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978-1-107-01536-4 - Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest

Michael S. D. Hooper

Excerpt

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## MANUFACTURING DESIRE

DON ... What makes desire? Desire for a face or a body? Why does flesh in certain forms become an obsession with you? Why does it darken your mind?

MIRIAM Because you have passion. Put it into your work.

DON I've put it into my work, but I'm still not satisfied.<sup>1</sup>

For Williams's characters, life often begins and ends with desire.<sup>2</sup>

Ostensibly, Tennessee Williams's late play, *Green Eyes, or No Sight Would Be Worth Seeing* (1971), charts the premature break-up of a marriage. A young boy and girl from the South are honeymooning in New Orleans, staying in a hotel in the French Quarter. The girl has clearly visible bruises, marks about which her new husband is suspicious rather than concerned. She attributes them to his alcohol-fuelled violence of the night before: returning from a tour of the bars in Bourbon Street, he abused her and cannot remember doing so. This explanation is never completely refuted as the girl's admission that she has been having sex with a green-eyed stranger only comes after the boy, Claude, tells her that most of his army pay cheque will go to his mother, now that his father is in hospital. Though it may be true, the infidelity serves the purpose of revenge.

The relationship appears doomed from the outset. The girl is not interested in having sex with her husband, preferring instead to go sight-seeing; a middle-aged couple breakfasting on the hotel's patio seems only to offer a conjugal model of eccentricity and separation (the woman leaves her husband to go inside the hotel and does not look back when he trips over). It soon becomes apparent that the marriage of the boy and girl has been a hasty one, that their fractiousness with each other is more than just a disagreement over the night before.

Claude is due to return to Vietnam in five days, a complication to which is added his trauma at killing innocent women and children. His drunken meanderings through Bourbon Street were because 'I got things

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in my head I got to git out', namely the shame of murdering Vietnamese jungle-dwellers who, contrary to the American propaganda picked up by the girl, are 'more human than you ... more human than me that shot 'em down!'<sup>3</sup> It is possible that he is referring to the My Lai Massacre of March 1968, a gratuitously brutal moment in America's participation in the Vietnam War in which over 400 women and children in South Vietnam were wiped out after Charlie Company met with little or no resistance from the Vietcong. Claude is 'fed up and disgusted' (p. 159) and further at odds with a wife who feels he should be proud to serve his country and eager to get back to doing so.

The play could, quite interestingly, continue to document the impact of the Vietnam War on the couple's marriage, perhaps casting a comparative eye back to the personal and political situations when they first met. Instead, there is just the brief comment about innocent victims and a cursory exploration of the psychological effects on American troops; the war is, essentially, a convenient plot device. Claude has to have a plausible excuse to get so drunk that he cannot remember what he might have done to his wife. He also needs to be sufficiently uncertain about a condom that he finds floating in their toilet. Did he use it with a stripper as his wife suggests?

The heart of the play, and of so much of Williams's work, is desire. It is, as Annette Saddik indicates in the comment prefacing this introduction, a point from which Williams's characters invariably depart and to which they return; a life-giving and a life-denying principle. When the girl finally concedes that she repeatedly had sex with a stranger, her needs are at the centre of the drama. She is its desiring subject. Her new husband is seeking sexual fulfilment, too, both before and after the announcement of his wife's betrayal and despite his mental distraction. His fumbling hands yearn to hold what he regards as rightfully his, a chattel; but the girl is not so easily dominated and ultimately has few qualms about revealing the satisfaction she received from the violent coupling the night before. Her needs were met so fully that she begged the man, a marine, to take her on board his ship. Desire undermines a marriage that she does not seem to take very seriously, even before she learnt that she would not be properly provided for.

Almost predictably, a bitter Claude brands his wife a diseased prostitute. No longer a honeymooning tourist, she is made to seem a part of the city's sex industry, hardly better than one of the Bourbon Street strippers Claude might have brought back to the hotel had he been drunk enough. Yet the wife's all too graphic story, and the fresh desire its telling seems to

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release in her, moves him beyond jealousy and disgust, renewing his own desire. At the very end of this one-act play, Claude actively sustains his wife's fantasy of (enormous) green eyes to make her have sex with him. Their marriage has become a symbolic *ménage à trois*.

