

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the homosexual as fugitive in selected early works of Tennessee Williams and this chapter gives an overview of some of the key issues and concerns involved. In his first published short story, "The Vengeance of Nitocris" (1928), the playwright describes the revenge and ultimate downfall of Nitocris, queen of Egypt, in the hands of an irrational mob. It is, the playwright says, "a keynote to my works" (Vannatta 6) because it chronicles the individual's fight against a hostile society. Most of Williams' early works adopt the point of view of the outsider and describe his marginal position in society. Williams, in an early play, categorised them as the "fugitive kind". The rationale for their rebellions however changes with each phase in the playwright's development giving birth to many types of fugitives. He/she can be a queen, a southern belle, a homeless poet, a tubercular painter, a narrator in a play, a spinster in a small town or a desperate sister-in-law. In the early works however there are many fugitives who are running away from family, society and even from themselves because of their sexual orientation. Underlying their flight, this study aims to illustrate, is a subtext that deals with homosexuality.

Williams' early works, written between 1928 and 1948, represent a formative period in his career as a playwright and short story writer. Though

Williams is identified more as a dramatist than as a prose writer, both the short stories and plays complement each other in terms of clarifying themes and illustrating Williams' creative process. One factor that makes the selected stories and plays of this early period suitable to study as a whole is that they represent a period in the playwright's career before commercial success. Williams himself considered the commercial success of *Menagerie* (1945) "too sudden" and said that it was "an event that terminated one part of my life" because it had thrust him "into sudden prominence" (Day & Woods 15). Williams lamented the loss of creative energy because he was no longer one with his "fugitive kind". This lament soon gave way to a sudden spurt of creative energy that resulted in the writing of *Summer and Smoke* (1947) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

The short stories are considered in relation to the plays because they are closely connected. It is not uncommon for Williams to expand a short story into a play, reworking from memory and transplanting "reality" into fiction. For example, in chapter two, the short stories that are selected for analysis lead up to *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). These stories, namely, "The Vengeance of Nitocris" (1928), "Accent of a Coming Foot" (1935), "The Angel in the Alcove" (1943) and "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" (1943), are linked by autobiographical aspects. "Portrait" and the issues raised in these stories culminate in *Menagerie*, a play that chronicles Williams' own flight from his family.

The selected early works also offer a glimpse into the playwright's world and reveals his struggle with homosexuality, a "natural chasm", Williams once said, that separates him from society. It is this sense of alienation that partly fuelled his creative energy. In the third chapter I have selected from this early period, short stories that deal openly with (homo)sexuality in order to highlight Williams' treatment of the subject. "Mysteries of the Joy Rio" (1941), "Oriflamme" (1944), "Desire and the Black Masseur" (1946) and "The Yellow Bird" (1947) deal with the theme of self-division and "closetedness", a trend that culminates in *Summer and Smoke* (1947).

While early critics have been reluctant to see this early phase in the playwright's career in terms of queer politics (I will elaborate on this later in the chapter), this study will reveal that these works demonstrate Williams' social criticism against the marginalisation of homosexuals. This is illustrated in "Something About Him" (1947) and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, works that describe the alienation of the fugitive in a world that is dominated by "gaudy seed bearers". Chapter four will illustrate that violence against the homosexual is bound-up with homophobia and heterosexism.

These selected works also chart the development of a queer subtext in this early period of the playwright's career. Williams' lifelong fascination for the male body began with the description of the pharaoh in "Nitocris". This subtext is developed further in "Accent", a semi-autobiographical story centred on the

alienation of a poet in an oppressive home. While in "Accent", Williams ponders about "coming-out" of the family, it is in "Angel" and "Portrait" that the link between the need to escape the home and sexual orientation becomes clear. The underlying subtext of Tom's quest to be a writer is his etiological sexuality. While the works that culminate in *Menagerie* like the play itself deal with issues like "coming-out" and highlight the homosexual's alienation in the family matrix, the works selected for analysis in the third chapter is an exploration of the homosexual's closet. The "sexual deviants" in these works live in fear of violence and loneliness. Their world is their creator's "personal microcosm" and from him they inherited guilt and self-division. If *Summer and Smoke* is an exploration of painful self-division, both "Something About Him" and *Streetcar* illustrate the homosexual's marginal position in the world without. Haskell and Blanche Du Bois are victims of homophobia. Society is cruel to Haskell for no apparent reason other than the indescribable "something about him". Blanche tries to escape social ostracism by "masking" that "something about [her]". She takes disguise one step further by "embellishing" reality. However when she is "exposed" as a "sexual degenerate", she is reduced to her (homo)sexuality. Society, unable to explain her "condition", labels her insane. This echoes the label of madness associated with homosexuality.

