

The Truth That Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

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Because important gay writers like Tennessee Williams were courageous during past homophobic times, a positive gay identity has evolved. Although it could be said that novelists of the first half of this century took more liberty in writing about homosexuality than dramatists, no American writer who wished to establish a reputation with a widespread audience could “come out” in public without facing censure or even rejection as an artist, a fact which gay critics John Clum and Nicholas de Jongh seem to ignore when considering the element of the closet in Williams’s plays. Recognizing the complex ways in which gender and sexuality play a role in Williams, David Savran is the most understanding of these gay-oriented critics.

To comprehend fully Tennessee Williams’s courageous “outing” of the subject of homosexuality, the critic should interpret gay subjectivity contextually within the period when Williams wrote and originally saw his plays produced. As Neil Miller notes in *Out of the Past*, a study of modern gay and lesbian history, homosexuals in the 1950s faced the growing influence of Senator McCarthy and his “witch” hunts. Gay men and lesbians were considered security risks; in fact, it was believed that homosexual spies could easily betray the U.S. government—as the name of the McCarthy-inspired House Committee on Un-American Activities, reveals. Being homosexual was associated with subversive, un-American behavior, as it had been during World War II.

When Roy Cohn, a closeted homosexual himself, assisted Senator McCarthy in prosecuting and persecuting men and women of questionable repute according to the smug, middle-class America of the 1950s, the stage was set for a homosexual witch-hunt. Soon, the entire nation became in-

volved in government-inspired persecution of those not only who were perceived to be communists but also homosexuals, who in the minds of many, were communists any way. As a result, many gays and lesbians in the federal government lost their jobs. Also inspired by McCarthyism, a legislative committee sought to rid Florida of any perceived homosexual, for being gay was not only perversion of the highest magnitude but, more importantly, also tantamount to being a traitor (Miller 271-272). For most of Tennessee Williams's life, the popular opinion was that homosexuals were capable of the worst crimes against their own country and God.

In addition, for much of this century, gay men and lesbians were considered mentally ill. Before 1971, when the APA officially removed homosexuality from its list of mental disturbances, being gay or lesbian also branded one as "abnormal" and "maladjusted." In the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Mental Disorders (DSM I)*, homosexuality was considered a serious personality disorder despite the position of the father of psychiatry, Sigmund Freud, that homosexuality was neither an asset nor a liability. Few psychologists or psychiatrists openly questioned the official position of *DSM I* before the work of pioneer Evelyn Hooker in the 1950s.

Williams's *Cat on a Hot in Roof*, the focus of this discussion, was written and first produced during a time of reactionary politics. Because of the social, governmental, and institutional taboos against homosexuality, being an "out" gay writer was problematic during this time. As a result, when Clum and others attack Williams for internalized self-hatred and ambivalence toward homosexuality, they offer an anachronistic, post-Stonewall reading of his canon. Even more so, they seemingly overlook the playwright's courageous efforts to bring the subject "out of the closet" in a repressive era of American history.

As Michel Foucault has argued in *The History of Sexuality*, the lack of discussion of sexuality in a repressed society has typically indicated that "perverse" sexual permutations are rampant and that the more society renders taboo the unspeakable, the more such diversity is inscribed and reinforced. Considering the role of the unspoken as important as the uttered, gay (and other) critics should recognize that Williams's works have much more positive things to say about homosexuality and the gay subject than some contemporary gay critics give him credit for. This observation especially applies to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, one of Williams's greatest works—the first

major American play to confront the taboo subject of homosexuality directly and without apology. Winner of the 1955 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is Williams's most gay play before *Small Craft Warnings* (1972).¹ Not only is *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* a plea for tolerance of the gay lifestyle, the play also demonstrates the extent to which society dehumanizes men through its overt homophobia. As such, the play largely demonstrates that a homosocially-oriented social structure is responsible for problematizing homosexuality.

