل جنس
مقدرة بشكل متساوي و متممة لبعضها البعض بصورة متوازنة. أما بالنسبة لنظرية رغبة
التجانس الاجتماعي الذكوري فهي معيار لمدى ممارسة الترابط الذكوري و أسلوب للتأكيد على
بنية العلاقات الذكورية في النظام الأبوي . خلافا للنظرية السابقة فإن نظرية رغبة التجانس
الاجتماعي الذكوري تقرّ بتفاوت مستويات القوة بين الرجال و النساء و تعتبر النساء ممتلكات

Speaking Its Name Conceptualising homosexuality is only one problem that "gay scholars" face, (a)historically naming these is another.²⁹ Bristow notes that especially in the late nineteenth century and the decades that follow "c]ultural transformation in the naming and perception of dissident sexualities" is certainly uneven.³⁰ The Homosexual or homosexuality, as already established, is a concept of the latter half. The original German term Homosexualität had been coined in 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny; the first English use of homosexuality can be found in the translation of Krafft-Ebing's medical handbook *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1892.³¹ However, public usage of the Antistrateu, the god of war, wanted a kingdom of creatures so powerful that they would reign over the world with their strength. The soil was made of part of his flesh, always hungry for the blood of its foes. And Antistrateu's wife Mnemosyne planted green life all over the land and spread fruits, flowers and birds of blue to symbolise wisdom and loyalty as opposed to the husband's preferred violence. Tears of Antistrateu's victims graced the sky as glimmering stars. The Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name is the 4th episode from season 6 of *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy*. When Gladys asks Billy what he wants to be when he grows up, he decides wants to be a Reaper, like Grim. So, humoring him, Grim shows Billy how to be the 'messenger of death'. When Billy sees a girl that looks like him, he becomes smitten. But this girl is trouble when Blandy first agrees to be Billy's girlfriend, and then claims to actually loves Grim instead. Billy becomes jealous and