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THE HOMOSEXUAL AS FUGITIVE IN SELECTED EARLY WORKS  
OF  
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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UPR

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## Abstract

This dissertation, based on the theme of the homosexual as fugitive, is primarily a study of Williams' early works written between 1928 and 1948. The fugitive, prominent in the early works, is at times an autobiographical personality and his development is bound up with the playwright's growing concern for his sexual orientation. Williams' ambivalent approach to his homosexuality and his portrayal of homosocial relations is treated differently in his works. While it is more openly discussed in his short stories, it remains hidden in the subtext of his early plays. This subtext centre on the figure of the fugitive and more importantly his flight.

Mapping the flight of these individuals reveal three distinct patterns signifying the progression of an underlying subtext that deals specifically with the playwright's preoccupation with (homo)sexuality. Flight in the early works begins with a guilt-ridden abandonment of the family. This can be traced in the short stories that lay the foundation for the construction of a "glass closet" in Williams' first commercially successful play *The Glass Menagerie*, in which the queer Tom Wingfield narrates about his quintessentially Freudian family. In face of this secret sexual deviance, some of Williams' fugitives shrink into self-persecution. Alma Winemiller, in *Summer and Smoke*, demonstrates the theme of flight from the self when she denies her sexuality. Like the homosexual she suffers painful self-division. Accepting her sexuality however marginalises her from her family

and society. Once outside the familial and social matrix, the homosexual is a fugitive from “reality” because a queer identity invites persecution and ostracism. If the family is oppressive, society can be intolerant even violent. Blanche Du Bois’ rejection of realism in *A Streetcar Named Desire* mirrors the homosexual’s rejection of a heterosexist world. However rejecting “reality” by hiding in the closet is not a solution. Stanley Kowalski’s cruel assault and rape of the queer Blanche reflects the systematic persecution that the gay person suffers at the hands of a heterosexist society. In *Streetcar* Williams reaffirms the fact that the homosexual is not a fugitive by choice and warns that the closet door is never secure. The queer must act straight to survive in “a world lit by lightning” or be a fugitive from it.

## Abstrak

Disertasi ini merupakan kajian tema “the homosexual as fugitive” dalam karya-karya awal Tennessee Williams yang diterbitkan diantara tahun 1928 hingga 1948. Watak “fugitive” yang mendominasi tahap awal penulisan Williams adakalanya merupakan personaliti autobiografi. Perkembangan watak ini berkait rapat dengan “homosexuality” penciptanya. Pendekatan subjek homosexuality serta penggambaran hubungan “homosocial” dibincang secara terbuka dalam cerpen-cerpenya tetapi tersirat dalam “subtext” dramanya. “Subtext” ini berpusatkan watak “fugitive” dan arah pelariannya.

Pemetaan pelarian “fugitive” ini menghasilkan tiga arah pelarian utama yang mencerminkan perkembangan “subtext” yang bersangkut-paut dengan pendekatan penulis terhadap subjek homoseks. Pelarian “fugitive” bermula dengan percubaan melarikan diri dari pangkuan keluarga. Cerpen-cerpen awal mendirikan tapak sebuah “glass closet” yang penting dalam drama pertama Williams yang berjaya di Broadway iaitu *The Glass Menagerie*. Dalam drama ini, Tom Wingfield, seorang watak “queer”, menceritakan kisah keluarganya yang “Freudian”. Dalam keadaan “secret sexual deviance” ini, adakalanya watak-watak Williams memburu diri mereka sendiri. Alma Winemiller dalam *Summer and Smoke*, mencernahkan tema “flight from the self” apabila beliau enggan menerima kenyataan bahawa beliau mempunyai perasaan seksual. Seperti seorang homoseks, Alma sengsara kerana berasa terbahagi (self-division). Penerimaan

seksualitinya mengakibatkannya terusir dari keluarga dan masyarakat. Apabila berada diluar pangkuan keluarga dan masyarakat, seorang homoseksual itu andaikan seorang “fugitive” dari realiti kerana pencapaian-dirinya (self-realisation) diperolehinya berlandaskan identiti “queer” yang kian dibenci oleh masyarakat. Penolakkan realisma oleh Blanche Du Bois dalam *A Streetcar Named Desire* merupakan penolakkan dunia “heterosexist”. Walau bagaimanapun penyembuyan diri dalam “closet” bukanlah suatu penyelesaian. Pencabulan serta perogolan Blanche Du Bois oleh iparnya Stanley Kowalski andaikan penganiayaan sistematik ke atas seorang homoseksual dalam sebuah masyarakat “heterosexist”. Dalam *Streetcar*, Williams menyarankan bahawa seorang homoseksual itu dipaksa menjadi “fugitive”. Tambahan lagi seorang homoseksual itu tidak selamat dalam “closet”-nya kerana rahsianya tetap akan terbongkar. Mereka yang “queer” mesti berlakon “heteroseksual” untuk menyelamatkan diri, jika tidak mereka akan tertindas sebagai “fugitive”.

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