Fluidity and Differentiation
in Three Plays by Tennessee Williams:
The Glass Menagerie,
A Streetcar Named Desire,
and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

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At the age of fourteen I discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became my place of retreat, my cave, my refuge. From what? From being called a sissy by the neighborhood kids, and Miss Nancy by my father, because I would rather read books in my grandfather’s large and classical library than play marbles and baseball and other normal kid games, a result of a severe childhood illness and an excessive attachment to the female members of my family, who had coaxed me back into life.¹ (Emphasis added)

When Tennessee Williams wrote these lines, in 1959, he was already a widely acclaimed, forty-eight year old playwright, the author of a number of Broadway hits including the three plays under consideration—The Glass Menagerie (1944), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955). As an adolescent, reading had enabled him to escape Reality, that is to say the hostility of his father, a paragon of normalcy and virility, American style, according to Williams’s biographers. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, the playwright makes fun of the conformist couple Mac and Gooper’s “nawmal children” (37) that Maggie describes as “no-neck monsters” (17). As a child and teen-ager, Tom (before he became Tennessee) felt different from “normal” children and uncomfortable in the company of other (male) kids, the reason being, according to his own interpretation, that he was excessively attached to the women in his family. Further down, in the same text, he describes himself as “neurotic.”

I

In the closely autobiographical The Glass Menagerie (henceforward referred to as Glass) the world of normalcy is that of the urban petty bourgeoisie to which Williams’s family belonged when they moved to Saint Louis in 1918.² The first stage direction evokes, to use Tom’s own words, “the social
Staging Difference

background of the play” (23): in the “overcrowded urban centers,” the “lower middle-class” is “fundamentally ... an enslaved section of American society” whose main purpose in life is to “avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism” (21). Indeed, one of the driving forces of the plot appears to be Tom’s desperate desire to disengage himself from this undifferentiated mass: he writes poetry in a cabinet of the “washroom” (68) of the shoe warehouse, where he is not even a shipping clerk, and he dreams of enlisting in the Merchant Marine. In the apartment where he lives between Amanda, his overbearing mother, and Laura, his crippled sister, whose “difference” is even more acute than her brother’s, Tom feels caught as in a trap. He secretly plans to follow in the footsteps of his absent father, “a telephone man who fell in love with long distances” (23) and deserted his family.

Within the framework of the play, Jim O’Connor, Tom’s friend and colleague, represents normalcy, or better said, a sort of ideal complete American male. A very good-looking young man, he is both artistic and athletic:

In high school Jim was a hero. He had tremendous Irish good nature and vitality with the scrubbed and polished look of white chinaware. He seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star in basketball, captain of the debating club, president of the senior class and the glee club and he sang the male lead in the annual light operas. (68)

Jim’s primary dramatic function, as Tom points out, is to be “an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from.” He is the most realistic character in the play,” at the same time as he is a “symbol” (23). In one sense, far from being a fixed, allegorical character, Jim also represents fluidity and resilience, as his vitality has not waned: if he is disappointed by his apparently stagnant career, he is not “discouraged” (96). Yet, within the context of the American society of the time, his aspirations are those of a conformist—moving up the social ladder thanks to night classes in radio engineering, public speaking, etc. It could be argued, however, that in the cultural atmosphere of the Thirties, as an Irish Catholic “on both sides” (63) Jim is bound to feel somewhat different from mainstream America. In fact, his ethnic origin may be the reason why this conformist has retained the playwright’s sympathy—his “difference” makes of Jim a possible ego ideal with whom the author can identify.

If Jim O’Connor embodies both normalcy and marginality, it is arguable that Tom also incarnates both difference and conformism, as he represents another facet of the American virile ideal; unlike Jim, Tom is not about to marry and start a family: he dreams of virile adventures as a sailor; like the unattached manly cowboy of Westerns, he has no desire of settling down.

