

**“There was something different about the boy”:
Queer Subversion in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire***

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Abstract: Although queer drama is commonly regarded as “product” of an essentially nineties discourse of postmodern revisionism, this paper examines how Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) queerly subverts and implodes heteronormative ideology. Intrinsic and elusive traces of a “queer philosophy” can be located as a foundational context and motivating factor in Williams’s play. To this effect, the critical approach to this text aims to reflect on issues of sexuality and identity in the historical, cultural, and social context of mid-twentieth-century America. A further aim is to isolate specificities concerning the construction and representation of masculine dynamics through a queer-inflected approach.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, American Drama, queer, sociosexual dynamics, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity

Queer Defiance and Tennessee Williams

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Tennessee Williams employs a double performance: a highly visible heterosexual performance, and a homosexual one, the richer of the two in terms of possible readings and interpretations, but which occupies a place in the subtext—hidden behind the doors of the white straight America of the 1950s. However, in spite of the fact that the gay character is almost always physically absent in *Streetcar*, an economy of homoerotic desire is present throughout the text. Williams manages to ally his homosexual economy of desire to a heterosexual one imposed by heteronormativity. Simultaneously, the playwright also exposes the violence that is part of the exercise of an authoritarian masculinity and enhances women’s power and sexual desire (Savran 81).

Even though in *Streetcar* homosexuality remains “unsaid”, the visibly marked “persona” and “sensibility” that characterized cultural understandings and stereotypes of the homosexual are glaringly abundant. Thus, in this particular play, homosexuality is conveyed through “the eyes of the beholder” and, therefore, opens to audience interpretation (Clum 84). Despite the fact that *Streetcar* is problematic due to its influential stereotyping of homosexuality, its dual textuality and refusal of conventional narrative resolution also allows it a queer potency that is commonly underestimated. Whereas the homophobic elements of the audience can find pleasure and satisfaction in the gay character’s tragic fate, more sympathetic (or identifying) audience members can also find equal pleasure and satisfaction in these characters’ “deviant lifestyles”, thereby epitomising homosexual “resilience” and “perseverance” despite social oppression and violence. Thus, the chameleon-like identity of the homosexual in Williams’s play and the “danger” of being subversively encoded can be regarded as having much more in common with a radical queer theatre than the more fixed attempt at assimilation in such mainstream works of later gay theatre: a theatre based more upon the affirmation of an essential identity that is safely distanced from the normative.

Accordingly, theatre historians, gay critics, and queer theorists who have written key texts in the field contribute to the queer-inflected examination of the play offered in this

paper through their leading readings of gay male sexualities in American drama.¹ The main conclusion that emerges from a review of this literature is that this scholarship has been offering numerous examinations of gay individuals as continuously victimized and passive and consequently, it has been lacking a focused examination of gay individuals as active and victor, who when represented on stage confront the dominant ideology. Thus, this essay offers a reading of *Streetcar* as a challenging text. The play is here examined not as plea for acceptance, but as a text that confronts heteronormativity.

The queer subversiveness of *Streetcar* resides namely to a great extent in its social, political and historical context. The representation of homosexuality in American theatre was outlawed until the end of the 1950s for fear that it would lead to “the corruption of youth or others”, or that such productions would attract homosexuals to the audience “thus creating a visible presence and, therefore, a threat to the enforcement of invisibility” (Clum 74). As a result, “closet dramas” of this period saw sexual deviance as a tempting lure of the forbidden, wherein homosexuality was fluidly invoked and yet simultaneously disavowed actual articulation. Homosexual characters and relationships were commonly inferred through stereotype and an encoded structure of signs through which homosexuality could be deciphered. As John M. Clum proposes, a performative homosexuality was embodied through a “catalogue” or “combination of selections”:

Table 1
“Combination of selections”

Effeminacy (mincing, limp wrists, lispings, flamboyant dress)
Sensitivity (moodiness, a devotion to his mother, a tendency to show emotion in an unmanly way)
Artistic talent or sensibility
Misogyny
Pederasty (as we shall see, this became the stereotypical formula for homosexual relationships, with its connotations of arrested development and pernicious influence)
Foppishness
Isolation (the homosexual’s fate, if he or she remained alive at the final curtain)

John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000. 77.

