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The Unkindness of Strangers: Exploring Success and Isolation in the Dramatic Works of
Tennessee Williams

A thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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May 2017

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Keywords: Isolation, homosexuality, sexual deviance, disability, Tennessee Williams, "The
Catastrophe of Success," *The Glass Menagerie*, *Vieux Carre*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*,
Orpheus Descending

ABSTRACT

The Unkindness of Strangers: Exploring Success and Isolation in the Dramatic Works of

Tennessee Williams

by

Chelsea Gilbert

This thesis aims to explore the theme of isolation in the dramatic works of Tennessee Williams using his essay “The Catastrophe of Success” as the base theory text. The essay attacks the American idea of success through an in-depth examination of the “Cinderella myth” that Williams claims is so prevalent in both Hollywood and American Democracy. Williams’ deconstruction of this myth reveals that America’s love for stories like it results in the isolation of three groups: homosexuals, women and the physically disabled and terminally ill. Williams passes no judgment on his characters, instead showing their lives as they truly are. Through *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Vieux Carre* (1977), Williams gives readers and audiences a glimpse into the lives of isolated individuals, and the struggles each group faces.

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AWKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer of this thesis would like to thank the following individuals:

Katherine Weiss, head of my thesis committee, for her endless support and guidance. I would not be the academic I am today without your help. Thank you for further fostering my love for drama and Tennessee Williams. Most of all, thank you for seeing my potential.

Michael Briggs and Kevin O'Donnell for agreeing to advise me through the writing process and offering suggestions along the way. Thank you for believing in me and my ideas.

Rachel Maynard, the best friend I will ever hope to have. Thank you for being my audience, my proofreader and my shoulder to cry on when things got rough. I hope you will always find success, no matter what you choose to do. You are incredible.

Tucker Foster, for your continual encouragement and willingness to travel great distances for much needed library materials. Thank you for making me laugh on my roughest days.

Christopher and Bonnie Gilbert, for their tireless patience and interest in my work. Life with a graduate student is never easy, but you two made it through beautifully. I love you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	6
2. GOLDFISH INTO CANARIES: THE ISOLATION OF HOMOSEXUALS.....	12
3. BATTLE AGAINST ANGELS: THE ISOLATION OF WOMEN.....	23
4. YELLOW CAB PEOPLE WITH LIMOUSINE ASPIRATIONS: THE ISOLATION OF THE DISABLED OR TERMINALLY ILL.....	37
5. CONCLUSION.....	50
WORKS CITED	53
WORKS CONSULTED	56
VITA.....	57

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In fact, I can't expose a human weakness on the stage unless I know it through having it myself.

--Tennessee Williams, from the foreword of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, 1959

In 1947, only two years after the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams published an essay titled "The Catastrophe of Success." This essay goes far beyond explaining its title.

Williams does not label the main ideas within the piece as theory, but one can easily see that both the direct and implied points within it apply to most, if not all of his dramatic works in some fashion, particularly when examining the lives of characters who belong to groups most often isolated in the world of Tennessee Williams: homosexuals, women viewed as sexually deviant and the physically disabled or terminally ill.

Williams encourages readers to reassess the way they view success. He does not define it as mere monetary gain. He makes special mention of "the Cinderella Story," calling it America's "favorite national myth" (32). The myth now makes him yawn, with an attitude of "Who cares!" He insists the myth has become "the cornerstone of the film industry, if not of the Democracy itself" (32). His description of the myth subtly houses his definition of success:

Anyone with such beautiful teeth and hair as the screen protagonist of such a story was bound to have a good time one way or another, and you could bet your bottom dollar and all the tea in China that one would not be caught dead or alive in any meeting involving a social conscience. (32)

Not only are successful individuals supposedly financially stable, but they are also young, healthy, beautiful, likely heterosexual, sexually pure (at least outwardly so) and naturally

charismatic. Instead of wanting to solve social issues, so-called successful people ignore, and thus exacerbate them, as seen in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Vieux Carre* (1977). There are hostile coworkers and a nagging mother in *The Glass Menagerie*, a table of drunken poker players in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, town gossips in *Orpheus Descending* and a boarding house full of half-strangers in *Vieux Carre*. These are but a few examples of people in Williams' plays who, perhaps unintentionally in some moments, preserve the status quo through their perpetuation of stereotypes and close-mindedness.

If this myth is indeed the cornerstone of the film industry and Democracy as Williams believes it to be, it is inescapable. Success's allure of a virtually unattainable life is what makes it so catastrophic. If an individual is infatuated with this rags-to-riches story, he or she will not only devote all of his or her time and energy to achieving it, but isolate those who do not fit the ideal "Cinderella" mold in the process. There are numerous reasons why those obsessed with achieving success isolate those who do not fit this mold. Seeing those who are less than perfect tends to serve as a reminder of one's own imperfections. In other words, isolated individuals threaten to unhinge the perfect self-image a person may hold.

Furthermore, Williams argues that despite its appeal, achieving success can easily result in disappointment, giving his own experience as an example. Instead of feeling secure, he feels depressed. He wants to enjoy his new life, but cannot. He arrives at a first-class hotel and notes that the couch in his suite resembles "slime on stagnant water" (33), an appropriate comparison that evokes the image of a filthy pond. Thinking he needed time to adjust, he expects to love the couch upon waking up after his first night. He meets a much different result:

But in the morning the inoffensive little sofa looked more revolting than the night before, and I was already getting too fat for the \$125 suit which a fashionable acquaintance had

selected for me. In the suite things began to break accidentally. An arm came off the sofa. Cigarette burns appeared on the polished surface of the furniture. Windows were left open and a rainstorm flooded the suite. But the maid always put it straight and the patience of the management was inexhaustible. Late parties could not offend them seriously. Nothing short of a demolition bomb seemed to bother my neighbors. I lived on room service. But this too, was a disenchantment. (33)

When he returns to his old life, the one prior to his success, Williams becomes restless and possesses a newfound bitter disappointment in a deceitful society. This society, much like a pond, is stagnant, perpetuating the same ideas, unmoving and cooking in a miasma of its own rotten behavior. The Cinderella life is a façade. Under the gilded surface of success lies a grim reality. Sadly, it takes achieving success to realize its deception and drawbacks. For Williams, those who achieve it have lost a part of their true self. The most genuine self, according to Williams, is the “solitary and unseen” one, or the one that does not rely on the influence of outside forces (35). Not all his characters give in to the pressures of society. Instead, they intentionally isolate themselves before others can do so, as with Val Xavier of *Orpheus Descending*.

When a person experiences success, according to Williams, one key change occurs: awareness. Part of this newfound awareness involves the people Williams labels “the most embarrassing” (34), or those who wait on others, such as hotel maids, waiters and bellhops. These people, for Williams, are embarrassing because they are a constant reminder of “inequities which we accept as the proper thing” (34). One does not stop to consider what these people represent. They are but another form of comfort and security for “successful” people. Williams proposes that instead of relying on others, people should carry out tasks for themselves. He

insists, “Nobody should have to clean up anybody else’s mess in this world. It is terribly bad for both parties, but probably worse for the one receiving the service” (35). Williams labels the security and comfort brought on by success as “a kind of death” (36). For him, “a good life,” one for which humans are created, is one that requires endurance, “a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface and holding on tight with raw fingers to every inch of rock higher than the one caught hold of before” (32).

The lure of success is exceptionally strong. Like anyone else, Williams’ outsiders desire it. Many of Williams’ isolated characters retreat into fantasies in which they enjoy lives of success: comfortable and surrounded by admirers, as with *The Glass Menagerie*’s Amanda, who frequently reminisces (and exaggerates) about an afternoon in which she received seventeen gentlemen callers.

Chapter Two of this thesis explores the isolation of Williams’ homosexual men, such as Allan Grey of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Writer and Nightingale of *Vieux Carre*. During the majority of Williams’ career, many considered homosexuality a form of mental disease. For most of American history, homosexuality was illegal, particularly in the southern states that serve as the setting for many of Williams’ plays. The mildest reactions to homosexuality were ones of disgust and unhappiness, as the ones met by Nightingale. The most extreme homophobic individuals inflicted bodily harm or even killed homosexuals. Allan Grey cannot technically be labeled a character. He is the late husband of Blanche Dubois, and never appears on stage. In his case, reactions from Blanche cause him to end his own life. Williams struggled with his own homosexuality, his self-assessments reflecting the words of his father, Cornelius Coffin Williams (Lahr 75). In a journal entry, Williams writes, “Faults. I am egocentric, introspective, morbid, sensual, irreligious, lazy, timid, cowardly—But if I were God I would feel a little bit sorry for

Tom Williams once in a while—he doesn't have a very ~~gay~~ easy time of it and he does have guts of a sort even though he is a stinking sissy!" (qtd. in Lahr 78-79). Lahr follows this quote with the statement that Williams felt "stunted" and often complained about what he felt to be his childish nature (79). It is difficult for Williams to accept himself when those around him do not. Writer conducts the same type of self-assessment through his monologues, wondering what others will think of his "perversions" (*Vieux Carre* 26). Writer too is emotionally stunted and feels self-hatred. This chapter will also examine potentially homosexual character Tom Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie*. It is impossible to declare if Tom is homosexual or not, but this chapter aims to show the debate on the subject as well as reveal the parallels between Tom, Writer, Nightingale and Allan.