In Glass, it is Laura, Tom’s sister, who symbolizes unmitigated difference. Her “morbid shyness” (to use a phrase Williams had applied to himself as a boy) prevents her from having any kind of normal relationship with others. Her lameness, and more precisely, the brace she has to wear, materializes this difference. Tom having said to their mother, “Laura is very different from other girls,” Amanda replies, “I think the difference is all to her advantage” (65). On stage, the objective correlative of imagination and art into which Laura has retreated is the eponymous glass menagerie that she spends hours taking care of. The sparkling glass also represents the more or less imaginary shining past nostalgically remembered by Amanda: when Tom insults his mother, brutally bringing her back to reality, to the present, he makes a violent gesture and upsets the glass menagerie: “there is a tinkle of shattering glass. Laura cries out as if wounded” (42). In this way, the playwright highlights the absence of flexibility, the lack of fluidity in Amanda’s and Laura’s dreams which can be shattered by the intrusion of reality.

The most dramatic scene between the representative of reality and that of imagination, between normalcy and difference, occurs when Jim and Laura find themselves alone. In high school Laura had had a secret crush on Jim; now, a few years later, she comes into close contact with him for the first time: trying to boost her morale Jim goes so far as to kiss her. And in 1944, twenty years before the cultural revolution of the Sixties, which promoted diversity and pride in one’s difference, in his first successful play, in front of the conformist audience of the commercial theatre, Williams has the “emissary from reality” deliver an impassioned plea to difference:

You know—you’re—well—very different from anyone else I know! ... I mean it in a nice way— ... Has anyone ever told you that you were pretty? ...

Well you are! In a different way from anyone else. And all the nicer because of the difference, too ...

... The different people are not like other people, but being different is nothing to be ashamed of. Because other people are not such wonderful people ... They’re common as—weeds, but—you— ... (104–105)

The materialization of this splendid difference (as opposed to the brace) is the legendary unicorn, Laura’s favorite little glass animal. Revealingly,
dancing with Laura, Jim accidentally causes it to fall and lose its single horn. Laura muses: “Now it is just like all the other horses... Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise.” She will just imagine that he had an operation: “The horn was removed to make him feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don’t have horns” (104).

The brutal brace and the brittle glass menagerie—most strikingly, the legendary unicorn that has to be symbolically castrated to merge with the group—are significant theatrical props (materializing the misery and splendor of difference), but in Glass the true textual symbol of difference is that of the “blue roses.” A few years before the stage action begins, Laura had had to stay away from school because of pleurosis. Having thought that Laura had said “blue roses” Jim had jokingly nicknamed her “Blue roses.” Today he comments that, if ordinary people are as common as weeds,

“But—you—well... you’re—Blue Roses!”
Laura: But blue is wrong for—roses...
Jim: It’s right for you! (106)

This is sickness metamorphosed into a flower, an extra-ordinarily beautiful one. Thus will Tom Williams metamorphose his neurosis into art. Glass ends with the transformation of Amanda’s “silliness” and fixation on the past into “tragic beauty” and on Laura’s “smile” (114). But as the play begins, a long time after the events related, the sailor whose domain is limitless fluidity returns to the now empty apartment, incapable of forgetting his sister who remains in his mind as the emblem of unmitigable alienation.3

II

Produced in 1947, A Streetcar Named Desire (henceforth referred to as Streetcar) plays further variations on Williams’s basic theme of difference. The term and its synonyms are used several times in connection with the characters’ social milieu, sexual preferences, and psychological makeups.

Streetcar can be viewed as structured on the clash between two social classes. Whereas in Glass, at the same time as she was nostalgic for the traditional aristocratic South, symbolized by the Blue Mountain plantation, Amanda made every effort to integrate the undifferentiated mass of the Saint Louis middle class in order to survive, in Streetcar Blanche DuBois is repelled by the working class milieu to which her sister now belongs. Belle Reve, her lost plantation, is the symbol of a long gone period, that of the chivalric, romantic, ante-bellum South. When she arrives in Elysian Fields, the lower class neighborhood of New Orleans, a stage direction describes her as being “incongruous to this setting” (5). On the contrary, her sister Stella, who comes from a “background obviously quite different from her husband’s” (4), has perfectly adapted to her new environment. Blanche, whose “delicate beauty” “must avoid a strong light” (5), will be crushed by her sister’s husband. Stanley Kowalski, the representative of violent normalcy and of the brutal present.