To be fair to Williams, a more subtle and complex way of viewing subjectivity would seem to be needed when the critic interprets his plays. I realize traditional theories of representation consider the physical embodiment of the subject on stage as representation, but I believe the opposite can also be the truth, as Foucaultian logic would suggest. The gay subject represented without question in *Cat* is Skipper, Brick's dead friend with whom he shared an "uncommon" relationship. Although some readers have suggested that Skipper may not even be homosexual, the play indicates the opposite. There is nothing to suggest that Skipper's self-perception is to be questioned. He has, after all, drunk himself to death after confessing his love for Brick and failed when trying to "prove" otherwise. Alcohol becomes the means by which both the gay or quasi-gay male characters, Skipper and Brick, run from their inner selves. Skipper is portrayed as a disturbed but clearly homosexual man whose love and admiration for Brick are such that he cannot face the truth Maggie helps reveal to him. Nevertheless, that Skipper has gay (that is, erotic) feelings toward Brick voices the taboo subject of genuine homosexual attraction and love—making the play subversive for its time. Savran acknowledges that with Skipper Williams "begins cautiously to redefine the male homosexual subject" (109) but considers the lack of embodiment of Skipper on stage problematic like Clum and DeJongh.

Even though not embodied on stage, Skipper is clearly a central figure in the drama; therefore, Williams's attempt at gay male subjectivity is implied through his character. Something concerning Skipper's suicide should also be addressed. Admittedly, gay subjects in American drama often commit suicide because of conventions about punishing the nonconformist in American culture and the playwright's fear of repercussions from a rejecting public, as Kaier Curtin's book "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*" shows. With Skipper, however, the issue is far more complex. Brick's rejec-

tion plays a large role in Skipper's death, and even though Skipper may find the truth of his own homosexuality difficult to face, the play suggests that social rejection is the root of his downfall—not homosexuality. If Brick had not hung up on Skipper, perhaps he would still be alive, and if Brick had not rejected his friend, he would not be drinking himself to death. In Williams's world the individual is at the mercy of social codes (and Brick is a prisoner of society's norms) which restrict his freedom and happiness, an issue to which I will return later in this essay.

With Brick, Big Daddy, and Maggie, Williams's negotiation of his own gay subjectivity without "coming out" as a gay playwright becomes even more evident. Everything which occurs centers around Brick, who embodies homosexual desire and, potentially, gay representation. True to the playwright's own homosexual nature, Maggie's attraction to Brick's body—and the central focus on Maggie's desire for sexual fulfillment with Brick—places the male body before the audience's (and the author's) gaze. As Mark Royden Winchell has observed, Brick's implied re-consummation with Maggie at the play's end may be a vicarious means through which he can reunite with his dead friend since he had slept with her to "prove" he was not gay (707)—an act which again centers the play on the male body and reinforces Skipper's role as a gay subject. Maggie's comments on Brick's appearance are often repeated—as are her pleas for sexual fulfillment in and revitalization of their marriage.

Laura Mulvey has argued that audiences identify with the male protagonist and enjoy visual display as they observe characters look at each other. However, the latter is shaped by the dominance of the heterosexual male gaze:

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

As Mulvey suggests, Hollywood cinema generally places male subjectivity at the center and focuses on the male's gaze on the female body. On the other hand, in her essay "Dis-Embodying the Female Voice," Kaja Silverman focuses on the problem of the lack of representation of the fe-

male voice: "To allow her to be heard without being seen would . . . disrupt the specular regime upon which mainstream cinema relies; it would put her beyond the control of the male gaze, and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze sustains" (135). Similarly, Mulvey skirts the issue of male sexual objectification by stating, "According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (426) and ignores the possibility of the homosexual male gaze in her theory. Each of these feminist theories is centered on the heterosexual paradigm of active/passive (male/female). This is not to criticize Mulvey and Silverman for their heterosexual-oriented views but to point out the possibility that ignoring gay or lesbian subjectivity within the conventional male/female dichotomy might alter conventional views of the gaze. Although Mulvey's and Silverman's theories apply primarily to filmic representation, they nevertheless inform my reading of theatrical and literary subjectivity in Tennessee Williams.