*Green Eyes* exhibits several key features of Tennessee Williams's writing: there are undeniable references to the political ramifications of a major historical event; there is an attempted deconstruction of desire, especially from the female perspective; and there is even a partial equation of enhanced sexual potency with race in that Claude immediately associates green eyes (an obvious euphemism for penis) with 'nigguh blood' (p. 162). In addition, the uncovering of truth and the construction of narrative feature prominently. More specifically, the play echoes the violent sexuality, both consensual and non-consensual, of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and the heightened eroticism that is derived from infidelity with a racial other in *Baby Doll* (1956) and its chief source, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (1945).

The play's brevity is one reason why the impact of the war on the couple's marriage is not explored further, but there are, nonetheless, values coalescing around conflict that affect what happens. Although the marine has no stated involvement in Vietnam, his violent lovemaking implies the very macho qualities that Claude lacks in the girl's eyes; we sense that he would have no hesitation in killing innocent civilians if he were so ordered. The girl will not be satisfied with a tender, loving relationship now that she is married: her choice is either sado-masochistic sex with a stranger or sightseeing on her own. Thus the marriage is symbolically annulled by Claude's failure as both provider and combat soldier.<sup>4</sup>

Whether real or a fantasy figure, green eyes (the actual nickname for a college roommate to whom Williams was sexually attracted but with whom he would not permit himself a relationship) is a barely realized character. Anonymity no doubt heightens the excitement of the encounter for the young wife, but it is, in any case, the stirring of physical sensations that is valorized – potent images of blinding and burning. Bodies and their features that stimulate attraction give way to an all-consuming desire. This is an essence that propels the human frame forward, that destabilizes – the wife tells her husband that she staggered into the hotel 'like I was drunk' (p. 163) – before it tantalizes with the threat of complete extinction.

In works that Williams and/or his critics have labelled allegorical, like *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) and 'Desire and the Black Masseur' (1948), desire leads to consumption, a figurative devouring that denotes human

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(non-)interaction. Sex as purely a source of pleasure has its limits beyond which issues of identity, survival and death take over. An early stage in an inexorable journey, in these examples it is bought and sold, a commodity that creates the illusion of relationship. Elsewhere in Williams's canon, sexual desire signifies survival, defines life against the death instinct and is a means of social climbing and the securing of property.

Very few plays and stories – and certainly not Williams's two novels, *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* (1950) and *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975) – overlook desire completely. Even early plays, constructed around news events and with derivative ideological viewpoints, compromise political developments with love plots and sexual tension. It seems something of a truism to state that sex is a fundamental guiding principle, that, released from the repressive agencies of the culture of Williams's most successful years (the 1940s and 1950s), it is the driving force between many of the characters' lives and the relationships they form. Yet it can equally be something that is policed – from the bigoted Boss Findley of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) to the fag-bashing of the narrator of *Moise and the World of Reason* by police officers. And, even when there is no outside control, the characters' lives and their sexual energies appear markedly disjointed, as if desire and its fulfilment lead not to union but, paradoxically, to a still greater sense of apartness.

Williams's characters are, wherever possible, remarkably open about their needs and desires in a period when exploring the female gaze was still not widely attempted by mainstream American playwrights and when homosexual desire could not even be directly acknowledged in the theatre. The plays and stories are full of sexual discourse, a running dialogue that proposes sexual bliss as both desirable and achievable, though ultimately unsatisfactory. Rarely do characters step back and try to locate the source of their obsessive attraction in the abstract way of Don and Miriam from *The Parade* (1962) at the start of this introduction. However, Williams makes us aware of desire's addictiveness and the eventual boredom and disgust that can come from the pursuit of multiple sexual objects. His memoirs, notebooks and letters all confirm his own experience of this – a life characterized by few enduring relationships and bouts of unfulfilling promiscuity. Moreover, though Williams could talk about desire in aesthetic terms in a 1974 interview when he declared proudly that 'it seems very beautiful to me to write sex into plays', we sense an underlying frustration, similar to that expressed by Don, that writing is an inadequate catharsis.<sup>5</sup> Passion cannot be exhausted because, as David Savran has suggested about *Moise*, there is a

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‘symmetry of writing and sexuality’, which is, poststructurally, ‘an erotics of writing and reading’.<sup>6</sup>

