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Cat on a Hot Streetcar Named Desire: Interrogations of Femeness— Or, the Mad Heroine Coded as Homosexual— in Two Plays by Tennessee Williams

Nicholas Becht

Tennessee Williams utilizes heterosexual female protagonists in two of his major plays, “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” in order to covertly represent and explore themes of male homosexuality and desire. They are Blanche DuBois and Maggie Pollitt, respectively. He does this because he is writing for a largely conservative and heterosexual audience of which anyone who might be homosexual would likely be in the closet. This is evocative of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of the “Open Secret” (Sedgwick 52).

Through various means, the identities of these supposedly heterosexual women are queered. Through their involvement and presumably sexual partnerships with men of dubious heterosexuality, Blanche DuBois and Maggie Pollitt become aligned with homosexuals and associated with homosexuality. Williams employs elements such as Camp and subverted forms of the Patriarchal Gaze in order to further interrogate and trouble our sense of Blanche’s and Maggie’s femaleness.

While describing her late husband, Allan Grey, and his suicide, Blanche makes allusions to his homosexuality:

There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s, although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate looking --still—that thing was there.... He came to me for help. I didn’t know that. I didn’t find out anything till after our marriage when we’d run away and come back and all I knew was I’d failed him in some mysterious way and wasn’t able to give the help he needed but couldn’t speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me – but I wasn’t holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn’t know that. I didn’t know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room which I thought was empty –which wasn’t empty, but had two people in it...the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years.... (Williams 95)

The words that Blanche uses to describe her husband –“nervous,” “soft,” “tender”—are all

words which are used to describe her. His coming to her for “help” parallels her own helplessness and looking to others for “help.” Their shared qualities and helplessness along with the imagery of her slipping into the quicksand with him indicates Blanche’s descent into and association with homosexuality. In some way Allan remains attracted to Blanche, and she remains attracted to him. She is complicit with his homosexuality. This is exhibited in her driving out to the casino with him and his old friend. Her placement in this love triangle makes her doubly associated with homosexuality.

In “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” Maggie remains married to Brick Pollitt, a man who will no longer make love to her and who is tortured by the death of his friend Skipper with whom Maggie had an attempted but unsuccessful sexual liaison. Allusions to Brick and Skipper’s homosexuality are made throughout “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.” Big Daddy and Maggie are perhaps most confrontational with respect to Brick. Maggie reflects candidly to Brick:

I said, “SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN’ MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE’S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!” –one way or another! HE SLAPPED ME HARD ON THE MOUTH!—then turned and ran without stopping once, I am sure, all the way back to his room at the Blackstone....—when I came back to his room that night, with a little scratch like a shy little mouse at his door, he made that pitiful, ineffectual attempt to prove that what I had said wasn’t true...--in this way, I had destroyed him, by telling him the truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told him could not be told? (Williams 42- 43)

Maggie and Skipper’s “attempt” confirms both Skipper and Maggie’s –and perhaps even indirectly, Brick’s-- homosexuality. Skipper’s inability to perform sexually with a woman implies a sexual attraction to men, whereas Maggie’s attempt at intercourse with a man who is attracted not to women but men suggests that her desires too, are perhaps queer or misplaced. Both Maggie and Skipper evidently make this attempt in order to feel closer to Brick, which establishes another strange

love triangle. Maggie, like Blanche is also doubly associated with homosexuality.

By association and allusion Blanche and Maggie both become something like the homosexuals with whom they are involved. Why are these particular men attracted to these particular women, and why are these particular women attracted to these particular men? This relational disconnect suggests something about the nature of Blanche's and Maggie's appeal, attractions, and desires; in this way, we may regard them as homosexuals. Their attractions to and desires – though, likely unconscious—to be with homosexuals are homosexual. There exists an element of homosexuality in their minds and psyches. It is almost as if they are reconciled, yet still subverted or perverse versions of Kraft-Ebbing's invert. They are men who are attracted to and desire men, living in the bodies of women.