Only recently has the male body as spectacle become acceptable for theory and critical analysis, as Peter Lehman's 1993 book *Running Scared* and Laurence Goldstein's 1994 book *The Male Body* would suggest. To my knowledge, however, little work has been done with addressing the theoretical possibilities of the gay male gaze, which I will turn to only briefly in this analysis and treat more extensively elsewhere. If the heterosexual-oriented cinema places the male subject at its center, would it not be possible that the work of a gay playwright places himself and his own gaze at the center? I think so. The gay male gaze thus redirects the traditional heterosexual man/woman dichotomy to center on the male body, blur the distinction between heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman, active/passive, and subvert traditional American representations of the male (and gay male) subject.

An appreciation of masculine beauty is often associated with gay subjectivity (gay subjects gaze upon male objects) while at the same time it is admired in American society. In his introduction to Williams's *Collected Stories*, Gore Vidal reports that Williams believed he could not write a story without at least one character to whom he was sexually attracted (xxiii). As this comment might suggest, his plays insist on male physicality and beauty, and through this means, further center his plays on gay male subjectivity (his own as well as the gay and quasi-gay characters on stage).

With Brick, Williams subverts traditional representations of the male and places homosexual desire, and the possibility of Brick's being an unresolved gay man, before the audience as central concerns. In *Cat* Brick is clearly eroticized. His masculine appearance appeals to the gay playwright; to the audience, which becomes involved in the subversive (for 1955) eroticization of the male body; to Skipper, who is homoerotically attracted to Brick; and to Maggie, who constantly begs him to sleep with her. In some productions, Brick wears silk pajamas—a clear indication of Brick's erotic appeal—after emerging from a hot shower. In one instance Maggie says, "I can't see a man but you! Even with my eyes closed, I just see you! Why don't you get ugly, Brick, why don't you please get fat or ugly or something so that I could stand it?" (40). While Maggie gazes on her beloved Brick's body, the audience itself is so directed. Through her character Williams eroticizes Brick and thus centers the play on gay male subjectivity.

As a result, though the play may at first appear to be focused on the presumed heterosexual Brick's perceptions of himself in relation to society, the sympathy and audience's identification are focused primarily on Maggie's and the gay playwright's gaze. Without getting too far into the arguments for transvestism in Williams's works, let it be said that the playwright projects his own homosexual desire for Brick's character onto Maggie (blurring male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and masculine/feminine) and thus converts the male gaze to the female gaze and, ultimately, the gay male gaze. As Robert Gross argues in his recent essay on Brick and the gay spectator: "Maggie's obsession for Brick, articulated in her lengthy speeches throughout the play's first act, encourages us to identify with her and assume her desire" (13). While heterosexual males in the audience may, like Brick, become uncomfortable with Maggie's desire for his body, at the same time, Williams forces them to identify with Brick, the quasi-heterosexual, and thus problematizes their positions as male spectators. They can either identify with Brick, whose heterosexuality is called into question, or with Maggie, whose desires for Brick they most certainly must be forced to assume or acknowledge in a way that might be uncomfortable for them.

Though the object of homoerotic (through Skipper and the playwright's gaze) as well as heterosexual appeal (through Maggie), Brick's potential for embodying the homosexual subject, while strongly implied, is never fully realized. During the McCarthy era Williams could not risk being this sub-

versive, and his fear of being “outed” in an intolerant age was much too great. Nevertheless, the mere possibility that Brick is an unresolved, repressed homosexual who is fighting hard to maintain his idealized view of male friendship and his sexual orientation counters the arguments of Clum criticizing Williams for not allowing the homosexual subject to appear on stage. For if Brick is indeed a homosexual (and, despite Mark Royden Winchell’s arguments otherwise, there are strong possibilities within the text for this reading of his character), he would be the most radical statement Williams could have made during the 1950s.