Chapter Three will explore the isolation of women in Williams' plays, namely Blanche Dubois of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Lady Torrance and Carol Cutrere of *Orpheus Descending*. These women share a common trait: most of the other characters in their respective plays view them as sexually deviant. The pure, innocent image of Cinderella serves as model for a "successful" woman. Women who are perceived as promiscuous tend to be the ones most isolated. If a woman remains in an unhappy relationship for the sake of appearances and peace, as with Lady, she may feel unsatisfied or increasingly depressed. If she chooses to pursue happiness by way of an extramarital affair or through multiple partners, as with Blanche and Carol, she risks the judgement and scorn of other characters. This chapter also aims to reveal discrepancies in attitudes regarding men and women who choose to act on their sexual desires, which are a key cause in the isolation of Williams' female characters. Blanche meets a tragic end as a result of her actions, while her bother-in-law Stanley's best friend Mitch attempts to rape her without a second thought and Stanley receives no punishment for raping her.

Chapter Four explores the isolation of terminally ill and physically disabled characters in Williams' plays, Jane Sparks and Nightingale of *Vieux Carre* and Laura of *The Glass Menagerie* in particular. Failing to be well-adjusted social butterflies who radiate loveliness and health causes isolation for the terminally ill and physically disabled. "Such beautiful teeth and hair" ("The Catastrophe of Success" 32) translates to one having a flawless, appealing outward appearance. Those born with a physical handicap or afflicted with a deadly disease cannot possibly be this type of beautiful. Often, the isolation Williams' characters feel as a result of their illness or physical disability results in the formation of a further debilitating mental disability, such as shyness, in the case of Laura, or denial or depression, as with Nightingale and Jane, respectively. Furthermore, this chapter examines the impact of illness on healthy individuals. Nightingale's tuberculosis is contagious, and threatens the health of others in his boarding house. Jane's leukemia slowly weakens her, and she must rely on others to care for her. Tom feels deep remorse at leaving Laura, as she cannot sustain herself without a husband or job, neither of which she can obtain due to her shyness.

The relationship between success and isolation is not always an obvious one. Even in Williams' time, "success" had an overwhelmingly positive connotation. All of one's hard work has paid off. But at what price? Waiters, maids and other help are not the only people who ultimately cater to the whims of the successful. This thesis does not follow a straight chronology from *The Glass Menagerie* to *Vieux Carre*, but still aims to show that Williams passionately wrote about the subject of isolation throughout his career. In other words, Williams wants readers and audiences to see how attitudes towards isolated groups have changed little. *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Orpheus Descending* and *Vieux Carre* all reveal the complex plights of the lost, lonely and isolated in a blind society.

CHAPTER 2

GOLDFISH INTO CANARIES: THE ISOLATION OF HOMOSEXUALS

In the “Catastrophe of Success,” Williams encourages readers to fully deconstruct the Cinderella myth. Variants of this myth do exist. The “Cinderella” may be of a different ethnicity, or be slightly older than the typical dating and marriage age. However, one element remains: the final unity is between a man a woman. Society’s focus on and preference for a heterosexual, monogamous relationships that span happily ever after can create great inner conflict for those who do not live that lifestyle. Williams depicts the isolation of known homosexuals Writer and Nightingale (*Vieux Carre*) and Allan (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) and potentially homosexual Tom Wingfield (*The Glass Menagerie*).

A homosexual himself, Williams faced negativity from sources as close as his own family. His father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, who likely knew his first son was gay before anyone else, was “annihilating” to Williams (Lahr 46). Cornelius was embarrassed of his “un-athletic, morbidly shy, effeminate” son, and forced him to work at the International Shoe Company, claiming Williams’ sixty-five dollars a month was “a whole lot more than he was worth” (Lahr 46). In his forward to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams speaks of using writing as an escape from his father’s taunts:

It immediately became my place of retreat, my cave, my refuge. From what? From being called a sissy by the neighborhood kids, and Miss Nancy by my father because I would rather read books in my grandfather’s large and classical library than play marbles and baseball and other normal kid games, a result of a severe childhood illness and of

excessive attachment to the female members of my family, who had coaxed me back to life. (xiv)

However, Williams scholars disagree on the playwright's attitude regarding his sexuality. John M. Clum insists Williams wrote to express negative feelings toward the subject, and that Williams possessed an internalized homophobia (xxiii). Brenda Murphy disagrees, arguing that while Williams recognized his homosexuality as "destabilizing," he considered it a fundamental part of his identity through his use of the phrase "gay bohemian artist" (3). Michael Paller too opposes Clum, claiming, "If Williams had harbored only negative feelings toward sexuality, he never would have written plays. Instead, he may well have tried to kill himself, marry, or do what so many other gay men did, especially in the 1950s: seek a psychoanalytic cure" (232). Debate aside, Paller's statement presents an undeniable truth: Williams wrote during a time in which a tense political climate affected every person, regardless of sexuality. Central figures, notably Senator Joseph McCarthy, felt that not only Hollywood, but the entire United States Government had been "infiltrated by homosexuals," whose presence imposed "great security risks" (Savran 85). The House Committee on Un-American Activities pursued a campaign against homosexuals that was "almost as vigorous as its campaign against alleged Communist subversives" (Savran 85-86). As Williams mentions in "The Catastrophe of Success," he views security as "a kind of death" (34). In the context of McCarthy's accusation, security means far more than being free from threat or harm; it takes on the larger meaning of the status quo. Many thought homosexuals threatened the foundations of what people in power at the time considered an ideal society, one enamored with the Cinderella myth of success.

Williams' first instance of an openly homosexual character occurs in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, though he does not appear on stage. Allan Grey, late husband of Blanche Dubois, meets a

sad end. Blanche mentions Allan in scene six during a conversation with her romantic interest Mitch. Blanche thinks she has the perfect romance when she meets Allan, despite him possessing what she describes as effeminate tendencies, such as his “softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s” (114). She is not completely certain of his homosexuality until she finds him in bed with an older man. She tries to behave normally, but later tells him during a dance, “I saw you! I know! You disgust me...” (115). He runs off, and a shot rings out. He has killed himself.

Blanche tells Mitch that Allan wanted and needed help, but he “couldn’t speak” (114) of what sort. Such a statement exemplifies the belief that homosexuality was a disease to be cured. One can easily assume Allan felt physically and emotionally isolated from his young wife. He harbored what he knew would be perceived as a terrible secret. He likely expected reactions tinged with revulsion, and took precautions to avoid them. He acted on his desires, but only in private. When he is discovered, he chooses to end his own life instead of living one in which he may to meet reactions similar to those of Blanche.

Yet Allan’s “time” on stage is short, and readers and audiences never learn about him aside from Blanche’s mention of him. Blanche becomes more accepting of homosexuality as she grows older, or at least recognizes the harm in ostracizing homosexuals. This is evidenced by Allan’s memory haunting her throughout the play when she hears the Varsouviana Polka music that played as they shared that final dance. However, the damage of her depiction is done. Readers and audiences may mourn Allan, but unless they choose to break from the gilded depictions of Hollywood, they will remember him as an effeminate man with unnatural desires.

There is perhaps an earlier instance of homosexuality in Williams’ first major success, *The Glass Menagerie*. Paller proposes readers and audiences need to examine the play’s main character, Tom, as a character who struggles with far more than disgruntlement at his current

occupation and living arrangement. Paller claims, “the homosexuality in *The Glass Menagerie* resides in Tom, and it is not metaphorical or abstract. Tom is gay” (39). This argument is debatable, and one could argue Paller is too immersed in a biographical reading. Yet even for those unfamiliar with the playwright’s life, subtle indications of Tom’s homosexuality are present throughout if one uses Allan Grey, and later Writer and Nightingale, for comparison. All four men are artists or writers. Both Tom and Allan engage in behaviors of some sort they must keep secret. Tom and Nightingale are both unsatisfied with their jobs. Tom and Writer act as both narrator and character in their respective plays, with each possessing a great deal of regret over their actions and feelings.

Amanda Wingfield, Tom’s mother, is quick to chastise her son for staying out late and for what she feels is him failing to take his future seriously. A routine argument in scene three escalates to the point of a hysteric Tom exaggerating his nightly activities. He claims to visit the movies, but Amanda does not believe him. He stands over her, angry:

TOM: I’m going to opium dens! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals’ hangouts, Mother. I’ve joined the Hogan Gang, I’m a hired assassin, I carry a tommy gun in a violin case. I run a string of cat houses in the Valley. They call me Killer, Killer Wingfield, I’m leading a double life, a simple, honest warehouse worker by day, by night a dynamic *czar* of the *underworld*, Mother. I go to gambling casinos, I spin away fortunes on the roulette table! I wear a patch over one eye and a false mustache, sometimes I put on green whiskers. On those occasions they call me—*El Diablo*! Oh, I could tell you many things to make you sleepless! My enemies plan to dynamite this place. They’re going to blow us all sky-high some night! I’ll be glad, very happy and so will you! You’ll go up, up on

a broomstick, over Blue Mountain with seventeen gentlemen callers! You ugly—
babbling old—*witch!* (24)

Tom is more straightforward with his sister Laura, but does not completely confide in her. The night after his confrontation with Amanda, a hungover Tom attempts to open the door the following morning. Laura opens the door for him after his failed attempts. Worried, she asks what he has been doing. He animatedly recounts the movies he went to see, as well as the magic show in which he was a drunken participant and received a scarf from the star, Malvolio. He only tells her a part of his night. Paller insists his withholding of the entire truth indicates embarrassment at his sexuality. He claims Tom fears Laura will not understand, yet it would be much easier for Tom to share had he met a girlfriend (43). Paller also calls special attention to the scarf Tom obtained from Malvolio. Tom describes the magic trick in detail as he gives the scarf to Laura: “You wave it [the scarf] over the goldfish bowl and they fly away canaries” (27). Tom desires as much of an escape as he can attain given the social environment. The goldfish bowl represents the life he shares with his mother and sister. He is “caged” and drowning. If he escapes, he will become a canary so to speak, able to express his authentic self as a man, artist and sexual being (Paller 43). Tom lives in a world preoccupied with the idea of leaving his home, as further evidenced by his mention of Malvolio’s coffin trick in which he escapes without removing any of the nails. Tom laments, “There is a trick that would come in handy for me—get me out of this two-by-four situation!” (27). He wishes it was possible to escape his “coffin,” the small apartment he shares with his family. The nails, however, are Amanda and Laura. When one removes a nail, the nail usually sustains some form of damage. Tom’s departure devastates his family financially and emotionally. The two women will suffer as a result of limited income. Not only will they be less likely to afford necessities, but they face the emotional impacts of

poverty as well. Others in their world may see them as lesser people because they are unable to adequately provide for themselves despite their best efforts.