The aim of such “combination” was, of course, to attempt to universalize a system by which the invisible “danger” of homosexuality could be exposed. Heterosexist culture could thereby seem to be given privileged and empowered access to the identification and marginalization of its deviant other, but ironically the establishment of such a system also

¹ See, for example, Duberman’s *Stonewall*; Chauncy’s *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*; Curtin’s *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*; De Jongh’s *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*; Senelick’s *The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner*; Sinfield’s *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*; Clum’s *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*; Savran’s *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture*; Dolan’s *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance*; Vorlicky’s *Act Like a Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama*; Román’s *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and Aids*.

provided a means by which the homosexual could “pass” in heteronormative society by refusing to enact such a performative system: “[t]he homosexual character is often trapped in a ritual of purgation—of identifying and eliminating. Visual stereotypes allow the playwright and performers to enact this ritual without ever naming what is considered unspeakable” (Clum 78). Williams’s *Streetcar* is here argued to be an example of this “ambiguity”.

Williams (1911-1983), one of the most important and influential American playwrights of the twentieth century, was responsible, together with his contemporary Arthur Miller, for the creation of an American drama independent of the European models. Both Williams and Miller were part of those marginalized groups of the domestic revival: Williams was homosexual and Miller was associated with the American communist party. Producing their most important works during the mid-forties and the beginning of the 1960s, their theatre apparently corresponds to the models of the ruling ideology. However, the subversion is held inside, or from these models.

Surveillance, arrest, police harassment, gay men imprisoned in violent wards, a government-sanctioned, organized drive to single out homosexuals in the workplace: this was the atmosphere in which Williams wrote *Streetcar* (D’Emilio 32).² In this context, Williams’s play depicts a weak and unadjusted masculinity, where the homoerotic menace appears close to being materialized. The gay character is usually constructed as physically absent, being only materialized through the characters’ memories. Alternatively, the female characters are strong and dominating, constructed with an authoritative sense of presence. Williams gives voice to the marginalized minority that did not fit in the ideological structure of the Cold War period and his work is revealing of the anguish of men and women who would not find, in this structure, any kind of personal identification (Savran 6).

Visibility and Masculine Performativity in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

A Streetcar Named Desire had its Broadway opening on 3 December 1947 at the Barrymore Theatre. It was directed by Elia Kazan, with Stanley played by Marlon Brando, Jessica Tandy as Blanche, and Kim Hunter as Stella.³ John M. Clum describes the rupture that the hyper-masculine character Stanley meant in the history of American theatre:

In 1947, Tennessee Williams wrought a revolution in American Drama by making a male character, Stanley Kowalski as played by Marlon Brando, the object of gaze and of desire. A man was placed in the spectacular position heretofore held by women. A man was looked at, admired, lusted after. (25)

Streetcar not only placed men as “object of gaze and of desire”, but also represented women as sexually active (Sinfield 189). Furthermore, by embodying desire in Blanche and Stella, Williams represents a heteronormative system that represses and condemns this kind of sexual desire, but does not, however, condemn physical violence against women.

In Scene Ten of *Streetcar*, Stanley rapes Blanche, whilst his wife is in the hospital giving birth to their first child. Stella’s reaction when returning home and hearing about the rape through Blanche is to institutionalize her into a psychiatric facility. Stella wishes to

² For a detailed historical account on homosexuality in the 1950s see, for example, John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970*.

³ In 1951, after directing the play on Broadway, Kazan directed the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh, playing Stanley and Blanche.

erase these memories from Blanche's mind, and, thus, protect her family. Stella, in a conversation with her neighbour Eunice, who, like Stella, lives with a violent partner, justifies her decision:

STELLA: I don't know if I did the right thing.

EUNICE: What else could you do?

STELLA: I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.

EUNICE: Don't ever believe it. Life has to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going. (217)

Within the heteronormative system represented in the play, both Stella and Eunice depend economically on their husbands, and possibly for this reason, privilege a relation of submission in relation to their partners to any other familiar or affective bonds. Conversely, Stanley places homosocial relations above marriage. Heteronormativity is embodied in all male characters of the play, and in particular in Stanley's heteronormative model of masculinity. Stanley is constructed as the real American "macho":

Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and the pride of a richly feathered bird among hens. (128)

Blanche also describes Stanley within a primitive model of masculinity: "Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is—Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle!" (163). Stanley also defines himself as a prime example of the postwar ideological model of the American man, even rejecting his Polish origins: "what I am is a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack" (197).