Though he claimed to have read only a couple of his books without too much interest, Williams was undoubtedly influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud. He was, for example, keen to account for his own homosexuality in terms of an excessive attachment to his mother following a potentially fatal attack of childhood diphtheria; and he considered his somewhat excessive fascination with sex to originate in a split personality. He would always be trying to free himself from puritanical attitudes – the primness of his mother and the religion of his clergyman grandfather, but also the underlying conservatism of America. Whilst Williams’s own sexual habits may be of chief interest to his biographers, early critics took up the notion of the ‘rebellious puritan’ to explain, and occasionally defend, a dramatist who was savaged by some reviewers for plumbing the immoral depths of sex and violence. Nancy Tischler, for instance, almost appears to be speaking on behalf of the author when she says that his ‘later determination that no subject can be taboo for the artist was apparently an effort to compensate for the prudery of his childhood, traces of which linger in the recesses of his mind’.<sup>7</sup>

The tension between permissiveness and restraint is a real one and Williams’s use of religious imagery, as either a counterpoint or a means of exploring desire, is a marker for this. However, such a personal and creative fissure should not distract us from the wider implications of desire and its operation within Williams’s texts.

## THE SELF-PROCLAIMED REVOLUTIONARY

Just as he sought to correlate sexual desire with his personal history, so Williams also tried to maintain a political persona that could apparently salvage his plays from the purely personal. Underneath the poetic intensity capturing the truth of experience for those incomplete people he felt instinctively were his kind – the fragile, maimed, emotionally crippled – he held a deep-seated conviction that the artist had some further, unspecified role in opposing the authority of government and big business. To his mind, writers were meant to be bohemian, unconventional in lifestyle and romantically non-conformist. The formation of such a view was no doubt encouraged by key moments in Williams’s early life. There were moves to lesser addresses in St Louis where a sensitive boy might be acutely aware of social snobbery. He was exposed to the city’s severely deprived areas as a young man; and he began to understand the plight of

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the ordinary working man when he was taken out of the University of Missouri to work on the floor of the International Shoe Company warehouse where his father was a manager. Of this final experience, perhaps the most seminal, he later remarked: 'Oh, I was a socialist from the time I started working for a shoe company. That will do it every time. Sixty-five dollars a month. Surrounded by all these lathes, my God!'<sup>8</sup>

With the exception of the second example, which Allean Hale briefly discusses in connection with the presence of a Hooverville in St Louis, Williams's understanding of society's inequities, the hardships of a working-class life, stems from personal resentment.<sup>9</sup> He had set his mind on being a writer and, whilst he may have been under no illusions that this could involve a lengthy, poorly paid apprenticeship, the creativity of the artist was quickly set at odds with the humdrum existence afforded by manual labour. Hence we have the dreaminess of Tom Wingfield and the Writer in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Stairs to the Roof* respectively, creative souls adrift in a sea of machines that have broken the spirit of modern man, constantly buffeted by the demands of unreasonable bosses who themselves seem cogs in one large automated mechanism. Tom's scribbles on shoebox lids represent the young author's attempts to write himself out of (literally) a kind of industrial slavery, to offset the endless, demeaning form-filling of the modern clerk.

This belief in the artist as rebel did not desert Williams. With his first success came an understanding of the type of play that would sell (his primary consideration) and endure for posterity. This would not be the overtly political fare popular in the 1930s, the 'shoot bullets' drama of Clifford Odets, but Williams's many essays, prefaces and interview comments repeatedly return to the condition of America and the responsibilities of the writer.<sup>10</sup> We will not always find consistency here, but there is an underlying unease at the reality of living through difficult times. The national and global pressures were experienced more acutely by the writer who, when he did not feel that speaking out was a futile exercise, was dangerously gagged. For example, digressing in an essay essentially about the Mummets, the theatre company in St Louis that he began working for in 1936, Williams speaks of the hysterical reaction to the threat of totalitarianism that keeps all writers 'under wraps of one kind or another, trembling before the spectre of investigating committees and even with Buchenwald in the back of our minds when we consider whether or not we dare to say we were for Henry Wallace'.<sup>11</sup> The investigating committees would come to assume greater solidity when Elia Kazan, the director Williams worked with on some of his most successful plays, was

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questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s and coerced into naming others in the entertainment industry with supposed communist affiliations. Williams's fears here, symbolized by the only too recent horror of the concentration camp and a further remark denying exaggeration – '*Yes, it is as bad as that*' (p. 13, Williams's italics) – are at least tempered by a faith in American democracy. Our collective memory of the stalwarts of American political thought – Jefferson, Lincoln and Paine – will, he reassures us, hold the country back from becoming a police state.