For what reason would Brick’s possibly being a gay man be considered radical? Simply because Brick also is the quintessential male ideal in American culture. To suggest that someone exhibiting the qualities of the masculine and homosocially acceptable man in the macho culture of the American 1950s is indeed subversive. Just considering the possibility that Brick is a gay man is a subversive notion in the 1950s, and in some circles it would even be considered so today. This should be evident in the reaction of Robert J. Higgs, the author of a book on the athlete in American literature, who definitively denies any possibility that Brick could be gay because of his masculine virtues (143)—a clear indication of the problematizing of homosexuality but also the reaffirmation of compulsory heterosexuality for a critic whose own idealization of the American athlete would be called into question if American notions of masculinity have little to do with sexual orientation, as is commonly believed. Furthermore, Higgs’ reaction reinforces the problem of the homophobic heterosexual male spectator of Williams’s plays mentioned earlier. Not only does Williams call into question American views of masculinity and homosexuality, he hints strongly that heterosexual men may be attractive to gay men, that gay men may be both erotically appealing and masculine, and that masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality may merely be constructed norms—not realities.

Like the masculine ideal in America, Brick appears, for much of the play, stoic and controlled. To begin with, Brick’s name suggests callousness, repressed emotion, and stubbornness. He is, after all, like a brick wall whom no one, except perhaps Skipper, his true love, and Big Daddy, the man most like him, could penetrate (pun intended). Male homosociality typically defines masculinity in a number of ways, including camaraderie with other masculine men, the frequent use of alcohol, sexual prowess with women,

emotional restraint, and athletic success. Brick possesses (or has possessed in the past) all these American male “virtues,” with the possible exception of his uncertain experience with women, as Maggie’s description of her dates and lovemaking with him might suggest (does Brick date and sleep with a lot of women as the successful male heterosexual is supposed to do?). Nevertheless, the fact that Paul Newman plays the role of Brick in the American film version only reinforces my reading of Brick as the epitome of masculine idealism and the male body at its best.

Ironically, he is drinking himself to death as self-punishment for the loss of Skipper, his one true love—whether Platonic or not. As Eve Sedgwick notes in her study of male homosocial desire, there is a continuum between homosociality and homosexuality many men sometimes fail to comprehend (1-2). Williams recognizes this continuum, and Brick, despite his homophobic protestations to the contrary, may be becoming aware, for the first time, that there is indeed a fine line between male-male intimacy, which he admits he shares with Skipper, and self-acknowledged homosexual feelings.

In fact, Brick is beginning to sense that his old homosocial world has crumbled. As the film version reveals and others, including Dukore, have argued, one of Brick’s major weaknesses is his inability to grow up and face the world of adulthood. Part of acceptance of one’s self as an adult is the understanding that sexuality helps define identity. In Brick’s naive world view, which parallels the view of the 1950s heterosexual male, there are no masculine homosexuals—only those “two sisters” who used to share the bedroom in which he and Maggie have been placed and whose secret from the outside world was “closeted” in the privacy of a huge plantation. By suggesting they shared a form of marriage, however, Williams illustrates the potential for relationships between two men outside conventional definitions of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. Brick cannot accept either Skipper, his ideal, as a fellow gay man, nor can he admit the possibility that he possesses tender and homoerotic feelings for his idol. As gay and lesbian theorists have noted concerning the construction of homosexuality before Stonewall, Brick’s generation believed that gay men were “degenerates” who acted like women and, by their very existence, assaulted the whole notion of American manhood. Denying the masculinity of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello enables Brick to reassert his own masculinity—but, at the same time and without his awareness, he risks protesting too much that he

and Skipper were not gay men in love with each other. As Winchell has suggested, “. . . the thought that he is the object of male lust raises questions of gender identity that may help to account for the vehemence of his objections” (706).