Although most of Williams' critics examine *Menagerie* and *Streetcar* together and omit *Summer*, dismissing the latter as a lesser play, I have chosen to study the early works chronologically because they mark separate thresholds of

the queer subtext in the playwright's works. While *Menagerie*, centred on "coming-out", seems to flow into *Streetcar*'s treatment of "disguise and exposure", *Summer* represents a pause in this progression where "closetedness" and "self-division" is sensitively highlighted. In terms of production history, the unfinished version of *Summer* was staged in Dallas several months before *Streetcar*'s phenomenal success in Broadway. Among Williams' biographers who share the same opinion, that *Summer* is an integral part that fills up the space between *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, are Nancy Tischler, Benjamin Nelson and Ronald Hayman. Furthermore in *Streetcar* the subtext that runs throughout the early works reaches a climax because the unmasking of Blanche, on one level, represents the unmasking of the "closetedness" of the earlier plays. In *Streetcar*, Williams perfected the "closet play". In it Williams successfully inverted the male gaze, making the male body a sexual object. The use of puns, "disguised" language and gender transvestism, created many convincing moments that deconstructed its supposed hetero(sexual) politics. None of his later works can match the "evasiveness" or the fluidity of "telling the truth as it ought to be" demonstrated in this play. This reinforces the argument that the queer subtext culminates in *Streetcar* making Blanche Du Bois the "quintessential gay character" in a "canonical closet play".

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A brief summary of some of the other early works of Tennessee Williams will reveal the playwright's preoccupation with the figure of the fugitive in this particular phase in his career. In one of his earliest short stories, "A Lady's Beaded Bag" (1930), Williams describes how an individual is reduced to scavenging because of poverty. In his early phase as a short story writer, Williams adopted a socialist point of view. If in "A Lady's Beaded Bag", criticism is levelled against the frivolous lady who bought a dress "so perfectly ridiculous" that she might never wear it, in "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" (1930), Williams' focus is on race relations. Race, Williams seems to suggest, can become a source of social ostracism. Big Black stands apart from other men because he is considered to be "prodigiously ugly". Blackness is associated with ugliness while whiteness represents "beauty [that] can never be seized" in this story. Like the trash-picker, Big Black, having "seen" himself, allows the currents of the river to take him to a position of marginality. He becomes a fugitive because of his skin. Dennis Vannatta considers "A Lady's Beaded Bag" as an example of "proletarian fiction" and cites "Big Black" as Williams' earliest attempt at writing (Vannatta 8-9).

Another important aspect about the short stories that Williams' critics point out is that many of them are autobiographical. "The Field of Blue Children" (1937) is one such story (Vannatta 19). Like "Accent", it re-echoes Williams' inability to establish a heterosexual relationship with Hazel Kramer. This story also reveals an important aspect of Williams' creative process - the reinvention of

reality or as one of his characters will say: "[telling] the truth as it ought to be." Gore Vidal is of the opinion that "re-invention of truth" is central to Williams' works. Other critics, however, were not so favourable in their views about the pathological liar who "...lies to the world because she must lie to herself" to go on living (Kronenberger 1). Lying in Williams' works is a defence mechanism employed by the fugitive to resist a "heterosexist" reality.