The likely candidate for Tom's secret affection is the gentleman caller he has for Laura, a coworker named Jim, who is engaged, unbeknownst to the family until the play's end. Distraught this grants no chance for Laura to form a relationship with Jim, Amanda furiously asks Tom if he knew of this engagement. Tom tells her, "The warehouse is where I work, not where I know things about people!" (95). Such a statement reinforces the homophobic atmosphere of the period, for Tom would not be able to express his true self if the appropriate moment arose. After Amanda confronts him, Jim storms out, claiming he is again going to the movies. Perhaps he is not only disappointed for Laura, but also for himself. Before Jim's arrival, Amanda aggravates Tom with her incessant questions regarding this gentleman caller. Tom answers her questions, making special mention of the fact Jim does not know about Laura. He labels their plan as one rife with "dark ulterior motives" (47). Tom knows his sister is painfully shy, and perhaps seeks to protect her from an awkward social encounter. Tom opens scene six with a monologue focusing on Jim's character and impending visit. He praises Jim's good nature, and laments his lack of recent progress in financial endeavors. He continues, claiming Jim is the only one at the warehouse who does not treat him poorly. Jim calls Tom "Shakespeare," (50) and does not speak of Tom's habit of sneaking away to write poetry. Though some of Jim's friendliness spreads to other workers, they still smile at Tom as "people smile at an oddly fashioned dog who trots across their path at some distance" (51). He becomes othered, a non-human animal. His coworkers are friendly, but only at a distance. Tom appreciates Jim's humor and genuineness. Tom does tell Jim of his plans to leave home, however, showing he does trust his coworker with sensitive information, perhaps more so than he does Laura. Jim went to high school with Laura,

making him older than Tom. If Tom is homosexual, the object of his affection is an older man, another trait he shares with Allan, though Allan actually acted on his desires.

It is important to note that homosexuality was illegal in the United States until reform began in the early 1960s. Laws differed by state, with some choosing to outlaw homosexuality well into the present. *Vieux Carre* takes place in Louisiana, a state that outlawed same-sex intercourse until 2003. Though the boarding house sits in the French Quarter of New Orleans, a city known for the colorful, free-spirited Mardi Gras, not all residents share in the spirit of open-mindedness. Such laws likely contribute Williams' choice to depict his characters as he does.

Like Allan, Writer from *Vieux Carre* suffers as a result of hiding his sexuality. Writer lives in a boarding house, surrounded by other tenants, but he becomes more emotionally distant from them as the play progresses. Many similarities exist between Tom and Writer (aside from the fact both men are writers). One could easily label Writer a reworking of Tom. *Vieux Carre* was written in 1977, though set in 1938-1939. The play could feature an openly gay character that appears on stage. With Writer, it is easier for readers and audiences to see the effects of isolation on a homosexual character.

Initially timid when approaching the topic of his sexuality, Writer confides in other individuals before he develops what Nightingale calls a "cold in the heart" (50). It is important to make the distinction that it is not Writer's homosexuality itself that causes his loneliness, but his refusal to act upon it. For Paller, Writer feels loneliness as he begins to "deprive his heart of feeling" (219). The play's second scene reveals Writer's turmoil and hints at the current social condition more so than *Streetcar* does; Nightingale labels him "a victim of conventional teaching" (18), and advises him to forget what he has learned. Nightingale gives this label to Writer after the young man admits he was told not to cry because "it's humiliating" (18). These

men live in a society in which males are to be strong and stoic, perfect counterparts for emotional, subservient women. It is difficult enough being a man who possesses feminine qualities. To be homosexual is worse, as it forgoes the traditional picture of success completely. A feminine, yet heterosexual man can still marry and have “a good time one way or another,” as Williams phrases it (“The Catastrophe of Success” 32). Homosexual men, on the other hand, will be ostracized if they openly express their sexuality. Though considered perverse by the other characters, the interaction between Writer and Nightingale in scene two is far more tender than any readers witness between the heterosexual couple of drug-addicted, homophobic Tye McCool and his girlfriend, the lonely former socialite Jane Sparks. Tye is physically rough with Jane, even forcing her into bed at one point. Writer’s rejection of Nightingale’s advances may anger the older man, but Nightingale never resorts to physical violence. Nightingale tells Writer not to be honest “in this dishonest world” (19). This statement refers to Nightingale wanting Writer to have an eye operation (perhaps a nod to Tom’s “blind masses” (5) line) and not accept the bill. Nightingale tells Writer he should not conform to society’s standards, as it is crooked, and selling a false picture of success, one which rejects homosexual men like Writer and himself.

Nightingale easily guesses Writer is homosexual. Writer “*slowly*” and “*with embarrassment*” (22) describes his first sexual encounter with a paratrooper who took advantage of his innocence. Nightingale listens, incredulous, before telling Writer he has two things for him. The first is a pill he calls his “sandman special” (26). The light then dims, suggesting a form of sexual intercourse for the second “thing.” Though he is much more comfortable in his sexuality, Nightingale likely uses the pills as a means of escape, much like Tom likely uses alcohol to self-medicate. Writer appears as narrator, much as Tom frequently does in *The Glass Menagerie*, and recounts the female apparition that he feels is appearing as a result of the pill.

Her look reminds him of his grandmother, and he wonders how she feels about “such perversions” and “longing” (26). Her face does not indicate one feeling or another at first, but Writer comes to see “a gesture of forgiveness” (27) as she lifts one hand in front of his eyes. Years later, Writer still questions his actions and the vision. He grows less emotional as the play progresses, but still cannot escape from his feelings of confusion and shame despite the amount of time that has passed. Writer and Tom both possess a tremendous amount of regret at the end of their respective plays, though for Tom, the regret comes from leaving his disabled sister with no way to provide for herself while Writer’s regret is identity-driven. Despite trying to harden his heart, Writer weeps for the terminally ill Nightingale near *Vieux Carre*’s end. The caring displays of both Tom and Writer further unify them with the tender Allan Grey.

Smothering his sexual desires and the feelings that accompany them causes Writer to develop a “shell of calcium” (50) on his heart to match the cataract on his left eye. His attitude results in many awkward exchanges with his housemates and landlady. Nightingale reacts negatively after Writer refuses to hold him one night; the two throw hateful words at one another. Just before Writer leaves the boarding house permanently, Nightingale calls him “boy with soft skin and stone heart” (93). Writer refuses Mrs. Wire’s attempted maternal guidance early in the play, but Mrs. Wire allows Writer to stay despite his inability to pay rent by having him advertise her lunch specials. Yet Writer expresses less and less gratitude for Mrs. Wire’s kindness until he finally leaves with musician Sky. Yet Writer addresses the audience early, in scene four, as opposed to the play’s end, to reflect on his emotional transformation. His realization occurs in the middle of an interaction between himself and Mrs. Wire, in which the spotlight focuses on him:

WRITER: I've noticed I do have some troublesome little scruples in my nature that may cause difficulties in my... [*He rises and rests his foot on the chair.*] ... negotiated—truce with—life. Oh—there's a price for things, that's something I've learned in the Vieux Carre. For everything that you purchase in this marketplace you pay out of *here!* [*He thumps his chest.*] And the cash which is the stuff you use in your work can be overdrawn, depleted, like a reservoir going dry in a long season of drought ... (44)

Writer is trapped, much like Tom. He cannot leave the boarding house until an opportunity presents itself, and has willfully isolated himself so others will not isolate him, as they likely would if he chose to fully reveal and act on his homosexuality. Yet this plan causes most of his housemates to dislike him and isolate him for an entirely different reason: they see him as cold.

Clearly, Nightingale is more open than his housemate. He is open about both his homosexuality and loneliness. He labels loneliness “an affliction” (20), repeatedly remarking he feels so until he is carried away from the boarding house on a medical stretcher. Nightingale does not deny his homosexuality, but readers and audiences only see his advances toward Writer. These occurrences are still enough to earn complaints from his other housemates. A drunk Tye stumbles in one evening, and Writer helps him to his own bed so he will not wake up Jane. Nightingale enters Writer's room, thinking the figure in bed is his friend. Instead, Tye angrily shouts “‘Sthat how you visit a friend, unzippin his pants an' pullin' out his dick?” (45). Nightingale tries to apologize, but Tye continues shouting, insisting no “goddamn faggot” (45) can mess with him for less than a hundred dollars. Tye immediately stereotypes Nightingale, assuming he will be interested in any man. In response, Nightingale simply replies, “I am afraid you have priced yourself out of the market” (46), effectively silencing him. Perhaps witnessing

homosexual behavior reminds Tye of any homosexual desires he may possess. His brutal discourse is his way of rejecting his desires, and assuring others will not see him as homosexual.