Despite Brick’s nervous and vehement denial of the homosexual elements within his relationship with Skipper, the possibility that Brick, the ideal American male, might be gay seems clearly evident. Not only is Brick himself aware that intimate friendship between men is so rare as to be construed as homosexual, but Maggie herself also seems to understand that there is the potential for tender (but Platonic) feelings toward Skipper in her husband, as her reference to legendary Greek friendship indicates. Yet Maggie’s confession to Brick that she knows that his feelings for Skipper were “pure” (58) may be interpreted as her own need to deny the possibility that her masculine, ideal husband might be gay. Maggie even admits to Brick that the double dates on which she and other girls would go out with him and Skipper were more “like a date between you and Skipper” (57). Furthermore, she describes Brick’s lovemaking style as indifferent and distant. His detachment, as she refers to it, indicates that Brick may perhaps be playing his masculine role all too well at the risk of not understanding his inner self. A frequent visitor to Freudian analysts, Williams clearly portrays Brick as exhibiting all the traits normally associated with latent homosexuality: indifference to women, excessive attention to masculinity, and internalized homophobia. All signs indicate Brick’s dispassionate and repressed nature. Despite what some critics have said concerning the appearance of gay characters on stage, Brick may very likely be the first homosexual character embodied in a Williams’s play.

Brick’s homophobia not only represents his fear of what is the potential for homoerotic feelings within himself but also his fear of the gay “other”—best represented in the play through the references to Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, the monogamous gay couple whose presence is always felt in the bedroom which Brick and Maggie occupy. The mystery surrounding his refusal to sleep with Maggie seems clearly tied to the bedroom, where Jack and Peter have expressed an uncommon affection for one another. The setting, which provides space for the gay male, thus functions to reemphasize the possibility that the hidden truth of homosexuality—even from Brick himself—may be the root of his inability to make love to Maggie. As his

ambiguous commentary within the text indicates, Williams does not want the reader to dismiss too easily the possible parallels between the Jack-Peter relationship and the Brick-Skipper friendship. He is far too aware that human sexuality cannot be placed into neat categories. Despite Mark Lilly's facile claim that reading Brick as a gay subject is simplistic and that gay men want to see Brick as gay because there is "safety in numbers" (72), the complexity of Williams's portrayal of this character and the role of homophobia within the play's structure suggests otherwise.

Clearly, Brick fears being labeled a "sissy" himself, but he does not hesitate to label Straw and Ochello "degenerates," "sissies," and "queens." As a genuine subversive in a repressive age, Williams dares to voice terms commonly used to refer to homosexuals not only within American culture as a whole but also in the gay underground of which he is a part. In an article dealing with homophobic discourse, Clum claims that *Cat* is "the most vivid dramatic embodiment of Williams's mixed signals regarding homosexuality and his obsession with public exposure" (170), suggesting that Brick's homophobic reactions to Big Daddy's innuendoes concerning his possible gay orientation receive the last word. Even Savran, who seems to understand the complexity of Williams's gay subjectivity more clearly than Clum, focuses on homosexuality within the play as "self-destructive and cancerous" (101). Admittedly, the play does not describe being gay as an asset, but it is only portrayed as a liability due to society's enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality. Besides, Williams does all he can to validate the existence of gay men and homosexuality during this dark part of American history.

The question is: How are the signals mixed when Williams offers sympathy for gay men through the ghost-like presence of the Ochello-Straw gay space and if Big Daddy is sympathetic to them? Contrary to Clum's misreading in his article on homophobic discourse that attacks Williams for allowing Brick's anti-gay rhetoric to receive the emphasis, Williams mentions the unspeakable: the existence of a monogamous gay couple and overt language to describe and validate the love of homosexuals for one another. To my knowledge no other American play of the 1950s acknowledges the possibility that two men share a bed and no other American play before this time uses the rhetoric of oppression and the oppressed to describe the social predicament of homosexuals. Social conventions are the problem, not gay men or homosexuality.