Blanche and Maggie are also characterized in manners similar to their respective homosexual partners. They are all described as being dishonest, “weak,” “sick,” and in some way inadequate. Allan is “degenerate” and Skipper and Brick are both alcoholics. Blanche drinks. Skipper is also “crippled” and needs his crutch. Maggie is driven wild by her unfulfilled desires. While the men lie to hide their sexuality, the women also lie about and conceal other aspects of their lives, including but not limited to their sexuality.

Blanche is unable to keep her family's plantation, Belle Reve, and her job as a High School English teacher on account of her “weaknesses,” which appear to be men –especially young boys (particularly a seventeen-year-old student) —and clothing and jewelry. Stanley suspects that she is trying to “swindle” him out of what he deserves by the Napoleonic Code, but what he might also subconsciously suspect is that she is trying to “swindle” him into believing that she is a lady.

Maggie comes from a poor family background and as a result, feels inferior and defensive. She is also deemed and feels inadequate as a wife and hopeful mother since her husband will neither make love to nor impregnate her.

Another way in which Blanche and Maggie are situated as being more like homosexual males than heterosexual females is through the interrogation of their femaleness and exaggeration of their femininity.

Blanche's aging, fading beauty, failed marriage to Allan Grey, and failure to become engaged to Harold Mitchell suggest her failure and

illegitimacy as a woman. Marriage is the ultimate reification of heteronormative values. Blanche's failed marriage to a homosexual renders her illegitimate as a woman in the eyes of society both in that it actually failed and that it was, or became, a homosexual relationship. Blanche's status as a single woman and seeming inability to become engaged and remarried is a threat to heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Heteronormativity dictates that heterosexuality can only be achieved and known through the production of the traditional gender binary by two persons of the opposite sex -- a man and a woman—who must also fulfill specific, gendered roles.

Blanche relies on stereotypical signifiers of femininity in order to (re)assert herself as a “real” or “true” woman, admitting, “I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion” (Williams 41). This statement suggests what Judith Butler calls the “Performativity” of gender. Blanche is consummate in her illusion and performance of femininity. She bathes and primps often. She wears makeup, perfume, and stylish clothing and jewelry. She sings songs, swishes and dances around. She smiles, laughs, jokes, and flirts. She recites poetry and speaks in French. She talks about her nerves and overemphasizes her frailness, vulnerability, and femininity. She cannot even stand to be in the light of day or a naked light bulb, which speaks to the sort of deception she is attempting achieve. Mitch confronts her by saying, “I don't think I ever seen you in the light,” and “I've never had a real good look at you” (Williams 116). Though superficially he is concerned with her true age and appearance, there is almost a sense that he is challenging her femaleness and wondering whether or not she is really a woman.

Blanche defends herself: “I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!” (Williams 117). Her statement about what ought to be the truth suggests that it ought to be permissible for two men to be in love and in a relationship with each other. This idea is strengthened by Blanche's mention of sin and damnation with respect to her (homosexual) behavior.

Gordon Rogoff posits that “Blanche is not a woman at all, she is a man in drag” (83). Quentin Crisp explains, in an interview, the ways in which effeminate homosexuals attempt to win and keep the love and affection of “real” men through the reproduction of heteronormativity, gender binaries,

and stereotypes: "They simply become more feverish, they pile the makeup on thicker, they sway more from side to side, they Camp more outrageously, and of course, the more they do this, the more the desired object recedes."

Blanche is of course feverish and only becomes more so throughout the rise of action in "A Streetcar Named Desire." She is anxious in her performance of femininity and in her seductions and attempts to ensnare a second husband, but as Crisp predicts, the desired object and objects recede. Her self-consciousness about the act makes others aware.

Crisp's use of the term 'Camp' reminds one of Susan Sontag's "Notes" on the subject. Blanche is a "Woman," "in quotation marks" (Sontag 109). She possesses "a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms...corny flamboyant femaleness" (Sontag 109). Her "character is understood [by the other characters and the audience] as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility" (Sontag 114). How fitting that the actress playing Blanche also plays Blanche playing a role as herself.