Furthermore, Nightingale becomes the scapegoat for many of the incidents that occur within the house. Following the argument in which Writer refuses to hold Nightingale, Mrs. Wire calls up the stairs, her voice full of concern for Writer as she asks if Nightingale is molesting him. Her tone is then laced with suspicion as she tells Nightingale she will “get the goods” (51) on him yet. After she pours boiling water on a photography session of naked models, which she labels an orgy, taking place in the basement, Mrs. Wire demands a sleepy Nightingale take the blame. She plans to tell the police Nightingale is drunk. The orgy takes place out of sight, and Williams does not indicate boisterous, loud sounds throughout the scene. Mrs. Wire despises those she deems sexually deviant. Her plan to blame Nightingale is two-fold. Both he and the photographer T. Hamilton Biggs could be arrested and removed from her home.

Given attitudes during Williams’ time, the inclusion of a homosexual character presented great risk. Today, the inclusion of a homosexual character in a film, play, television show or novel is not uncommon, and is a sign of open-mindedness. Many homosexual individuals are still afraid of the reactions they will face if they reveal their sexuality. Though a number of his plays are now over seventy years old, the struggles faced by homosexuals as penned by Williams are still applicable today.

CHAPTER 3
BATTLE AGAINST ANGELS: THE ISOLATION OF WOMEN

Williams asks readers to consider what is so appealing about Cinderella and other females in similar rags-to-riches stories. These women are naturally beautiful, exuding a feminine aura. Yet they have another, perhaps less obvious appeal: they should be sexually pure (virginal), and conform to the sexual standards of the time. The perfect Cinderella is submissive and loyal, preferably waiting until marriage to consummate her relationship with her husband. She does not submit to her sexual desires; better still, she does not possess these desires at all. She may flirt, but must not appear desperate. These mores are not new. Women lived under such restricting standards while their male counterparts were often praised for acting on their sexual desires long before Williams could pick up his pen to challenge the hypocrisy. It is important to note that it is not Williams, but the other characters in the plays who see these women as sexually deviant. Blanche Dubois from *A Streetcar Named Desire* is perhaps Williams' most famous openly sensual woman. Blanche has much in common with females from his other plays, including *Orpheus Descending*'s Lady Torrance and Carol Cutrere. Each of these women is ostracized for her sexual behavior, and must live as the subject of gossip and taunts.

While a promiscuous woman is a likely topic for discussion, both scholars and Williams' fellow playwrights during the period debated female characters in plays overall. Arthur Miller offered a single analysis of Williams' work during the 1956-57 season of the New Dramatists' Committee.¹ Williams' most recent play at the time was *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Miller attempted to make the play into one of his own. David Savran claims a female protagonist was

¹ Founded in 1949, The New Dramatists' Committee is one of the country's leading playwright centers and play laboratories.

“unimaginable” for Miller, as Miller tried to reframe the play with Brick as the protagonist (99). A glimpse at perhaps Miller’s most famous work, *Death of a Salesman*, which premiered in 1949, reveals Miller’s attitude toward female characters. This play features female characters, but they play more supportive, submissive roles. Miller acknowledged that each of his plays “pivots around a male protagonist” who “determines the play’s central reality” (qtd. in Savran 29). Miller and Williams treat female characters differently. In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller claims of main character Willy Loman’s wife, Linda: “*she more than loves him, she admires him*” (131). Throughout the play, Linda dotes on Willy; she lives a subservient existence. In contrast, Williams’ Blanche willingly submits to no man. The same can be said of Carol Cutrere. These two women may enjoy the company of men, but do not rely on them completely for self-worth. One may argue that Blanche’s prostitution indicates a reliance on men. This is a valid argument, but the loss of her home, Belle Reve, drove her to sell her body just to get by. She needed money, not validation. She did not want to rely on men, but had no other choice.

Before 1979, the year famous feminist pieces such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* and Elaine Showalter’s “Towards a Feminist Poetics” began to reshape how society viewed women both in literature and in general, Williams scholars were generally unforgiving of Williams’ female characters. Philip Weismann reduces characters like Blanche to nothing more than “prostitutes” and “exhibitionist women” concerned only with appearance (59). Joseph Riddell views them as a different sort of extreme. For Riddell, they cannot be completely defined. They are “mythical,” overwhelmed by a special type of desire not found in “successful” women (82). Durant du Ponte grouped these women under his own label, the “faded Southern Belle, a stereotype with a difference” (53). For du Ponte, many of Williams’ female “creations,”

such as Amanda Wingfield and Blanche are “impressive,” but simply “unable to adjust to a hostile environment” (54). How these early scholars treat female characters differs greatly from how Williams does so. For the early scholars, the women are made a spectacle of some form: exhibitionist, mythical or impressive but tragic creation. Williams chooses a different and much more progressive approach to female characters, particularly ones perceived as sexually deviant. Savran asserts that Williams almost always presents males, such as *Streetcar*’s Stanley Kowalski, *Orpheus Descending*’s Jabe Torrance and *Vieux Carre*’s Tye McCool as relatively unsympathetic figures in comparison to more richly sympathetic women (123). Readers and audiences can analyze Williams’ female characters, and determine they are definitely not selfish. They can also decide if Savran’s statement regarding pity for male characters is compelling. Stanley, Jabe and Tye are all violent and hateful towards women.

Williams’ more sympathetic approach is reminiscent of another progressive author, Virginia Woolf. In her “Professions for Women” speech, Woolf draws on the 19th century term “Angel in the House,” and explains how each woman must fight against this “phantom” (2153). Woolf’s description of the Angel is simple:

She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it—in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. (2153)

Killing this Angel is extremely difficult, Woolf asserts, particularly for women who wish to move beyond the home. The Angel constantly tells women not to think for themselves or have sexual desires. Woolf asserts that a woman cannot express what she thinks to “be the truth about

human relations, morality, sex” without a mind of her own. Yet all these topics, according to the Angel in the House, “cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women” (2154). Williams does not mention the Angel, but hints at the existence of such a struggle when describing the seemingly glamorous individuals who achieve success. Many of the qualities of a “successful” woman and the Angel in the House overlap: she must be graceful, beautiful, pure. Williams too attempts to kill the Angel so he can write honestly of the body and sexuality. In his essay “Questions Without Answers,” Williams recalls someone asking him why he wrote about “frustrated women.” The question shocked him, as he insists, “I would say frustrated is almost exactly what the women I write about are not” (42). He mentions Blanche, leaving no room for debate with, “Is Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire* frustrated? About as frustrated as a beast of the jungle!” (42). Sex is a perfectly natural act for a beast of the jungle. This is a stark contrast to the pure behaviors of the Angel in the House.

Upon her first entrance, readers and audiences can see Blanche feels unsettled, and with good reason, as she is in unfamiliar territory. She speaks “*with faintly hysterical humor*” (6), and is unable to believe her sister now lives on the bottom floor of an apartment complex in such a poor neighborhood. Cat screeches and other common noises startle her; she cannot become calm enough to talk to her sister Stella without rambling. Blanche reveals she has lost their family home, Belle Reve, which, translated from French, means “Beautiful Dream.” All of Blanche’s former comfort is gone. Blanche’s name too is symbolic, for Blanche means “white” in French. White is a color normally associated with purity. Blanche even enters the scene in “*a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat*” (5). She wants to maintain the appearance of a delicate, cultured Southern Belle as not to arise suspicion. Blanche claims to have resigned from her teaching job due to frazzled nerves. Stella believes her sister,

but her husband Stanley is suspicious of Blanche from the beginning, mostly due to her extravagant wardrobe which he does not believe can be bought on a teacher's salary. One could present Stanley's red silk pajamas as a form of hypocrisy. It is unlikely Stanley could afford such a nice garment on a factory worker's salary.

Blanche's secrecy regarding her sexual actions makes them more horrid in the eyes of the other characters. Having to falsely present herself as a proper lady is isolation in itself. She cannot tell anyone, not even her sister, of the acts she had to resort to. This act is hers and hers alone. Blanche is aware of the reactions she will face if discovered. She is guilty of having these reactions herself in a similar situation. Her late husband Allan hid being homosexual, as she must hide her prostitution. He shot himself after Blanche told him he was disgusting. While Blanche is not homosexual, the people who inhabit the environment she has been forced into, such as Stanley and his friend Mitch, deem her sexual behavior as vile and inappropriate in a different way. For one, loyalty to a single man, regardless if he mistreats her, is what a woman should want to possess, as in the case of Stella and Stanley. In scene two, Stanley flings Blanche's personal belongings throughout the room, trying to find information about her lost home. Blanche flirts with him partly in attempt to defuse the tension (she later tells Stella she treated the situation as a joke), partly because she, unfortunately, has had to use her looks and charm in order to get ahead. Her flirtatious behavior infuriates Stanley:

STANLEY: If I didn't know you was my wife's sister, I'd get ideas about you!

BLANCHE: Such as what!

STANLEY: Don't play so dumb! You know what!

BLANCHE [*she puts the atomizer on the table*]: All right. Cards on the table. That suits me. [*She turns to Stanley.*] I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion, but when a thing is important, I tell the truth, and this is the truth: I haven't cheated my sister or you or anyone else as long as I have lived. (41)

Flirting with and charming a single man is acceptable; flirting with married Stanley is not. Blanche must restrict herself, and attempts to conform to society's idea of a well-adjusted woman as well as she possibly can throughout the play. Meanwhile, Stanley can be as obnoxious and violent as he pleases. Stella only scolds her husband, foreshadowing where her loyalties will ultimately fall after he rapes Blanche. In fact, Stella chooses not to believe Blanche.