Though not directly “outing” Brick as a gay subject, Williams never fully “closets” him either. For this reason, all critics who argue definitively against Brick’s homosexuality somehow miss the point. While admittedly Williams suggests in the narrative descriptions that he does not want readers to simply identify a particular psychological trait and as a result dismiss the play’s mystery, there is also no indication that Williams himself denies the possibility for this as one aspect of Brick’s character. Besides, a scrutinizing, skeptical critic might not take Williams at his word if one suspects he fears the repercussions of representing a gay man on stage as a major character in the homophobic 1950s. Whether Brick’s homosexuality is fully resolved (if sexual orientation is a social construction, is anyone’s?) does not answer the fundamental question the play raises: What does homosexuality have to do with the gender and sex role of an individual? Williams puts on a good show of suggesting the possibility of nothing—a pretty radical statement for this time, indeed.

If a critic is particularly partial to arguing against Brick’s homosexual orientation and concluding that he is, therefore, not a gay subject, this reading still does not account for the positive attitude (at least for 1955) toward the gay individual Williams posits. None of Brick’s hostile, homophobic rhetoric comes from Big Daddy, whose attitude toward society is fundamentally critical, for he has learned “tolerance.” Williams clearly indicates that Big Daddy, perhaps the most likable character in the play, is both tolerant (but not of Big Mama or his grandchildren) and pro-gay. After all, Big Daddy supports Brick’s friendship with Skipper and defends two gay men involved in a long-term relationship. Furthermore, he also admits that he has had homosexual experience himself (“I knocked around in my time”) and does so as if there is nothing of which to be ashamed (115). Presumably, Big Daddy admits here that he is a bisexual subject. Admittedly, Big Daddy questions whether the friendship between Skipper and Brick was “normal,” but never does he indicate that he expects Brick to be heterosexual or threaten to cut Brick off because he might be gay. Such openness in treating the homosexual issue during the 1950s is commendable and does not in any way support the view that Brick’s homophobic language gets the last word. Surely, Big Daddy is far more admirable than Brick, and he preaches tolerance—just as Maggie, Brick’s devoted wife, who fears that he may be homosexual any way, does as well.

Big Daddy's views of marriage, the family, and the church further serve to illustrate his awareness that social definitions of normality may force people to lie to themselves and to others in order to conform and receive social approval. Facing death's possibility, Big Daddy sees no need to conform any longer. In describing his loveless marriage to Big Mama, he confesses to Brick his distaste for her and admits he wants to have an extramarital affair. Though harsh to Big Mama when she eavesdrops on him and Brick, Big Daddy is a truth teller: "You don't know a goddam thing, and you never did!" (75). Big Daddy represents an ideal character in Williams's world, for he declares the "truth" as he sees it no matter how harsh and how painful the world where we live—society—might find it. At the same time, he illustrates the problem with patriarchal authority, as Savran points out (106). Williams clearly humanizes the play's most likable character, but at no point does he challenge Big Daddy's notion of truth that it is something which must be faced and something which is at times harsh for the hearer. Trying to get Brick to profess his own truth, Big Daddy admits his favoritism towards him and his extreme dislike of Gooper, Mae, and the "no-neck monsters."

That Big Daddy believes he has just missed death by a narrow margin enables him to see through the illusions of society and recognize that all the "bull shit" society teaches is meaningless thought and social control. Not only has Big Daddy grown "tolerance" on his land, he has also come to view homosexual love as understandable human behavior. After all, he has happily lived on the plantation of Peter and Jack, the monogamous, "married" gay couple whose haunting presence permeates the bedroom of Maggie and Brick, and he has in effect been their surrogate son. He also supports Peter when Jack dies, sympathizing with his grief, and defends them to Brick (116-117). Couldn't this conceivably be the first representation of a gay "family" in American drama?

Big Daddy is, it might be said, the voice for Williams the playwright, who finds social institutions suspect and deceptive. As Big Daddy says, "I've lived with mendacity!—Why can't you live with it? Hell, you got to live with it, there's nothing else to live with except mendacity, is there?" (109). Furthermore, Big Daddy may be Williams's ideal projection of Cornelius, a father from whom he felt alienated, as Lyle Leverich's recent biography clearly demonstrates. If this is the case, Big Daddy responds in a positive, accepting

way to his son's possible homosexuality in a manner which Williams would have liked for Cornelius himself to have done. Without Big Daddy's support for Brick's sexual orientation (no matter what it is) and his condemnation of Brick's intolerant language, perhaps Clum's argument about the anti-gay rhetoric would be valid. Here and elsewhere, the play may be seen as an indictment of society and its homophobia, not of homosexuality.