Sontag also explains "camping:" "the vulgar use of the word Camp as a verb, 'to camp,' something that people do...a mode of seduction—one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible to a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity," and continues, stating, "One must always distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp. Pure camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ('camping') is usually less satisfying. The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious" (110).

While there may be some elements of pure, naïve, unintentional Camp to Blanche's personality, the majority of her behavior—especially with respect to men—is 'camping.' Blanche is at times, certainly duplicitous. Also, Stanley and later, Mitch, grow tired and dissatisfied with, and begin to see through Blanche's 'camping.' One might suppose, however, as the dialogue indicates, that Blanche began life as a very sweet and innocent, loving girl.

Blanche's brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski, is most acutely aware of her deceptions, stating plainly:

I've been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes!

You come in here and sprinkle the place with

powder and spray perfume and cover the light bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! (Williams 127-28)

In essence, Stanley is telling Blanche exactly what kind of low woman he believes her to be. Taking the idea a bit further, he might be implying that she is not a woman at all, or at the very least, not a lady.

Ironically, Stanley still becomes sexually associated with Blanche, through raping her. To some extent, even her mimicry and parody of femininity is attractive—perhaps repulsively so—to a presumably thoroughly heterosexual male.

Although Maggie is described as beautiful, sexy, and desirable to almost every other man besides Brick, her seeming inability to sexually please her husband and produce children are often referenced and questioned. Big Mama asks her, "D'you make Brick happy in bed?", and tells her, "Something's not right! You're childless and my son drinks!" (Williams 32-33). Mae later remarks, "Do you know why she's childless? She's childless because that big beautiful athlete husband of hers won't go to bed with her!" (Williams 121). These "flaws" serve to destabilize her identity as a woman. The imagery as Brick as "big" and "beautiful" also serves to make him seem like less of a man and perhaps more like a maternal, matronly, or pregnant woman.

The fact that Brick does not desire and is not sexually satisfied by Maggie says just as much about Maggie's desirability as it does about Brick's desires. The fact that she has no children and is not pregnant suggests to the other characters who criticize and scrutinize her that she is somehow less of, lacking as --or perhaps, not-- a woman.

Blanche and Maggie are also more traditionally male, or masculine, in their desires. They frequently objectify men through compliments and their use of the gaze. To deliver the gaze is traditionally a male behavior, whereas to be the object of the gaze is a traditionally female position. This is especially evident and apparent in the film adaptations of both plays.

The stage directions in "A Streetcar Named Desire" indicate that Blanche "regards a [young man] with interest" (Williams 82). She looks at, touches, and makes him uncomfortable, telling him that he looks "like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights" and saying, "I want to kiss you, just once, softly and sweetly on your mouth!" (Williams 84). In a show of dominance, she kisses him without his consent and then asks him to leave.

The 1951 film version includes long shots of the young man. The camera overemphasizes the gaze. Also, the young man is shown to be pretty, almost like a girl, with big, feminine eyes and eyelashes.

Blanche's sister, Stella explains to her husband, Stanley, that Blanche objectified her late husband, Allan Grey: "He was extremely good-looking. I think Blanche didn't just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human! (Williams 102). This championing of beauty is typically something that males do with respect to females and not the other way around. Blanche has rendered Allan an object and therefore not human; she has dehumanized him. That this tribute was paid not only to a man, but to a male homosexual further complicates the notions of heteronormativity and stereotypical, binaried gender roles. In making Allan less of a man and more of a woman, Blanche makes herself more of a man and less of a woman. This and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," are both plays about queer sexualities: feminine masculinity and masculine femininity.

Throughout "A Streetcar Named Desire," Blanche tends to objectify and dehumanize Stanley as she characterizes him not as a man, but as an animal. She calls him an "ape" and "primitive" and considers him to be only sexual. She later refers to him and Mitch as "swine" undeserving of her fine company (Williams 126).