Since the death of her husband, the poet Allan Grey, since the loss of Belle Reve, Blanche has felt, like Tom Williams, “acutely uncomfortable” in the everyday world. According to Stanley’s informer, in Laurel, where she taught high school English, she was considered, “not just different but downright loco—nuts” (121). After her affair with a seventeen year old student of hers, she was declared “morally unfit for her position.” She ironically agrees: “True? Yes, I suppose—unfit somehow...” (146–47). She sings a paean to art, magic, make-believe: the artist of the play being her homosexual husband, a poet who died before the rise of the curtain and whose emissary she appears to be within the time-span of the play. To sensitive and brawny Mitch (a felicitous combination in her eye, just as Jim was artistic and athletic, and therefore attractive to Laura) she explains: “There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness which wasn’t like a man’s although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate-looking—still—that thing was there” (114). Stella, Stanley’s wife, who functions as the link between the idyllic Belle Reve and the shabby reality of Elysian Fields, reveals to her husband that this “beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate” (124). Blanche had apparently once thought the same thing since her avowed “disgust” (115) caused Allan’s suicide.

Stanley is a far more inexcusable representative of reality than gentle, likeable, well-mannered, only unwittingly cruel Jim. Like Jim, however, Stella’s husband is part and parcel of his social milieu: a father-to-be, an ex-Master Sergeant in the American army, he is captain of the neighborhood bowling team. Contrary to Jim, who broke things by accident, Stanley loves to destroy what is fragile—light bulbs on his wedding night, plates, the radio set when he is in a rage, and finally Blanche, who, it should be noticed, “broke” her husband and who, when Stanley attacks her, defends herself with a broken bottle after having smashed a mirror (151).6

Jim was Irish; Stanley Kowalski is Polish. The Poles are “something like Irish, aren’t they?” (16) asks Blanche who (like Williams himself) is descended from French Huguenots. As she repeatedly calls her brother-in-law a “Polack,” she vehemently denies this ethnic difference:
I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what
I am is a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest
country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don’t ever call me a Polack.
(134)

Possibly, Stanley Kowalski married Stella DuBois with a view to abolishing
this difference, in hopes of perfecting his social integration.

Judging by his last name, Hubbel, the owner of the house in which the
Kowalskis live is German. Among Stanley’s friends there is a Mexican (Pablo
Gonzales) and an Anglo-Saxon (Harold Mitchell) considered by Blanche as
“superior to the others” (52). Revealingly enough, this Anglo-Saxon is
Stanley’s closest friend even though their personalities are totally opposite.
Was Mitch chosen by Stanley as the badge of his complete integration?

Outside the door—not inside the apartment—there are black people...

In this light, Stella and Stanley’s apartment may be viewed as the
theatrical representation of the American melting pot, in Blanche’s eye it is an
image of future democratic America, of the “interfused mass” evoked in
Glass.9

In a moment of desperate lucidity Blanche admits to her sister: “maybe
(Stanley)’s what we need to mix with our blood now that we’ve lost Belle
Reve and have to go on without Belle Reve to protect us” (45). (The tone is
both ironic and dead serious.) Stanley and Stella’s child, born toward the end
of the play and whose gender is left indeterminate (“baby,” “child,” “it”), is
perhaps the embodiment of a future positive “undifferentiation,” that of a
United States having integrated the aristocratic, agricultural, and “feminine”
values of the poetic Old South (represented by Blanche and her husband) and
the virile vigor of the urban industrial new world.9