In 1936 Williams wrote two short stories describing the physical flight of two young men based on his own physical flight from St. Louis to California. In "Ten Minute Stop", Luke travels from Memphis to Chicago to meet a man about a job but instead discovers that the latter has left for a cruise. Down to his last few dollars, he takes a bus ride back to Memphis only to be waylaid during a ten-minute stop. In "Gift of an Apple", a nineteen year old vagabond is offered an apple by a middle-aged woman. Desperate for food, he offers himself to her but is rejected for being too young. Both stories mark a new development in the playwright's work. Williams' fugitives, now attractive young men, seem to be caught in desperate situations similar to the little skirmishes he experienced himself. This strain culminated in Williams' first professionally produced play, *Battle of Angels* (1939), where the beautiful fugitive Chance Wayne is brutally burned alive by jealous townsmen after having awakened their women sexually. The emphasis on beautiful men and women who are aware, even in control, of their sexuality became the trademark of Williams' works. This depiction of raw sexuality brought with it negative criticism. Gerald Berkowits, for example, states

that “Williams’ popular reputation was as a sensationalist” (87). However upon closer scrutiny, Berkowitz goes on to argue that sensationalism reflect^{-s} Williams’ use of melodrama to “[lead] the audience to recognise the emotional experience they share with the characters, and thus to feel more sympathy and charity for those driven to aberrant behaviour” (87).

Similarly Williams used “shock tactics” in the short stories that deal with sexual degeneracy for the same effect. Both “Angel in the Alcove” (1943) and “One Arm” (1945) are short stories that specifically illustrate the homosexual in a shocking and “gothically bizarre” manner. The homosexual in these stories is not only lonely and unhappy, he is a dying artist and a murderer. Both are actually on “death row”. In “Angel”, the tubercular artist is a victim of homophobia while Oliver Winemiller in “One Arm” can be perceived as a victim of the judicial process. These stories also reveal that homosexuals, whether in or out of the closet, are prisoners of homophobia and heterosexism. Critics when dealing with these openly gay characters either chose not to talk about them or to see them in terms of social pathology. Dennis Vannatta taking a more personal approach said that in “One Arm”, “we sense less pity than anger, and the fugitive...must share with the world at least part of the blame [for his condition]” (Vannatta 45).

After “One Arm”, Williams’ short stories begin to portray society as oppressive. The playwright’s description of this social injustice, already growing rather nightmarish and grotesque with “Oriflamme” (1944), reaches a morbid

climax in "Desire and the Black Masseur" (1946). Society in "Oriflamme" restricts Anna Kimball's self-expression and drives her to live a "subterranean existence" (134). Williams was also preoccupied with the idea of disease and death in "Tent Worms" (1945). His description of life was also growing more pessimistic with each story. In "Desire and the Black Masseur", Williams' indictment of society's cruelty towards the homosexual reaches a climax. Anthony Burns, a man who is always easily overcome by things around him, discovers his sexuality late in life. By his giant black masseur, Burns, a masochist, is beaten to death. In a satiric mood, Williams compares Burn's torture with the Christian obsession with suffering during the Lenten season. Burn's death is ironical because it is atonement demanded by a "Christian" society that cannot tolerate difference. "Desire" also marks a development in Williams' works because it depicts the problematisation of gay desire.

The morbidity in "Desire" reveals another side to the fugitive in Williams' early works. They have all inherited their creator's sense of guilt. Williams' strict Episcopalian upbringing conditioned him to regard his sexual orientation as monstrous. This shame eventually led to self-division. The playwright would disassociate himself even from the gay characters in his own works. In "The Yellow Bird" (1947), for example, this condition is treated in the person of Alma Tutweiler. Here Williams' treatment of the theme of the homosexual as fugitive branches inward with Alma's rebellion against the "uniform" that she has to wear

as preacher's daughter. The theme of self-division, explored as early as "Oriflamme", is transposed to the stage in *Summer and Smoke* (1947).

In "Something About Him" (1946) however, Williams' resumes his indictment of society. Haskell, a young man with all the stereotypical traits of a homosexual, is disliked and eventually turns out of a job because of the unexplainable "something about him". Williams, one critic suggests, was aware of the importance of "acting straight to survive". If "The Yellow Bird" describes the homosexual's closetedness, "Something About Him" is an account of the world without and its cruel treatment of the homosexual. Other than "The Lady of Lakspur Lotion", a one-act play, this short story shares many similar ideas with *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