Stanley cannot shake his suspicions, and conducts an investigation, questioning anyone who can provide information about his sister-in-law. During this time, Blanche has developed a relationship with Stanley's friend, Mitch. Stanley learns of Blanche's promiscuity, and tells his friend. Blanche is caught between two aspects of the "Angel" when interacting with Mitch, and this ultimately proves her downfall. In "Professions for Women," Woolf argues that a woman "must charm" and "tell lies if they are to succeed," yet they must be pure (2153). Blanche refuses to go out with Mitch during the day, attempting to conceal her true age. Finding out Blanche is older than he expected does not bother Mitch. Instead, he grieves over the fact she is "not straight" (145), and tells her she is "not clean enough" (150) to bring into the house with his ailing mother. He then attempts to rape her, but his clumsy attempt fails. He is more than willing to force her into sex, but will not let her meet his mother. She no longer makes a suitable wife in his eyes. Shortly after, Stanley succeeds in raping Blanche.

Following the rape, Stella's neighbor Eunice tells Stella "Life has to go on" (166) as they lead Blanche away to a mental hospital. Daniel Thomieres, who borrows from Rene Girard,

author of *Violence and the Sacred*, argues that this phrase unknowingly means that Blanche's "desires" were dangerous for the group. He uses Girard's formula "unanimity minus one" (qtd. in Thomieres 375) to describe the unfair scapegoating of Blanche. Her "personification of excess" (375) needs to be eradicated, she does not fit in. Her excess is a sign of refusing socialization. It is acceptable for Stanley to live excessively; it is a sign of "integration" for a man (375). Had Blanche been a man, she likely would not face such extreme consequences for her actions. Instead, she is taken away. Stella may cry for her sister, but ultimately aligns herself with Stanley and the status quo. No one tries to understand the root cause of Blanche's actions. She had to become a prostitute out of necessity. Williams uses this situation to highlight the "double standards" (i.e., that a man may behave as he sees fit and take part in sexual intercourse freely while a woman must not possess any sexual desire for any reason other than procreation) in place at the time. The number of Williams' female characters² that must sell their bodies in order to scrape by is immense. These characters are "bought." Those who are obsessed with success sell themselves in a much different manner. Blanche is still true to herself, while those who strive to meet the Cinderella mold are not, according to Williams. This makes their "selling" much worse. Yet this sort of "selling out" does not even register for characters such as Stanley or Mitch. Neither man would want to admit his shortcomings.

The two remaining female characters in this chapter are from Williams' *Orpheus Descending*. This play was originally titled *Battle of Angels*, which was written in 1939. It may appear as if *Orpheus Descending* centers on the rogue musician Val. Regarding *Battle of Angels*, Williams wrote that the central individual was "a boy who hungered for something beyond reality and got death by torture at the hands of a mob" (qtd. in Murphy 35). Williams is referring

² Two important exceptions are male characters Chance Wayne, a gigolo in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) and Val Xavier. Both men must "sell" themselves.

to Val, who in *Battle of Angels*, forms a relationship with Mya Torrance (who becomes Lady in *Orpheus Descending*). Cassandra Whiteside (later Carol Cutrere) is aggressively sexual, and instead of befriending a Conjure Man, is having an affair with her black chauffeur (Murphy 43). The major difference between *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending* is Williams' use of the implicit Orpheus myth present in *Battle of Angels* to provide the major symbolic structure of *Orpheus Descending* (Murphy 47). Williams makes Val's bohemian nature more overt, but William expert Brenda Murphy makes special note of Williams' changes to Carol's character. He makes Carol a "clearer representation of the fugitive kind" (48). Carol is meant to serve as a counterpoint to Lady in order to better represent the play's feminine principle; she is a beautiful exhibitionist who cannot even stay in her hometown due to the bigoted attitudes of the townspeople (48). Val is undeniably important, but it is the women who command focus in *Orpheus Descending*.

Lady Torrance, like Blanche, faces dire consequences once others discover her promiscuous acts. In the prologue of *Orpheus Descending*, two older women, Dolly Hamma and Beulah Binnings, discuss Lady's family history and marriage. Unbeknownst to Lady, the man she is currently married to, Jabe Torrance, killed her father many years ago. Dolly asks how Lady could possibly live with Jabe if she knew, to which Beulah replies, "She could live with him in hate. People can live together in hate for a long time, Dolly" (18). Beulah insists couples who do not love one another develop a passion for money, and live together to accumulate wealth and property. Beulah only mentions living in hate because Jabe is ill, and she thinks Lady will cash in on the store she and Jabe run. Given Lady's actions and attitudes at the play's beginning, it is unlikely she "lives in hate," though she is unhappy with Jabe. She attempts to communicate with her husband without causing arguments. She is unsatisfied, but passive,

perhaps more so than she should be with Jabe's curt retorts to her comments. The musician Val Xavier is the only one to see her express her true emotions. Val can sense her unhappiness, but must coax information out of her. After one of their conversation, Lady laughs, "*as lightly and gaily as a young girl*" (58). Maintaining the perfect wife and woman image proves taxing for Lady, but meeting Val grants her the opportunity to express herself for the first time in many years. Williams writes of both Lady's dissatisfaction and her potential to be a sexual being upon her first entrance:

[...] *LADY enters, nodding to the women, and holding the door open for her husband and the men following him. She greets the women in almost toneless murmurs, as if too tired to speak. She could be any age between thirty-five and forty-five, in appearance, but her figure is youthful. Her face taut. She is a woman who met with emotional disaster in her girlhood; verges on hysteria under strain. Her voice is often shrill and her body tense. But when in repose, a girlish softness emerges again and she looks ten years younger.*

(33)

The description is one of both hopelessness and hope. The tragedy of Lady's youth is what led her to marry Jabe. Carol Cutrere's brother David left Lady, not knowing she was pregnant. This happened shortly after the death of her father at the hands of the Magic Clan, a branch of the Klux Klan led by Jabe. Lady aborted the child, not wanting the gossip of the town to follow her. Her vulnerable and isolated state drove her into the arms of Jabe, who, as Beulah says, "bought her cheap" (14), indicative of the predatorial nature some men possess (sadly, this is perfectly acceptable). Interacting with her husband results in great stress for Lady. Yet when calm, Lady appears more vibrant and genuine. Williams praises this genuine Lady. His description is sympathetic; it is unhealthy for Lady to have to pretend to be a good wife. Though rare until her

encounters with Val, Lady is able to be a young, girlish person capable of anything, sexual acts included.

As Val and Lady grow closer, Lady must take special precautions as her budding sexual desires grow. The two do not always agree. An argument escalates after Val steals money from the cashbox. Val claims he sees through Lady. She asks what he sees, to which he replies: “—A not so young and not so satisfied woman that hired a man off the highway to do a double duty without paying overtime for it.... I mean a store clerk days and a stud nights, and—” (101). Lady cuts him off and tries to strike him; her violent reaction confirming Val’s words. Lady sobs in Val’s arms before he tries to leave. She blocks the door, screaming “NO, NO, DON’T GO ... I NEED YOU!!!” (102). It is the “*true passion*” (102) of her outcry that stops him. He retreats to his room, guitar in hand. Lady witnesses “*a conflict of feelings*” (102), but ultimately enters the room as the lights dim. Their secret affair continues for some time. Hiding this affair proves mentally and physically taxing for her, but she cannot reveal her actions. Lady is fully aware of the gossipy, judgmental nature of the town. She witnesses Dolly, Beulah and another woman attempt to run Carol out of town after a local service station refuses to wait on her in act two, scene one.

Lady learns she is pregnant near the end of the play. Several years after her emotional disaster, Lady has finally fought against and killed her Angel in the House. She proudly tells Jabe’s nurse to announce her pregnancy to the whole town. She even tells Val he may leave, since he has given her life, both physically, with the child and metaphorically, with her revitalized, now prominent, sexuality. Jabe shoots and kills his wife upon hearing of her pregnancy. He is not finished with eradicating her as he burns the store down using a blowtorch. “Unanimity minus one” again prevails. This is particularly disturbing, given the other people in

town. Val perhaps articulates this idea best with: “If some of you older women in Two River County would set a better example there’d be more decent young people!” (41). The bigoted attitudes of the area both promote sameness and encourage outliers. Like Stanley, Jabe is not punished (at least during the play) for his violent actions. For Williams, the “punishment” for both Stanley and Jabe comes in the form of severe shock and disapproval from readers and audiences.

Carol differs greatly from Lady. She openly displays herself throughout *Orpheus Descending*, unlike Lady, who conceals her affair until the play’s end. Other characters comment on her boldness as early as scene one. As Carol enters the store, Beulah remarks, “Somebody don’t seem to know the store is closed” (21). Dolly does not reply, instead asking, “Can you understand how anybody would deliberately make themselves look fantastic as that?” (21). Carol proceeds to take money from the cashbox, startling Eva Temple, who, panicked, turns to Dolly and Beulah. The two women tell Eva that Carol can do whatever she wants, as Carol is part of the Cutrere family, “*the oldest and most distinguished in the county*” (21). Eva recovers from the shock of Carol’s thievery, and inquires as to why Carol is barefoot. Beulah tells Eva the last time local law enforcement arrested Carol, they found her naked under her coat.