In a context in which the woman is usually the object of the erotic gaze, Stanley competes with Blanche for this position, and this is where the heteronormative system begins to be subverted in *Streetcar*. In a clear mutual sexual provocation, Stanley and Blanche confront each other, repeatedly throughout the play, with the minimal amount of clothing. On first encountering each other, Stanley takes his shirt off: "My clothes're stickin' to me. Do you mind if I make myself comfortable?" (129). Blanche is unnerved by, but cannot help gazing at, Stanley's torso, just like the audience.

Laura Mulvey argues that audiences identify with the male protagonist:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (426)

Mulvey focuses on the general placing of male subjectivities at the centre of Hollywood cinema and on the male's gaze on the female body. On the other hand, Kaja Silverman focuses on the lack of representation of the female voice:

To allow her to be heard without being seen would [...] disrupt the spectacular regime upon which mainstream cinema relies; it would put her beyond control of

the male gaze, and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze sustains. (135)

Both authors ignore, however, the possibility of the gay male gaze in their arguments and are only centred on the heterosexual paradigms male/female and active/passive. Thus, both Mulvey and Silverman present heterosexual-oriented arguments, ignoring gay or lesbian subjectivities that might change conventional views of the gaze. Nevertheless, considering Mulvey's and Silverman's theories on filmic representations, which consider that heterosexual-oriented cinema places the male subject at his centre, it is possible to argue that in *Streetcar* Williams places himself and his own gaze at the centre by clearly perceiving Stanley as "sexy" and presenting him as such. This gay male gaze redirects the heterosexual male/female dichotomy to the male body, distorting the distinction heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman and active/passive. Williams constructs Stanley's hyper-masculinity against the implicit homoeroticism of homosocial bonds and frames him within the heteronormative system, but, however, by constructing him as "a richly feathered bird among hens" (128), Williams places Stanley as object of gaze and desire, both straight and gay. This erotization of Stanley's male body, if only paratextually, has a subversively queer force that undermines the play's heteronormative model.

Mitch, however, is totally different from Stanley, even in the way he describes how sweaty he is: "I am ashamed of the way I perspire. My shirt is sticking to me" (178). Mitch is not "sexy". However, as Blanche states, there is a quality that opposes him with the other men in the play: "[A] sort of sensitive look" (146). Blanche knows through her sister, Stella, that Mitch is single, that he takes care of his sick mother and that he has a precarious job at the same place where Stanley works. According to Stella, Stanley is the only man in the group with a better job, which also positions him above the other men. Mitch and Blanche have a relationship in the play, but their relationship is of pure self-interest: Mitch wants to get married and Blanche is a poor and ageing Southern belle looking for economic support and affection.

Mitch is tolerant at first of Blanche's idiosyncrasies: he agrees to see her only in poor lighting; he respects her, satisfying himself with small displays of affection and kindly hoping for more. However, when Stanley tells him about her past, he rejects her, and the last shred of hope Blanche might have clung to thus disappears, as Mitch is "Stanleyized" (207). Furthermore, at the end of the play, when Blanche is being taken to a psychiatric institution, Mitch only says to Stanley: "You! You done this, all o' your God damn interfering with things you—" (224), being quickly restrained by Pablo and Steve. Mitch, as well as Eunice, Steve, Pablo, and Stella became Stanley's accomplices, upholders of the patriarchy that has imposed violence and silence on minorities for millennia, all reinforcing the visible heteronormative structure of the play.

Yet, Blanche's dead husband is present throughout the play to destabilize this same structure. Allan only appears through Blanche's memories and although he may be a dead homosexual, out of sight to the audience and symbolic of a closeted existence, Williams insists on his continuing influence through the "Varsouviana", which Judith J. Tompson calls "an aural symbol of her guilt", and through the sound of the gunshot and of the locomotive (34). In many ways Allan's death is the cause of Blanche's destruction, and it is one of the most crucial elements of the play as well as of Blanche's personal, cultural and social background. Although the homosexual character does not appear in the play, he exerts a tremendous influence on its development as well as on various levels of its interpretation.

In fact, *Streetcar's* queerest passage is Blanche's description of Allan Grey, placed "at almost the exact center of *Streetcar's* eleven scene structure, as if all dramatic action prior to it radiates backward and all after it projects forward, further emphasizing its often neglected importance" (Poteet 30):

He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking—still—that thing was there... He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't find out anything till after our marriage when we'd run away and come back and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me—but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. (182-183)

Like Stanley, Blanche describes Allan in terms of his masculinity: he was not "effeminate looking", referring to the reassuring cliché for the dominant culture of the time that all gay men were feminine, but, on the other hand, she says that "there was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's". In this part of Blanche's description she partakes in the general enforcement of gender roles in the heteronormative system of the play, which constrain men to repress their feelings and hide their fragility. Further into Blanche's description she says that Allan came to her for help, which could have happened if Allan saw himself as "ill" and sought a "cure" in Blanche, but was too terrified to confide in her.