While there are several short stories in the early works that link fugitiveness with poverty and racial prejudice, it is the emphasis on society's inability to tolerate "difference" that later becomes a major theme resonating in *Menagerie*, *Summer* and *Streetcar*. The playwright's role in the short stories is at first quite clear but progressively becomes vague almost indistinguishable as fugitiveness becomes inextricably linked with homosexuality. In the plays, male characters are aggressively "heterosexual" and are particularly violent in their sexual politics. This, in my opinion, is a sensational ploy that Williams uses to deflect attention from the queer subtext that underlies these works. Only in *Menagerie* is male-attractiveness toned down. The effectiveness of the queer

subtext in this play does not depend on “sensational tactics” because Tom is a member of the Williams family. Like Williams, he runs away because one aspect of self-realisation involves coming-out of the closet, a goal that can only be achieved outside the home. Before turning to the works I shall be focusing on in this dissertation, I would like to consider Williams’ own opinion of this early period in his career.

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It is only in his work that an artist can find reality and satisfaction, for the actual world is less intense than the world of his invention, and consequently his life, without recourse to violent disorder, does not seem very substantial. The right condition for him is that in which his work is not only convenient but unavoidable. (Day & Woods, 19)

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Writing for Williams is a form of self-expression and critics have noted that the playwright is most truthful about himself in his works. It might not be wrong to suggest that the playwright's true memoirs lie in his works. In the short stories, a more private medium, this statement is most correct. In the plays however, edited at times because of commercial considerations, the playwright muted "self-expression", especially if it dealt with homosexuality. He would, however, be in search of the proper medium or theatrical technique, "to write about people [and] life!" (Day & Woods, 27). In this endeavour, the playwright highlighted the difficulty in communicating what he had to say about life to his audience. One of the most difficult subjects to stage must have been sexual orientation. Yet Williams' plays have been associated with the sexual. Camille Paglia, for example, calls one Williams play "a sexual hothouse". However Broadway in the 1940s was not particularly receptive to any form of sexual representation. Homosexual representations had to be evasively expressed. In *Streetcar* for example, gay characters are dead or are merely projections based on subtle hints and inferences. This assured that the stage would be free of homosexual bodies.

Most playwrights, Williams included, had to disguise their attempts to give homosexuality a physical body on stage. In the 1955 essay "Critic Says Evasion, Writer Says Mystery", Williams, forced to address the sexual ambivalence of Brick Pollit, a character in his play *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*, explains:

Every moment of human existence is alive with uncertainty. You may call it ambiguity, you may call it evasion. I want to leave the Morosco [theatre] as they do leave it each night, feeling that they have met with a vividly allusive, as well as disturbingly elusive, fragment of human experience, one that not only points at truth but at the mysteries of it... (Day & Woods 74)

Williams, by insisting that Brick and Skipper's relationship need not be firmly tied down to one interpretation and that it should mimic life's mysteries, is arguing for a more liberal interpretative community. He had earlier made a statement that no "two members of an audience ever leave a theatre...with identical interpretations (70-71)", allowing for liberal explanations regarding the nature of Brick and Skipper's relationship. This suggests that the playwright might have been aware that his plays had a gay following. In the same essay, Williams also made references to the ambiguity surrounding Blanche Du Bois, the protagonist in *Streetcar*, again trying to evade the pressing issue of sexual ambivalence in his works:

But still they must have that quality of life which is shadowy. Was Blanche Du Bois a liar? She told many lies in the course of *Streetcar* and yet at heart she was truthful. Was Brick homosexual? He probably –no, I would even say quite certainly – *his gayness* went no further in physical expression than clasping Skipper's hand across the space between their twin beds in hotel rooms – and yet his sexual nature was not innately "normal". (*Italics mine*) (Day & Wood, 72)

In "Evasion" the playwright stressed the importance of liberal interpretation and even hinted that Brick might be gay. This essay, I believe, was written partly to

appease critics who began drawing attention to the “cracks in the closet door” of his plays in the 1950s (Clum, 1994, 176).