It may seem as if Beulah and Dolly are being malicious. The rumor surrounding Carol’s last arrest is never proved true or false, and is just that: a rumor. The arrest portion of the rumor is overshadowed by the fact Carol was naked under her coat. Williams includes a detailed description of the clothes Carol wears in this scene. Carol lacks traditional beauty, but “*has an odd, fugitive beauty which is stressed, almost to the point of fantasy*” by a particular type of makeup worn by those in “*the bohemian centers of France and Italy*” (21). This description is poetic, with an appreciative tone. Williams almost describes Carol as a piece of living art. For

Williams, Carol is a wonderful free spirit. Yet much like a painting, Carol's appearance and actions are subjective. The local women do not understand her, and find her style appalling. Such fashion indicates Carol's free spirit, which lends validity to the theory that a sexual encounter resulted in her lost clothes, for a "successful," well-adjusted woman would practice passivity and control. Carol is unashamed of her actions, as evident by a phone call she makes early in the play:

CAROL: Bertie?—Carol!—Hi, doll! Did you trip over something? I heard a crash. Well, I'm leaving right now, I'm already on the highway and everything's fixed, I've got my allowance back on condition that I remain forever away from Two River County! I had to blackmail them a little. I came to dinner with my eyes made up and my little black sequin jacket and Betsy Boo, my brother's wife said, "Carol, you going out to a fancy dress ball?" I said, "Oh, no, I'm just going jooking tonight up and down the Dixie Highway between here and Memphis like I used to when I lived here." Why honey, she flew so fast you couldn't see her passing and came back in with the ink still wet on the check! And this will be done once a month as long as I stay away from Two River County.... (23)

Betsy assumes her sister-in-law has made herself look more attractive because she is going to a ball, a socially acceptable event. Finding out Carol is "jooking," or drinking, then driving before stopping to dance to a jukebox repeatedly until one can no longer drive (usually ending in a sexual encounter) is appalling to Betty, and she pays Carol to stay away. Those around her consider Carol's behavior unladylike. Carol lives dangerously, at least in the eyes of other characters, and as with Blanche and Lady, must be eradicated, or at least driven out of town. It may seem as if no one has any patience for Carol. Most merchants around town refuse to provide

her service. Yet many characters do like Carol, as indicated by Beulah's comment, "You can't ostracize a person out of this county unless everybody cooperates" (69).

Shortly after Carol enters Lady's store in act one, scene one, a Negro Conjure Man follows. The other women are terrified of him and refer to him as simply "that old crazy conjure man" (25) or "*Nigguh*," (26) but Carol, in a "*very high and clear voice*" calls him over, and addresses him as "Uncle" (25). She lets him perform his Choctaw cry, which possesses a "wild intensity" (26). Carol does not exhibit racist behavior. Coupling her open-mindedness and carefree attitude, Williams creates a likable character in Carol. Perhaps Carol's greatest sympathizers are the readers and audiences, as Williams intends them to be.

Williams allows Carol to survive the fire that destroys Val and Lady's bodies so she may deliver some of the last lines in the play as she obtains Val's snakeskin jacket from the Conjure Man. Putting on Val's jacket as she hears a "*cry of anguish*" (144) causes Carol to nod in understanding as she speaks these lines: "—Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind..." (144). Williams' choice of the word "fugitive" is deliberate, for fugitives flee from persecution. They are isolated both physically and emotionally; they cannot live in their intended home and surround themselves with friendly familiar company. They must flee from antagonizing forces. However, fleeing from feelings of isolation brought on by others is a form of self-imposed isolation. This isolation can be a cathartic experience. One can take time to assess their emotional situation. The "fugitive kind" is less concerned with achieving success, as we see with Val, who recognizes and encourages Lady's sexuality, and Carol, who is free and unapologetic. The fugitive kind leaves behind clean items because to Williams, their motives are pure. Being able to wear Val's jacket

after the tragedy allows Carol to move forward; the jacket lets her know that despite the opinions of others, her path is the right one. She must continue on in order to forge a path for those like her.

For Williams, no one should be punished for experiencing perfectly natural sexual urges. While it will not be easy, Williams encourages all of “the fugitive kind” to forge ahead. Only then can individuals begin to kill the Angel, and grant women the life they deserve, a life free of judgment.

CHAPTER 4

YELLOW CAB PEOPLE WITH LIMOUSINE ASPIRATIONS: THE ISOLATION OF THE DISABLED OR TERMINALLY ILL

With outcries against homosexuality and sexual desire, individuals may forget about another group that faces isolation as a result of America's obsession with its favorite national myth. Many suffer from a physical disability or are terminally ill. Physical and mental wellness are an unspoken aspect of the Cinderella story; the seemingly perfect lives of those who have "achieved success" could not exist if not for the person in question being healthy. If a person is ill, they are unlikely to "have a good time one way or another" ("The Catastrophe of Success" 32). The gilded picture of success sets an unfair expectation. According to Thomas Shakespeare, "only when a society has developed certain expectations of its members does the lack of ability to fulfil those expectations become obvious and problematic" (13). Shakespeare presents the example of dyslexia. This learning disability remains hidden and unproblematic until society demands literacy (13). While poor health is hardly ever considered positive, it would perhaps be less of an issue if not for needing to meet the standards of a successful individual. Illness also makes healthy individuals aware of their own suffering, says Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. She insists that "Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance," the disabled body becomes "a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control and identity" (27). Disabled individuals cause unease in healthy ones. Those free from disabilities may find themselves questioning their own mortality or health, an uncomfortable occurrence. Healthy individuals tend to react to a disabled individual in one of three ways, says Nicole Markotic. They may ignore the disabled person, and act if he or she is not even present. More likely, however, are responses of pity or disgust, as an ill or disabled

person represents living a life “less than one of great activity” or a “nonliving state” (14). These responses dehumanize the disabled person, or as Garland-Thomson phrases it, make him or her the picture of “corporeal otherness” (26). Williams’ plays contain countless instances of physically disabled or terminally ill characters meeting pity or disgust by healthy characters. *Vieux Carre*’s Nightingale and Jane Sparks as well as *The Glass Menagerie*’s Laura Wingfield serve as prime examples.

Limited scholarship exists on the physically disabled and terminally in Williams’ plays, though many scholars, such as Garland Thomson, Shakespeare and Markotic, tackle these forms disabilities in literature as a whole. Some Williams-specific sources such as Brenda Murphy and C.W.E Bigsby cover the mental plights of well-known characters, such as Amanda and Blanche’s frequent retreats into a fantasy world. But they mention little about other disabilities, namely terminal illnesses, such as Nightingale’s tuberculosis or Jane’s cancer. Shakespeare argues, “Disability is a complex, scalar, multi-dimensional phenomenon. The social exclusion of disabled people is widespread and persistent” (11). Williams aims to show this social exclusion through characters that suffer from a variety of disabilities. This chapter’s exploration of physical disability aims not to undervalue mental disabilities (as it covers the mental plights of Jane, Nightingale and Laura), but demonstrate the complex relationship between the two types of disabilities.³ Often, though not always, the treatment one receives as a result of a physical disability aids in the formation of a mental disability. Countless scholars, the aforementioned Murphy and Bigsby included, have noted that writing about Laura’s physical disability is a way

³ While readers can sympathize with many of Williams’ terminally ill or physically disabled characters, such as Laura, Jane or Nightingale, other characters such as Jabe Torrance, who is dying of cancer, are much less deserving of sympathy.

for Williams to discuss or work through his sister Rose's mental illness. However, this chapter will forgo any in-depth biographical analysis.

Many homosexuals or women viewed as sexually deviant may also suffer from a disability, but it is frequently ignored by other characters in favor of the more offending quality. This is the case with Jane Sparks, who learns she is dying of leukemia. This former New York socialite lives with her drug addicted boyfriend, the abusive Tye McCool. For the majority of the play, Jane appears outwardly composed, a woman who is simply experiencing a bit of bad luck, or "a sudden change of circumstances" (34) that forces her to live in a cramped boarding house. She is already feeling isolated, or as she says "frantic with loneliness" (30) upon her arrival. Learning of, then having to quickly lie about her disease introduces another layer of isolation. In scene six, Writer brings Jane a letter. A marked mood change occurs in the scene after "*Jane tears open the letter and gasps softly*" (52). Before the letter, Jane is frustrated at her lack of progress on a fashion design, but is able to give Writer a friendly greeting when she opens the door. After she opens the letter, she asks Writer if he would like a cup of coffee, clearly needing company. His initial declination causes her to become momentarily hysterical as she asks if he would instead prefer a drink. She controls herself as they talk of rejection letters (Writer found one for himself in the mail along with Jane's letter), though not before Writer asks about the letter. Instead of telling the truth, Jane claims to have a critically ill relative. Jane trails off, saying she no longer recognizes "the lady" the letter concerns (54). Her uncharacteristic extremes of emotion prompt Writer to ask if the letter is about her instead. Jane replies, "Let's just say it was sort of a personal, signed rejection slip, too" (54). She tears the letter to bits as soon as Writer leaves.