Later, in a review of Paul Bowles's *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories*, he again talks of 'the true American nature and tradition' that will probably re-impose itself, but, by 1950, society (notably not just government) has outlawed dissenting voices to such an extent that the artist has no alternative other than 'withdrawal into the caverns of his own isolated being'.<sup>12</sup> Like so many of his characters, Williams and fellow artists must settle for the isolation of exile, a position that is attractive (as we shall come to see) as well as damaging to a healthy democracy.

Williams's incessant bouts of travelling from virtually the late 1930s onwards, both across America and into Europe, seem to confirm this notion of artistic exile and reinforce the image of the bohemian, though it is likely they proceeded from boredom and restlessness rather than any serious gesture of political ostracism.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1941, he was telling his mother that 'when I feel stale I move to another place and it freshens me up' – productivity, the rhythm of writing, always being ultimately more important than anything else.<sup>14</sup> Travel overseas also invited obvious comparisons with a more relaxed Latin temperament, one that Williams would draw on repeatedly when exploring different sexual mores.

As America made its own incursions into other countries – Korea in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s – the artist, unfairly silenced by Western democracies mindful of the threat of communism, naturally joined the counter-culture in condemning a politics of imperialism. Though Williams acknowledged his own withdrawal in the sixties, a decade he later claimed to have slept through on a continuous cocktail of prescription drugs and alcohol, interviews he gave in both the sixties and seventies perpetuated the writer's moral, anti-establishment stance. They also denied and then restated the political force of his work. Diagnosing America's ills as stemming from a violent urge to colonize, to produce and deliberately to waste ever more weapons as the capitalistic 'death merchants of the world', he sought to affirm his political credentials.<sup>15</sup> The legacy of strong democratic principles had seemingly not been enough to



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keep his country from ‘moral decay’, and Williams had come to accept that political writing was ineffectual.<sup>16</sup> However, looking back on the late sixties as a time of ‘crisis’, personal rather than societal, he claimed a turning point, a fresh commitment mirrored in his characters:

For the first time in my life I gained a genuine relationship to the social conditions of the world. I always had the same problems as the people in my plays: no connection to the outside world. I was trapped within myself. That problem, at least, was solved in the crisis of the late sixties, which one should certainly not take to mean that I suddenly became a sociological author. But my main characters now have a political dimension to the extent that they no longer act blindly out of themselves, but rather are aware of the effect of their actions.<sup>17</sup>

Williams was particularly thinking of *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975), a play that captures some of the mood of the dark surveillance society of the sixties, but it is not widely thought that his work shifted in this way. The later plays are characterized by experimentation in form and style, developments that echo the work of European playwrights like Samuel Beckett and theorists like Antonin Artaud, not increased political awareness, other than an intimation of impending global destruction. The insertion of the word ‘genuine’ implies that Williams had only ever been feigning a social conscience, fooling himself as much as those who took his earlier claims seriously.

Neither contention is entirely accurate. We might quibble over the semantic difference between sociological and political, but the blindness of Williams’s characters is itself a political decision, one made with a full understanding of the ‘social conditions of the world’. If his characters find themselves on the run, fleeing an unbearable social reality, they have, in part, accepted solitude, the very fragmentation of communities that opposes Williams’s claimed socialism. Resisting the violence of the intolerant – psychological as well as physical – Williams’s characters create a manifesto of the imagination where their own creativity goes beyond mere survival to order alternative worlds, to make them self-supporting. The strength of those who have created an ideological power base can only be opposed by the individual ability to summon personal images of beauty and tenderness, metaphors created in the knowledge that they will be destroyed. With these intimations of mortality comes not only compassion but also a sense of glamour: the outsider is celebrated for individuality, not just his/her fleeting gesture of resistance.

Within this social disintegration, sexual desire gives the illusion of being a cohesive force, bringing characters together in the face of both an advancing materialism and death. It masquerades as the love that seems



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so elusive in a world where the individual will resist being anchored. Yet desire works against community in Williams's work as a force so achingly strong that the state of desiring holds more importance than the relations that follow its consummation. Desire is an end in itself, not just a necessary prelude to, or part of, human relationships.