In “Person to Person” (1955), another essay written in the same year, Williams came even closer to admitting his homosexuality but is once again evasive:

I once saw a group of little girls on a Mississippi sidewalk, all dolled up in their mother's and sister's cast-off finery, old raggedy gowns and plumed hats and high-heeled slippers, enacting a meeting of ladies in a parlor with a perfect mimicry of polite Southern gush and simper. But one child was not satisfied with the attention paid her enraptured performance by the others, they were too involved in their own performances to suit her, so she stretched out her skinny arms and threw back her skinny neck and shrieked to the deaf heavens and her equally oblivious playmates, “look at me, look at me, look at me!”

And then her mother's high-heeled slippers threw her off balance and she fell to the sidewalk in a great howling tangle of soiled white satin and torn pink net, and still nobody looked at her. I wonder now if she is not, now, a Southern writer. (76)

The focus of this essay was to explain certain autobiographical aspects in his works and to impress on the reader that what lies under the “histrionics” in them is a cry for attention. Williams was aware that there are “perils” to this kind of “personal lyricism and sidewalk histrionics”, particularly so, if like the playwright, one chooses a little girl “all dolled up in ...cast-off finery” to be self-representational. In this essay, Williams goes one step further by saying that his plays must not only “attract observers but [the] participants in the performance as

well" (77). Perhaps the playwright is referring to his gay audience here. Williams was aware that gay men are not mere observers of performance but performers as well. In his *Memoirs*, the playwright explains:

I know many in "the gay world" who accomplish this trick [acting straight] with apparent ease. However, I think it still requires a good deal of hypocrisy, even now that society in the Western World is presumed to have discarded its prejudices. My feeling is that the prejudices have simply gone underground *and there is still a need to wear a mask.* (Italics mine) (204)

In "Too Personal" (1972), an essay that introduces *Small Craft Warnings* (1972), Williams states clearly that he has become a victim of "write-ups and personal appearances" (Day & Woods, 155). Popularity destroys "organic writing" because it reveals too much about the personality that creates it, the playwright said. It is obvious that "Too Personal" is a response to the charge that the playwright has been repeating himself in his works. These magazine articles create "a sort of déjà vu" which robs the cathartic effects of his works, in fact reducing them to "sullen craft and art" (155). What is interesting about "Too Personal" is not this complaint but Williams' defence of his works. Unlike all his other plays, *Small Craft Warnings* features an openly gay character and this essay, I believe, is a form of pre-production apology for featuring an openly gay character on stage:

In all human experience, there are **parallels** which permit common understanding in the telling and hearing, and it is the frightening responsibility of an artist to make what is

directly or allusively close to his own being communicable and understandable, however disturbingly, **to the hearts and minds of all whom he addresses.** (emphasis mine) (159)

Williams admitted that it is the responsibility of the artist to communicate “what is close to his being”. In the earlier essays, the playwright gave emphasis to the importance of self-expression and communication in his works. It becomes clear that self-expression, on one level, refers to his homosexuality and the important thing that needed to be communicated lies in the queer subtext of his works. In a play that features a gay character, a play that breaks the “allusive” barrier of a closet play, it makes sense to write an essay like “Too Personal” in order “to prepare [straight] audiences for a disturbing time”.

Despite having expressed his opinions repeatedly that there is a social mission that he pursues in his works, the playwright, Gerald Berkowits in *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* says, is still perceived to be “an almost completely non-political writer” (86). This perspective prevailed among Williams’ earliest critics. Although the plays were hugely successful, they were considered “inward-looking” reminiscent of earlier works of “American dramatists like Herne and Crothers” (87). They were unlike the sinewy “outward-focused” plays of Arthur Miller or Eugene O’Neill because they were considered an “exploration of the emotional burdens of ordinary life” (Berkowits 86). Unlike *Death of A Salesman* which critics claim to be a “play about American society”,

Williams' *Streetcar* with its emphasis on sexuality and women was dismissed as being preoccupied only with the pathological (Berkowits 90-92).