Jane has her own reason for not revealing the letter's contents to others members of the house until scene eleven. By this time, her condition has deteriorated to the point where even Tye begins to express worry. Jane has lost weight, and can no longer walk long distances without becoming fatigued. She tries to avoid the subject, telling Tye, "I guess I'm a yellow-cab girl. With limousine aspirations" (103). Though he mainly uses Jane to satiate his sexual urges, Tye is concerned, and demands she "cut the smart talk" (103). Jane pauses, indicating she is still uncomfortable discussing the subject. She even begins explaining with "Well, after all, why not, if you're interested in it" (104). She cannot stand still, "*moving convulsively*" (104) as she explains that her blood count is close to collapse. Readers and audiences will notice a significant change in the way Tye and Jane act toward one another after Tye learns of her illness. He behaves much more tenderly towards Jane, a far cry from his forcing her into bed after she tries to leave him in scene nine. His reactions of concern are the kind Jane hoped to avoid; they make her feel even worse. At the end of scene eleven, Tye must leave for work, but does not want to leave her alone. Jane says she has their cat, Beret, and wonders if St. Vincent's, the hospital, will allow her to bring the animal. Tye insists she will not go to the hospital. Jane says it is a "likely destination" (110) for her. Tye asks why, and Jane explains:

JANE: I watched you dress. I didn't exist for you. Nothing existed for you but your image in the mirror. Understandably so. [*With her last strength she draws herself up.*]

TYE: What's understandable Jane?—You got a fever? [*He rises, too, and stretches out a hand to touch her forehead. She knocks it away.*]

JANE: What's understandable is that your present convenience is about to become an encumbrance. An invalid, of no use, financial or sexual. Sickness is repellent, Tye, demands more care and gives less and less in return. The person you loved—assuming

that you *did* love when she was still useful—is now, is now as absorbed in preparing herself for oblivion as you were absorbed in your—your image in the—mirror! (110)

Jane labels her letter from the hospital a rejection letter because she knows, sooner or later, even those closest to her will begin to reject her. Instead, they will see her as a nuisance, and she is fully prepared to distance herself emotionally before she can be hurt by this rejection.

Jane's mention of the mirror is not incidental. Achieving a happy Cinderella story results in the loss of one's true self. In "The Catastrophe of Success," Williams asserts that when people achieve success or "have a name," this name is a "fiction created with mirrors" (35). One obsessed with success too possess a mirror self, one concerned with appearances, and how he or she is perceived by others. Tye does not present himself as he truly is. He vigorously attempts to maintain a masculine façade through berating others in the house. No one else must see "cracks in the mirror," or potential indications of failing to fit in.

Jane's assumption that those closest to her will see her as a nuisance proves incorrect, at least for the remainder of the play. Tye tells her to rest, and that he will bring her something to eat upon his return. Jane follows him to the door, but calls for her cat. She stumbles and falls, and Writer must help her to her feet. She is half conscious, and mutters "They don't understand. Alone. I'm alone" (111). Jane suffers from a terminal disease that does not manifest itself in the form of fatigue until she is close to death. No one can see her symptoms until they have progressed so far. She is in a situation that results in isolation regardless of her actions. If she chooses to reveal her condition, people may pity her, at least during the first stages of her final decline. As time progresses, pity will turn to exasperation and disgust. Those closest to her may even choose to send her to a hospital or similar institution. On the other hand, keeping her illness secret proves a source of great distress, as indicated by her erratic behavior after opening the

letter and during her explanation to Tye. After briefly recovering from her fall, Jane remarks the change in the sky's color, saying "It isn't blue anymore, it's suddenly turned quite dark" (112). Jane is much like the sky; she has moved from the bright blue part of her life, and is now in darkness, nearing the end of both her time as a productive member of society as well as the end of her life. She struggles to carry out even the simplest of tasks, and must be waited on not because she is important, a key indicator of success, but because she is ill. Dealing with her physical well-being has deeply affected Jane's mental state. Even Writer realizes she has changed. He wants Nursie, an African American maid who works for landlady Mrs. Wire, to bring the cat to Jane, as she is "all alone up there" (115). She ends the play absorbed in a solitary chess game.

Though she keeps it secret for much of the play, Jane does not adamantly deny her disease. Her housemate Nightingale is dying from tuberculosis. Throughout the play, he downplays his condition, calling it "flu" (23), "asthma" (76) or a cold, and claiming the blood in his bed comes from bed bugs. Yet Nightingale knows the truth. He tells Nursie about the blood on his pillow. Nursie asks to see the bug, but Nightingale cannot provide evidence. He is quick to change the subject when Writer voices concern:

NIGHTINGALE: Who in hell wouldn't remove the remains of a squashed bedbug from his pillow? Nobody I'd want social or any quaintness with... she even... intimated that I coughed up the blood, as if I had... [*coughs*] consumption.

WRITER: [*stripped to his shorts and ready to go to bed*] I think with that persistent cough of yours you should get more rest.

NIGHTINGALE: Restlessness. Insomnia. I can't imagine a worse affliction, and I've suffered from it nearly all my life. I consulted a doctor about it once and he said, "You don't sleep because it reminds you of death." A ludicrous assumption—the only true regret I'd have over leaving this world is that I'd leave so much of my serious work unfinished. (48)

Nightingale plays a twisted game of sorts. He tries to convince his housemates as well as himself that he is not dying as seen through his claim that he would have no regrets if he were to die. He must appear brave and maintain this façade, or his world will further crumble.

Markotic notes that when a male character in poetry is ill, the illness robs him of masculinity: "To move from strong, young male, to weak, injured feminized male" is "a fate worse than death" (16). The same principle may be applied to *Vieux Carre*. During his first meeting with Writer, Nightingale reveals his disregard for stereotypes after Writer says he was "taught not to cry because it's ... humiliating" (18). Nightingale tells Writer, "Crying is a release for man or woman" (18). As a gay man, Nightingale already deals with rude comments from Tye, who calls him derogatory names and accuses Nightingale of trying to molest him. Though Nightingale may not succumb to stereotypes, Tye, and others like him, hold tightly to them. At one point, Tye tells a story about a transvestite who tries to have sex with him in exchange for dinner. Jane scolds him, since his story has caused Writer to leave their room. Jane asks, "Does everyone with civilized behavior, good manners seem to be a queer to you?" (32). Tye associates femininity with homosexuality. Nightingale is already "less of a man" to people like Tye. Nightingale would be even less masculine in the eyes of others. Simply because he does not believe in stereotypes does not mean he is unaffected when others force them upon him. After Writer rejects his plea for intimacy, Nightingale rises "*slowly with dignity*" (50). Writer and

Nightingale yell at one another, attracting the attention of Mrs. Wire, who asks if Nightingale is molesting Writer. Nightingale's voice replies "the persecution continues" (51). He clearly feels ostracized.

Furthermore, Nightingale's disease threatens the health (and masculinity) of other characters. In the 1930s, tuberculosis was deadly. It is a contagious, airborne disease; it is completely understandable that very few people are willing to be near Nightingale. Tye is particularly wary of Nightingale, for if Tye did contract tuberculosis, he would lose his masculinity, something he greatly prizes, as readers and audiences see through his often vulgar comments to and interactions with Jane. An action as harmless as suggesting Tye put on a robe meets an inappropriate reaction. Jane throws the robe around his shoulders, but Tye instead takes Jane in his arms and remarks her body feels good. She tells him to behave, since Writer is visiting. Tye has little power other than the masculine strength he exerts over Jane. He works as a bouncer in a strip club, but is not financially stable, as evidenced by him agreeing to let another man perform oral sex on him for a hundred dollars.

Jane and Nightingale both despise pity. In scene eight of *Vieux Carre*, Mrs. Wire learns Nightingale's place of work, The Two Parrots, has discharged him due to his illness, and claims the establishment kept him there out of "human pity" (73). Nightingale exclaims, "pity!" (73) in disbelief, then locks himself in. In tears, Writer tells Mrs. Wire to "be easy" (73) on Nightingale, that his denial is his last defense. Their conversation angers Nightingale, who claims he will hit anyone with his easel who tries to enter his room. The experience weakens Nightingale, and Mrs. Wire calls an ambulance. As Writer waits with him, Nightingale becomes feverish. Writer suggest suicide to end his suffering, but Nightingale adamantly refuses, both on religious grounds and his claim that he is not dying. Nightingale refuses to accept Writer's comforting

words. He claims apparitions only appear to the mad when Writer tells him to look on his alcove for his grandmother. Nightingale does not want to be pitied or coddled. Writer leaves him lying in bed, knowing he can do nothing more.

Laura Wingfield is not terminally ill, but must wear a brace on one of her legs, causing her to limp. Laura is self-conscious about this imperfection. It is likely one reason Laura is painfully shy, and was too embarrassed to finish her typing course at the local business college. Laura's mother, Amanda, is horrified when she learns her daughter wasted the hard-earned money set aside for the class. Amanda then decides Laura must get married, since she is not "cut out for business" (17). Laura's situation is not uncommon. It was a sad reality for many women during the 1930s, disabled or not. It would be difficult for Laura to survive without a job or husband to provide for her, especially with her disabilities. The family scrapes by on Tom's meager salary, with Amanda occasionally providing assistance by taking on odd jobs such as periodically selling magazine subscriptions. Laura "*utters a startled, doubtful laugh*" at Amanda's suggestion of marriage, interjecting "I'm—crippled!" (17). Amanda scolds Laura:

AMANDA: Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect—hardly noticeable even! When people have some slight disadvantage like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it—develop charm—and vivacity—and—*charm!* That's all you have to do! [*She turns again to the photograph.*] That's one thing your father had *plenty of*—was *charm!* (18)

Amanda is well meaning, but her words hold heavy expectations for her daughter's future. Laura needs to be confident in order to attract a husband. Amanda tries to make Laura feel as if her condition is in no way a hindrance, yet her backhanded speech fails to accomplish this. Laura may not be the more extreme "cripple," but Amanda still refers to the limp as a "defect" and a

“slight disadvantage” (18). Even Laura’s own mother makes her feel inferior, though without meaning to. Amanda wants her daughter to be taken care of. However, Amanda does not execute the most effective of methodologies when trying to accomplish this. Amanda’s half-truth is a form of pity and discrimination. Laura has heard the term “cripple” somewhere. Amanda uses this term at the play’s end in attempt to make Tom feel guilty about leaving. Though hateful, it more honestly describes the urgency of Laura’s condition. Her leg truly is “crippling.” It prevents mobility and causes her to retreat into her own mind. Laura knows her mother is simply putting on a show, hoping her confidence will spread to her daughter. Amanda may claim she thinks Laura is “an adult” (12), but her actions speak otherwise. Always being treated like a child does not help Laura’s self-esteem, creating in her a painfully shy young woman.