This book seeks to explore the interface between desire and the broader politics it often succeeds in stifling. While the pursuit of desire creates its own power structures, it also diverts, even dismantles, larger political frameworks, so that Williams's social conscience is lost in plays and stories that probe the personal rather than the ideological, that reference contemporaneous events but are not fundamentally political. Though a fascination with desire itself might imply a political subversion of society's attempts to repress it (certainly up to the sixties), Williams's transgressive desires are diminished as political choices for not acknowledging the social advancement that has, in part, sought to legitimize them. Thus, his exploration of homosexuality, bold by virtue of the injunctions against it, makes no connection with the work of the various gay liberation movements that gained valuable political ground in the second half of the twentieth century. Sympathetic to the black civil rights movement, Williams nonetheless makes no direct acknowledgement of the demonstrations and riots advancing its cause, choosing only to foreground the eroticism of colour; and the great changes in the status of women throughout Williams's lifetime barely register, whilst an interest in female desire is only too evident.

It is along the lines of mainstream politics, the gay sensibility and Williams's treatment of race and women that this book is simply and uniquely organized. These are large and, at times, cumbersome categories, each one capable of forming a single study in its own right. They are approached with a conviction that Williams's politics – propounded as humanitarian, left-wing – are, without being completely absent, not the focus of, or the primary motivation for, his writing. The chief reason why this should come to preoccupy us is a growing tendency from approximately the 1990s onwards to re-evaluate the playwright – and, though valuable work has been done to bring to light and assess his other writing, he is still considered first and foremost a man of the theatre – as a social writer who, no matter how obliquely, commentates on his times. This goes much further than simply stating, as we could with any writer, that Williams's texts are cultural artefacts, documents that reflect the conditions under which they were produced. Rather, it is maintained they reveal a deep distrust of authoritarian government, represent a

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backlash against the ultra-conservative, family-centred values of the Cold War years and champion the claims of disenfranchised minorities, notably African Americans.

Since it has been suggested that Williams's earliest plays establish his values and prove his political roots, Chapter 1 adopts a chronological approach. Allean Hale has shed light on Williams's likely influences in St Louis and his successful, if rather brief, connection with the Mummies and their director, Willard Holland.<sup>18</sup> Following both the success of social drama in the first half of the 1930s and labour agitations around the country, Williams was receptive to political material. However, even by the end of the thirties, when *Candles to the Sun* (1936) and *Fugitive Kind* (1937) seemed to suggest that he would fully embrace political rhetoric, the moment had passed, the public's taste (at least in Broadway productions) having moved on. The late publication and full-scale production of these works – and we must add *Not About Nightingales* (1938) here, a play first performed in London thanks to the determined efforts of an English actress, Vanessa Redgrave – is another factor in the vogue for a political playwright. The uncovering of writing that clearly reveals a political direction, albeit a derivative one, points, it may be contended, to the real writer behind the Broadway fame, one distracted away from his roots.

*The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *Stairs to the Roof* (also performed in 1945, in between the Chicago and Broadway runs of *Menagerie*) continue Williams's preoccupation with the little man, the lowly employee ground down by the wheels of capitalism, and a pre-war age of automation and homogeneity. In this sense, they adumbrate the idea of a rat race, a constantly revolving life/work cycle such as that symbolized in the short story 'The Treadmill' (1937), and the recently published *The Municipal Abattoir*, a play to which I shall return in my conclusion.<sup>19</sup> Whilst *Menagerie* paints a broad background canvas of global events leading up to World War II and underlines the economic misery of the thirties for the lower-middle classes, Williams's main focus is unquestionably on the broken private realms occupied by the Wingfields, their sensitivities and frustrations.

After the political posturing of the three proletarian plays – *Candles to the Sun*, *Fugitive Kind* and *Not About Nightingales* – Williams shows two clear tendencies: mining his own life for dramatic material (family tensions but particularly his frustrations at International Shoe) and a marked interest in fantasy/nightmare, a dimension of the recurrent theme of escape. Neither represents a commitment to resolving social ills in a coherent, meaningful way. Williams's fanciful solution of making a clean break with the world we know and colonizing another planet (repeated