Homosexuality in Williams' early plays was also not given much emphasis either by his critics, reviewers or by the producers of his plays. Williams himself was silent on the subject before the publication of *One Arm and Other Stories* in 1948. If criticism was levelled against any sexual issues in the early works, it was heterosexually inspired. The critics of the 1940s were more preoccupied with Blanche's arguments for "human values" or Tom's poverty rather than their ambivalent sexual nature. Although sexual ambiguity is said to be a central feature in Williams' works, homosexuality was not the popular focus among Williams' many critics. Thomas P. Adler's commendable critique on *Streetcar* for example, does not include a queer approach in its listings of "approaches" to reading the play (1990). However homosexuality as a subject of study in Williams' works can be traced to Roger Gellart's article "A Survey of the Homosexual in Some Plays", published in *Encore* 8 (Jan-Feb 1961) 34-35. Other than a few hostile critics who were admonishing Williams' "liberal" attitude towards sexuality, the literary community was silent on the issue of homosexuality. Even W. David Siever's *Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama* (1970), limits the interpretation of "Freudian sexual psychology" in Williams' works to a heterosexual paradigm (377). The general silence on the subject was disrupted by lone voices like Barton

Lee's of the *New York Times*, who in 1972 asked "Why Do Homosexual Playwrights Hide Their Homosexuality" (23 Jan 1972).

Even when homosexuality was discussed it was limited either to the short stories or to the later works. Gerald M. Berkowitz in *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* (1992), for example, addresses sexual ambiguity in Williams' works only from the period after the publication of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. While Edward Sklepowich's "In Pursuit of the Lyric Quarry: the Image of the Homosexual in Tennessee Williams' Prose Fiction" (1977) is limited only to the short stories. Only in 1989 with the publication of John Clum's "Something Cloudy Something Clear: Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams" in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* was the silence surrounding the subject in the early works broken. This was followed by Mark Lily's *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1990) where the critic introduced Williams as a gay playwright by reading *Menagerie* and *Streetcar* from a queer perspective. John Clum's analysis of Williams' works in *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (1992) further enriched this growing interpretive trend. This study aims to throw further light on Williams' treatment of homosexuality in his early works.

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Historian John D'Emilio in "Sexual Communities, Sexual Identities: The Making of the Homosexual Community in America", states that "gay men and

women of the 1940s were pioneers in the creation of an urban gay and lesbian subculture" (Abelove, 472). The war, which exploded traditional patterns of gender relations, allowed gay men and women the opportunity for self-expression and self-realisation in the modern city. Williams' exploration of the theme of flight from the family reflects this development in American society. Williams' own "coming-out" in New York and his visits to the YMCA chronicles the "coming-out" of this pioneering generation.

While the war allowed gay men and women to come-out of their closets, the homosexual's growing visibility, D'Emilio adds, brought about a Right Wing backlash. The 1940s and 1950s were nightmarish years for the gay person in America. Gay men, because they were more visible than gay women, bore the brunt of this heterosexist persecution. If in early America, before the establishment of a capitalist society, Americans "did not celebrate heterosexuality but rather marriage" because "sex was harnessed for procreation" (Abelove 469), in postwar America, sexual deviance, particularly homosexuality, was seen as a threat to heterosexuality itself.

In a separate but related article in the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Lee Edelman describes in "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet", the politicising of homosexuality by Right Wing politicians in America. Edelman's article exposes the American government's heterosexist agenda to expose and rid America of homosexuals. Next to the communist,

Edelman states, the homosexual was public enemy number one (Abelove 553-574). D'Emilio's research concurs with Edelman's claims revealing how gay men and women were under surveillance by the FBI and the Postal Service. Homosexuals were purged from the civil service and the military. Yet D'Emilio states that many gay bars sprang up in cities across the nation. The days of being scared and alone, despite this persecution, were over.

The flight motif that dominates the early works of the playwright is evidence of the ambivalent position of the homosexual in postwar America. On one hand the need for flight informs us of the precariousness of the gay person's existence but on the other, the fact that he had a destination, signals a progression towards acceptance and recognition. In mainstream America, the American theatre was where Tennessee Williams found his home. Among the four most successful postwar American dramatists only Arthur Miller was heterosexual (Clum, 1994, 149). Williams, Edward Albee and William Inge were gay and their works, especially those of Williams', enjoyed great popularity at home and abroad.