Blanche then describes how she found out about Allan's homosexuality: "In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty—which wasn't empty, but had two people in it" (183). Allan was caught in the act and as a result Blanche told him: "I know! I know! You disgust me" (183). A western heteronormative society expresses its homophobia in various ways, but one of the most common learned notions is that of disgust. The homosexual as cultural "other" is he who does things with his body homophobic society refuses to envisage and is shocked when compelled to visualize. Hence, Blanche finding out "in the worst of all possible ways". As Antony Easthope puts it:

the dominant myth of masculinity demands that homosexual desire, if it cannot be sublimated, must be expelled. And this governs the prevailing attitude towards male homosexuals. It accounts for homophobia, the fear of homosexuality, and for the way that gay individuals are made into scapegoats [...]. Homophobia strives manfully to eliminate its opposite, the thing which causes it. It does this mainly through three operations which are understood by psychoanalysis as projection, hysteria and paranoia. (105)

Many critics argue that Blanche remains homophobic after the death of her husband, but I believe she in fact evolves considerably in this respect. Her initial homophobia is

diminished by her feelings of guilt and her subsequent identification with Allan, as they are both victims of heteronormativity.⁴

Blanche's and Allan's guilt, and the guilt and homophobia of many other characters in Williams's theatre, led to the characterization of Williams as a self-hating homosexual, namely by Gore Vidal and John M. Clum.⁵ The guilt which Williams's characters feel may echo the guilt of the homosexual writer "born in the Episcopal rectory" and raised "in the shadow of the Episcopal church" (Devlin 58). Guilt may have been unavoidable for Williams in the repressive political atmosphere of the 1940s and 1950s which "were extremely turbulent and trying decades for gay men and lesbians in America" (Savran 84). However, sketching Williams as a self-hating homosexual would ignore the deeply homophobic culture of the 1940s and 1950s and its internalization in the author (Savran 84).

After all, it is this homophobic culture and reigning heteronormativity that drove Allan to neurosis, and then to suicide. Through him, it drove Blanche to neurosis, and then to a psychiatric institution. Blanche's tragedy is above all the result of a severe hegemonic masculine dramatic structure, which at the same time allows for gay pleasure to be derived from the play. As William Mark Poteet argues "psychic theatres, infused into the play, allow gay men, especially gay men of the day, a way to derive pleasure from the homosexual representation of Allan and his friend", in addition to the pleasure of gazing at Stanley, which ultimately leads to subliminally subvert the ruling hegemonic system (33).

Queer Ghosts

In *Streetcar*'s final line, Steve says "[t]he game is a seven-card stud" (219). Indeed, and in particular in 1947, it is the heteronormative masculinity that controls the game. However, it is through these same games of power between the characters of the play that a gay identity is presented subliminally, while what is visible to the public is Stanley hegemonic masculinity and his dominion over the remaining characters. Thus, and although the homosexual character in Williams's *Streetcar* appears as a memory of the past, Alan's sexual identity pervades the entire text.

The theme of homosexuality in *Streetcar* is indeed more crucial to that play than most critics recognize. Although the references to it are fleeting, it has a subterranean presence throughout. It demonstrates Williams's consummate skill in describing the homosexual figure in elaborate, refined, and sympathetic terms, in presenting homosexuality in a subtle, elusive, and profound manner. At the same time, in this play, Williams demonstrates the estrangement of the homosexual and the extent of the social pressure operating against him, as Allan, unable to endure the pressure of the sudden public revelation of his homosexuality, killed himself with a gunshot to the head.

To conclude, I do not intend to claim here that Tennessee Williams was a gay militant, whose only aim was to discuss things queer, but instead that he certainly had an interest in letting the silenced be allowed to speak. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as demonstrated in the examination offered in this essay, Williams allowed the silenced to speak by queering "before", "after" and "besides" the text.

⁴ See, for example, John M. Clum's "'Something Cloudy, Something Clear:' Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams".

⁵ See Gore Vidal's "Introduction" to *Tennessee Williams: Collected Stories*, and Clum's *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*.

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