Despite her mother’s attempts to make her feel less alienated, Laura possesses a profound awareness of what her disability means. She shows Jim her collection of glass animals when he comes over for dinner. Laura is especially proud of her glass unicorn, though she claims she does not have a favorite. However, during a dance, Jim knocks it off the table, breaking off its horn. Immediately apologetic, Jim feels Laura will never forgive him. Instead she smiles, and tells him she will imagine the unicorn has had an operation to make him feel “less freakish” (86). For Murphy, this is “an expression of a fantasy of her own to have an operation that would remove her disability and consequently her shyness, making her feel more at ease around “normal” people” (58). The only thing that separates the unicorn from the other horses in terms of basic appearance is its horn. The only thing that separates Laura from other girls in terms of basic appearance is her leg brace. Yet Laura recognizes that this one trait, the unicorn’s horn, can be looked upon as a mark of freakishness. This recognition is an example of what Bigsby labels as Williams’ ability to have characters “reach for something more than the merely material” (79).

The unicorn symbolizes an individual ostracized by society. However, in the case of both unicorns and isolated individuals, people who see the beauty in each exist. Laura loves her unicorn, but knows others may not. However, she cannot muster up love for herself. The loss of the unicorn's horn is both negative, for it has lost what makes it unique, and positive, for it no longer attracts potentially unwanted attention for its difference.

Readers learn very little about Laura through Laura herself. Instead, they must rely on the account of her brother Tom. Amanda pressures Tom into finding a gentleman caller for Laura. Tom chooses a coworker named Jim, whom Laura knew in high school. He has heard Laura "speak admiringly" (51) of Jim's singing voice. Laura never stands up to her mother, and likely never stood up to anyone in school, even if they used terms like "crippled." This play is one of memory, as is *Vieux Carre*. Implementing the memory play technique allows Williams to reveal the hardships illnesses may have on the affected person's family. Amanda and Tom must work around Laura's disability. Her limp not only defines her, but the rest of her family as well. Tom, and to a lesser extent, Amanda, work to support her. The fact Laura cannot work or find a husband becomes Amanda's main problem. Amanda puts a great amount of effort into preparing the house for a gentleman caller for Laura. Tom cannot forget his sister after his departure. While Amanda scolds Tom, he almost lives in his sister's shadow. After all, he is pulled into the plot to find a gentleman caller. Jane and Nightingale have no family that appear in the play, but their illness affects those around them. At *Vieux Carre*'s end, Williams, as narrator, stops for one final reflection after he sees Jane absorbed in her chess game. He claims the voices of those he met in the boarding house "are echoes, fading but remembered" (116). The image of Jane, among other images such as the dying Nightingale, still haunt him.

According to Stephen Bottoms, when staging productions of *The Glass Menagerie*, it is important to take note of Williams' direction that Laura's limp "need not be more than suggested on the stage." The focus shifts from the handicap itself to the inner vulnerability Laura experiences as a result of it. Laura *feels* the 'clumping' noises she makes as she walks around are much louder than they actually are (65). It is impossible for her to be confident. Her isolation is self-imposed. The gentleman caller Jim remarks on Laura's decision to remain in her own world. Laura tells him she has never had much luck making friends. Jim is gentle, but firm in telling her she needs to work out her shyness gradually, and that "people are not so dreadful when you know them" (76). Telling Laura she is not the only one with problems is another well-meaning, yet ineffective way of coaxing Laura out of her shell. Jim may not find Laura's walk loud, but she clearly does. Tom notes that in high school, "Laura had been as unobtrusive as Jim had been astonishing" (50). It is easy for Jim to tell Laura to be more outgoing. He does not understand what it is like to be physically disabled. Despite his approach, Laura does open up to him, her feelings of attraction for him she harbored in high school returning. Just as a relationship appears to be forming, Jim reveals he is engaged to a girl named Betty.

Laura frequently retreats to an imaginary world in order to deal with the world around her. According to Bottoms, this imaginary world revolves around three of her personal possessions (22). She polishes her glass collection, plays her father's old Victrola and looks through her high school yearbook. The yearbook in particular represents Laura's hope and longing as opposed to anything more solid (Bottoms 23). Likewise, the glass represents the fragility of her world, which can come crashing down at any moment. In scene two, Amanda catches Laura polishing her glass collection instead of memorizing the secretarial typing chart and confronts her about missing school. Amanda then begins a tirade:

AMANDA: [*hopelessly fingering the huge pocketbook*]: So, what are we going to do with the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling eternally play those worn out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him? We won't have a business career—we've given up on that because it gives us nervous indigestion! [*She laughs wearily.*] (16)

Amanda does not realize how truly difficult life is for her daughter. The reminder of her father is not painful for Laura; it instead provides relief. Laura clings to her possessions because they are her only comfort. In her present state, Laura has no option other than to rely on these items; they remind her of a time when she did not have to worry about the pressures of marriage or finding a steady job. Yet, according to Bigsby, the imagination that sustains Laura also isolates her (81). Socialization is difficult for her. Laura's disability becomes crucial when Amanda decides her daughter is to get married. Everyone, Laura included, knows her disability and its side effects will make finding a husband more difficult unless she can prove she has redeeming qualities, such as the charm Amanda so wants her acquire. At the end of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom reveals he has been tormented by his sister's memory, lamenting, "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (97). He loves his sister, but left to achieve his own dreams. He cannot shake the image of Laura. Tom knows leaving heavily impacted the ailing young woman, emotionally (for Laura cares for her brother too) and financially.

Physical disabilities and terminal illnesses do far more than make maneuvering and daily activities more difficult. They often contribute to a second form of disability, such as retreatism or anger. Examining the lives of disabled characters perhaps gives the greatest insight to what constitutes "success."

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“What good is it?” (“The Catastrophe of Success” 36). This is the question Williams wants people to ask those who have witnessed the kind of success he warns against. Williams further claims that the answer to this question would be “unprintable in genteel publications” (“The Catastrophe of Success” 36), and would only come about after a shot of truth serum. A person would be loath to admit the pursuit of success brings about more harm than help. Williams’ plays act as a subtle truth serum. Williams argues that those who become ensnared by society’s definition of success have lost their purity of heart, the “one success worth having” (“The Catastrophe of Success” 36). Buying into the “primary and destructive” (Bigsby 81) Cinderella myth ensures its perpetuation, and therefore, a continuing state of isolation for those who do not fit in. By reading or watching a Williams’ play, one can easily relate to any number of characters. The reader has felt isolation at some point in his or her life. As readers and audiences begin to examine the reasons for their own feelings of isolation, they should begin to ask questions. Did they break an unspoken rule? Fail to meet an expectation? What does society’s expectations and rules say about it? The answer, much like the green velvet sofa that resembled “slime on stagnant water” (“The Catastrophe of Success” 33), is not a pretty one, but the truth nonetheless: society rejects those who do not fit the norm.

Occasionally, Williams would receive an analysis of one of his plays from an audience member. Though appreciative, Williams frequently found himself baffled, insisting:

Don’t misunderstand me. I am thankful for these highly condensed and stimulating analyses, but it never would have occurred to me that that was the story I was trying to

tell. Usually, when asked about a theme, I look vague and say, “It’s a play about life.”

What could be simpler, and yet more pretentious? You can easily extend that a little and say it is a tragedy of incomprehension. That also means life. Or you can say it is a tragedy of Puritanism. That is life in America. Or you can say it is a play that considers the “problem of evil.” But why not just say “life?” (“Questions Without Answers” 42)

Williams claims to write about the tragedy of Puritanism. A puritanical society is one that likes to believe it enforces strict moral behavior. Homosexual or sexually deviant lifestyles are not allowed to coexist with those who abide by rigid social rules. Thus, individuals who fail to “fit in” are isolated. A Puritanical society, though regulated, proves harmful, as it divides people instead of uniting them.

In addition to receiving multiple analyses, Williams often found himself the target of many tough questions regarding his plays. During one such occurrence, American stage producer Margo Jones interrupts, telling the group of women questioning Williams that the theme of his plays is “People!” and “Life” (“Questions Without Answers” 42). He manages to escape the crowd, a plate of food in hand. He recalls feeling happy not because he escaped the questions, but because “there were people who cared enough to ask them” (42). These people are the ones with a precious social conscious; they are the ones Williams ardently admires and encourages his readers to emulate.

Williams ends the “Catastrophe of Success” on an urgent, though nonetheless positive note. The catastrophe of success is avoidable, but only if people choose to live with “an obsessive interest in human affairs,” “compassion” and “a certain amount of moral conviction” (36). Lastly, he asserts that the time in one’s life is short; that the monosyllable of the clock is “Loss, loss, loss” (36) unless one devotes his or her heart to its opposition. For Williams, life is

about living freely, and to the best of one's ability. This type of life is only possible after freeing oneself from the snare of a success-obsessed, Puritanical world.

We're all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life!

--Tennessee Williams, through Val Xavier, *Orpheus Descending*, 1957

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