In Williams' case, critics only began to turn hostile when they noticed cracks in the closet door of the playwright's works. In the 1950s, especially with *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams inadvertently acknowledged the existence of a queer subtext in his works when he insisted that his plays and characters remain elusive. Critics have said that Williams' later

works, written less carefully, allowed reviewers to notice the queer subtext in them (Clum, 1994, 176). The most successful of Williams' plays are all closet plays. The closet play, as defined by John Clum in *Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, is a play that communicates gayness via a set of stereotypical codes. This can include inverting the male gaze where instead of women, men like Stanley Kowalski or John Buchanan ^{are} ~~is~~ portrayed as erotic objects. Williams, a master of queer codes, often used words like "straight", "queen" or popular gay terms like "turning the trick" as puns in his plays. His female characters, like Alma Winemiller or Blanche Du Bois often express a sense of insecurity commonly felt by homosexuals. Blanche's obsession with beauty and fear of growing old adds to her campiness, a trait she shares with many gay men. By making his women's sexual appetites vociferous and unconventional, Williams was also able to mask his gay male personalities in the guise of women. Alma Winemiller, like the homosexual, looks for "trade" in parks while Blanche Du Bois is evicted from Laurel for pederasty, a crime unfairly associated with gay men. William's early works harbour a subtext based on a language and a history akin to this new subculture that homosexuals in America belong to. However because the playwright was less established, he was more careful, often agreeing to tone down the telltale signatures of his gayness.

In the 1970s, after Stonewall, gay rights activism began in America. Williams' treatment of homosexuality in the early works was cited by a new generation of gay critics as an example of a primitive even homophobic

representation of gayness (Clum, 1989,161). His early works are often quoted as evidence of the playwright's refusal to commit himself to an "Out and Proud" gay generation. Pressured by this shift in society, Williams offered *Small Craft Warnings* (1972) to his public but was again criticised for the portrayal of "a sick and sad" vision of gay life. Williams as a gay playwright, this study hopes to reveal, is misunderstood. The adoption of the "closet play" and the fugitive as identity markers was necessary for its time. Therefore the inception of a queer literary inquiry will help in the process of "des-cribing" the "closet" in Williams' works.

The resurgent interest in Williams' early works in queer circles testifies to the relevance of his works in our postmodern times. The theme of "the homosexual as fugitive" is interesting because it conforms to a queer perspective of the concept of self. The adoption of "queer" a definitional term in exploring our postmodern gay identity reinstates the closet as a "shaping force" in the lives of most gay men, a reality affirmed by Eve Sedgwick in her groundbreaking book *Epistemology of the Closet*:

The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (68)

To be a fugitive equates one with a second self, usually kept in the realm of the closet. This opens up a fissure of binarisms such as straight/gay, light/dark, white/black, good/evil. These binarisms, Sedgwick argues, "are so permeative...in the absence of an antihomophobic analysis, [that we] must perhaps be [perpetuating] unknowingly compulsions implicit in each" (72-73). Sedgwick successfully demonstrates how these binarisms have dominated gay male writing particularly in the twentieth century in her exploration of "canonical" gay fiction ranging from Oscar Wilde to D.H. Lawrence. Examining a text from an antihomophobic perspective, Sedgwick argues, is an act of "des-cribing", through a dismantling of these binarisms, the work's queer subtext.

In drama, a highly fluid genre because of the performance factor, a highlighted subtext results in queer moments of identification, where gay audiences identify with, for example, Tom Wingfield's need to escape his domineering mother in *Menagerie*. Identity, for Williams' fugitive, is fluid, one that is deconstructive and that revels in self-disclosure. Thus when Blanche Du Bois reinvents herself to Mitch in *Streetcar*, she is telling the truth when she insists that she "never lied at heart". "The homosexual as fugitive" is relevant in today's theatre because it aligns itself to this queer concept of self. David Halperin in *Saint Foucault* explains this similarity:

Unlike Gay identity, which, though deliberately proclaimed in an act of affirmation, is nonetheless rooted in the positive fact of homosexual object-choice, queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable

reality. As the word implies, "queer" does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. (Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 1994, 62)

The homosexual/fugitive, by transgressing society's prescribed code of compulsory heterosexuality, is queer. The adoption of a queer perspective in analysing Williams' works is to read the world through the eyes of the "fugitive kind". Because of its fluidity, the queer perspective in drama, mirroring queer identity, shares the latter's transgressiveness.