Although some may think that Big Daddy's implied homosexual past with Straw and Ochello may indicate that the relationship between him and the gay couple was not platonic, I see no clear evidence that he was the subject of homosexual exploitation himself, nor does he ever admit anything less than admiration and sympathy for his surrogate parents. Maybe part of what Big Daddy learns from the men is that human sexuality does not come in neat packages and that one should be open to human experience in all its varieties. Furthermore, the argument of Savran and others (101) that Big Daddy's colon cancer demonstrates a form of punishment and Williams's ambivalence about anal sex (and homosexuality) seems to stretch the point. Homosexual experience does not automatically imply sodomy, nor does the fact that Big Daddy has colon cancer necessarily indicate that he is being punished for his participation in homosexual acts any more than for any of his other flaws, including being human and thus subject to mortality. The similar symptoms between bowel cancer and a spastic colon become an important plot device in the play since Gooper, Mae, and the doctor attempt to hide the truth about his impending death from him. And the social attitudes about cancer, which many in the 1950s perceived as a secret not to be shared, and homosexuality make reading Big Daddy's death as a form of punishment problematic. Cancer, like homosexuality, was a taboo subject in the 1950s. At the worst, Big Daddy is being punished for being himself, a reading which would reinforce Williams's awareness of society's intolerance of the individual, and for flaws which all human beings share.

Finally, the events of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* occur during a period of widespread gay oppression in the 1950s. While a tolerant society would have been willing to accept the special bond between Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, as well as Brick and Skipper, the most important difficulty to Williams was the problem of mendacity. Even though he is an anti-hero, Brick's character is sympathetic, for he does not really know who he is or what his sexual orientation is; and he is so afraid of admitting failure at achieving the

masculine ideal that he will never reconcile his love for Skipper with his inner nature, which he cannot resolve for himself. Brick becomes a symbol not only for a particular type of American male but also for an American society unwilling to confront the truth of homosexuality and individual difference.

Because of an intolerant society, gay identity and relationships in the 1950s were fundamentally problematic—not for the committed gay couple of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello—but for society. If there is anything negative said in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* about homosexuality and the gay subject, it cannot ultimately be separated from the issue of society's participation in compulsory heterosexuality, gay bashing, and homophobia. For a man of Williams's generation, he held amazingly progressive views of the gay subject. In his estimation, America during this time sadly could not accept the potential for two men to love each other nor acknowledge the truth about homosexuality. And this shows just how difficult a space a gay subject was forced into. With the increasing mechanization and urbanization of the Old South and its genteel manners and the intolerant climate of the McCarthy era, individual difference had become more and more dangerous. As Williams himself once said in an interview, "Society rapes the individual" (Devlin 146).

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Notes

¹ In his early study of homosexuality in American drama and fiction, Georges-Michel Sarotte gives a Freudian reading of Williams's plays, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. For alternate readings of the play, see C.W.E. Bigsby's *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990*, and almost any book-length study of Williams. See also Bernard Dukore's "The Cat Has Nine Lives"; Robert Bechtold Heilman's "Tennessee Williams' Approach to Tragedy"; Donald Pease's "Reflections on Moon Lake: The Presences of the Playwright"; and Vernan Young's "Social Drama and Big Daddy."

² My full-length work in progress, *Subverting the Closet: Tennessee Williams and the Evolution of Gay Theatrical Representation*, and "Is There a Gay Man in This Text?: The 'Closeted' Gay Subject, the Male Body, and Homosexuality in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," a paper delivered at the December 1997 Modern Language Association Convention, attempt to theorize the gay male gaze.