In "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," Brick is frequently the object of Maggie's gaze. She often calls him "Baby" and other pet names and remarks that he is still beautiful and has kept his figure despite having taken to drink. Maggie also speaks about keeping her figure and mentions that other men still look at her. That she and Brick are both objects of attention places them together in an interesting way. She is constantly forcing herself on him and trying to persuade him to make love to her. In further reversal of the heteronormative gender roles, he is constantly refusing her and fighting her off. In the 1958 film adaptation, we are shown great shots of Liz Taylor's eyes as she slowly, deliberately, and unashamedly sizes up Paul Newman; she is not a timid woman and appears to feel entitled to get as good a look for as long as she likes.

Much like Blanche has done with Allan Grey, Maggie objectifies Brick through worship. She speaks of his desirability and unavailability:

Skipper and I made love, if love you could call it, because it made both of us feel a little bit closer to you. You see, you son of a bitch, you

asked too much of people, of me, of him, of all the unlucky poor damned sons of bitches that happen to love you, and there was a whole pack of them besides me and Skipper, you asked too goddamn much of people that loved you, you –superior creature! –you godlike being! –And so we made love to each other to dream it was you, both of us! (Williams 40)

Both women have strong desires, and Maggie especially tends to reject traditional notions of female morality and purity in favor of traditional "manly" pleasure-seeking. There appears to be an unsuccessful struggle either to become wholly female or to subvert what it means to be feminine.

Ultimately, it is the desire for men, or the way in which it is pursued, that results in dissatisfaction, anxiety, and loneliness for these women who are coded as homosexuals. This speaks to the loneliness of homosexuality, especially during the time in which Williams was writing.

Concerning "A Streetcar Named Desire," but also relevant to "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," William Sharp observes, "Sex is comfort in the play, the one solace to all one's fears, and to all one's guilts as well" (162). Maggie can't get sex and practically goes insane, and Blanche is raped, and actually does go insane. There is also Stanley's –and Stella's, too, by association—guilt surrounding Stanley's rape of Blanche. Sex and lack of sex are both imbued with fear and guilt. Sex may make one feel close to another but is often not enough. Blanche claims to prefer matters of the mind, but clearly desires attention and places value on the physical. Brick values his "pure" friendship with Skipper over his sexual relationship with Maggie.

On Homosexual presence and themes in the plays of Williams, Gordon Rogoff writes:

The crisis of veiled homosexuality is, then, one of those decoys invented by a critical fraternity, which is itself in crisis. The plays, singly and together, are nothing if not revealing. What is revealed has something, perhaps a good deal to *do* with homosexuality, but it has nothing to *show* of the deed itself, which is hardly surprising. Drama is not yet documentary, despite all the ill-conceived efforts of newspaper naturalists with their well-made plays. On the contrary, drama selects from experience and transforms it into something else, something with a substance, order, and life all its own...One clinical interpretation could, with some justice, lean again toward homosexuality. To view life from a homosexual bedroom, cluttered as it is

with the memories of scattered partners, angry justifications, and broken dreams, is to view life as a prison. One wishes to be plural, but one is continually, and often agonizingly single. That is generally a simple, not easily changeable fact, of homosexual life. The mind thinks it is calling for one thing while its sexual surrender is moving it toward another. (85-86)

Maggie laments, "Living with someone you love can be lonelier –than living entirely alone! If the one that y' love doesn't love you" (Williams, 16), and Blanche exclaims, "I *can't* be *alone*!" (Williams 22).

The homosexuality about which Williams writes is a doomed and lonely homosexuality. It is a homosexuality doomed by its attempt to reproduce heterosexuality and the heteronormative gender binaries which do not even work in heterosexual relationships as is evidenced by the troubled heterosexual relationships in the plays: Stella and Stanley, Eunice and Steve, Big Daddy and Big Mamma, and Gooper and Mae. It is a homosexuality in which there still exists a dichotomy of power and desire that cannot be reconciled and leaves its participants dissatisfied and lonely if they are lucky and makes them go insane if they are not.

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