Transgression in Williams' early works is bound up with the fugitive's ambivalent sexuality. Jonathan Dollimore in *Sexual Dissidence*, believes that this fugitive quality is evidence of the plural sexual politics that surrounds the homosexual and his sexuality (247-48). Dollimore in seeing the homosexual as a dissident partly agrees with Susan Sontag in attributing society's persecution of homosexuals as the main cause for the evocation of a "gay sensibility" (Sontag quoted in Dollimore, 307). This digression is necessary because ultimately a queer perspective presupposes a gay sensibility. Defining the gay sensibility however is not simple as it is not easily translatable nor is it freely visible to the uninitiated. To say that it is the result of social persecution, although this is seemingly agreeable to most queer theorists, is as Dollimore explains, evidence of "the presupposition that discrimination is the essence of culture" (312).

At this point I will allow the issue to rest but would like to explain the various telltale signs that critics identified as evidence of the workings of a gay sensibility in Williams' early works. Apart from the closet, "closetedness", "gender transvestism", the covert use of gay terminology and the inversion of the male gaze, as suggested by John Clum and Mark Lily in their re-interpretation of Williams' plays, there is the nagging issue of camp and "campiness" in the female characters that appear^{-s} to be still controversial. Tying in campiness with the gay sensibility, Jack Babuscio suggests that the gay appreciation of impersonation and drama, integral components of camp, is the result of gays having to act straight to survive in modern cities (quoted in Dollimore, 311). Partly agreeing with Babuscio, Dollimore himself argues that camp is an aspect of transgressive behaviour that distinguishes homosexuals from heterosexuals because it "integrates...gender with aesthetics [and is] a recognition of mimetic realism." Camp, Dollimore argues further, "...comes to life around that recognition [and] is situated at the point of emergence of the artificial from the real, [distinguishing] culture from nature..."(312).

Williams' use of camp as a theatrical device serves to make the homosexual more elusive. Just as the gay sensibility works to undermine conventional sensibility, "the latter has sought to exclude the former" (312) making it indecipherable outside an "antihomophobic literary inquiry" (Sedgwick 72). If the body of the fugitive is elusive and his part in the play

illusory, we are left with only traces of his presence. From this we can construct the fugitive's flight pattern, three of which are distinctly visible.

The following three chapters of this dissertation examine these three flight patterns. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the fugitive's flight from the family, mirroring the playwright's own struggle to realise his sexuality, is firmly rooted in the queer Tom Wingfield. Tom is a fugitive, a prisoner of his own closet and a captive of a conspiratorial silence that surrounds him in the family matrix. An examination of Tom's narration is also a study of autobiographical influence in the early works. It brings to light the queer subtext in the playwright's works.

Drawing inwards because of social ostracism and self-persecution, the fugitive's trail leads to self-division. Self-loathing, an attempt to reject our sexuality, is commonly felt by most gay men of every generation. The theme of flight from the self culminates in *Summer and Smoke* where Alma Winemiller, a secret sexual deviant, is trapped between her sexual feelings for John and her strict Episcopalian upbringing. Like the homosexual, Alma is caught in a double bind. She is unable to accept her sexuality because she believes it to be deviant but neither can she not acknowledge its existence. This leads her to self-rejection. When she finally realises that she is incomplete without her sexuality, her acceptance of her "deviant" sexuality marginalises her from mainstream society.

The fugitive's flight, like the autobiographical influence fuelling the early works, culminates in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In this play Williams resumes his criticism of society by pitting the queer Blanche with the homophobic Stanley. Driven by an irrational animosity towards the queer, Stanley eventually rapes Blanche, confirming society's inability to accept the queer. The flight pattern in the early works culminates in this play with the homosexual a fugitive from a reality dominated by "gaudy seed bearers". It is here that camp distinguishes culture from nature. The inventive Blanche, like the homosexual, is a survivor clinging to a world as "delicate as butterfly wings". However her closet door is not securely locked and she is unable to keep out "deliberate cruelty". In *Streetcar*, Williams seem to be saying that the queer has no choice but to be a fugitive. His existence is as fluid and as elusive as the mask he wears.