Be that as it may, inside this melting pot, there subsists a clear hierarchy:
if Stanley enjoyed pulling Stella “down off them” (137) white columns of
Belle Reve, as he himself claims, if he delights in revealing what lies beneath
Blanche’s veneer and apparent refinement, if he feels insulted when referred
to as a Polack, he calls Pablo a “greaseball” (163), whereas his landlady and
friend, Eunice Hubbel, in a fit of anger, calls him a Polack (66). In spite of the
stage direction indicating that “New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there
is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town”
(3), Stanley’s house does not admit blacks, artists, marginals and those
refusing democratic equalization—no poet, no homosexual, no liberated
woman, no African-American. Indeed, 632 Elysian Fields appears as a
microcosm, as a faithful photograph of the United States in the Forties and
Fifties. It is arguable that it is because Blanche—implicitly and explicitly—

reminds Stanley of his ethnic and social difference that he revengingly crushes
her.

As an “emissary from reality” Irish Jim O’Connor came from outside, the
domain of normalcy and conformism in Glass; now, in Streetcar, reality,
normally dwell inside, on stage, in Stanley’s place, Blanche being an emissary
from a world of imagination, make-believe, and otherness. In Stanley’s
clamped quarters, she takes refuge in fluids: the hot baths that soothe her
frazzled nerves and whiskey. As Tom Wingfield became a seafarer (after
writing poetry in the washroom of the shoe factory) to escape the trap of
conformism, literary and musical Blanche dreams of spending the rest of her
life on the sea, of dying on a ship and of “being buried at sea, sewn up in a
clean white sack and dropped overboard... into an ocean as blue as my first
lover’s eyes” (170).

III

At the very beginning of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (henceforth abbreviated to
Cat), it is from the bathroom shower (as opposed to the feminine bath) that
Brick emerges: “At the rise of the curtain someone is taking a shower in the
bathroom, the door of which is half open.” Cat takes place in the magnificent
Politt plantation in the Mississippi Delta, the nameless plantation being the
real replica, in the present, of Amanda’s remembered Blue Mountain or
Blanche’s Belle Reve.

Much more spectacularly than Jim O’Connor or Stanley Kowalski, Brick
can lay every claim to the privilege of incarnating the American Virile Ideal:
a demigod’s physique, wealth, education, an Anglo-Saxon origin (Politt
should be contrasted with O’Connor and Kowalski), a beautiful wife, and, last
but not least, his past as a college football player—football being a much more
virile sport than basketball (Jim) and bowling (Stanley). Yet, like Tom
Wingfield and Blanche DuBois, Brick is trying to escape the trap represented
here by the bedroom (the sole setting of the action) and, more precisely, the
double bed—the main prop of the play. To follow Brick in Cat is to follow the
frantic movements of a man desperately trying to flee—to the bathroom, to the
outside gallery, to some dreamland. In Glass the first stage direction had
explained:

The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape, a structure
whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all these huge
buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human
desperation. (21)
Indeed, one way of bringing out the underlying structure and significance of *Cat* is to oppose the cold (or cool) to the hot. Below his “cool air of detachment” (19) mentioned in the first stage direction about him, Brick is on fire: he is a “quiet mountain” that can blow “suddenly up in volcanic flame” (119). He takes showers and constantly drinks iced liquor in an attempt to put out his inner fire.

Laura’s lameness was the visible sign of her difference, that of all those moving with difficulty within their society. . . . Brick broke his ankle trying to jump hurdles on the high school athletic field. During the three acts of the play, he hobbles on one foot with or without his symbolic crutch. Now, what is Brick’s difference?

The “Notes for the designer” tell us that the plantation was once owned by two men living and sleeping together. The bedroom

has not changed much since it was occupied by the original owners of the place, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. In other words, the room must evoke ghosts, it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon. (Emphasis added)

“Uncommon” underlines the difference of the two men, a difference that the playwright relates to poetry, gentleness, and tenderness. It is this room that Big Daddy, Brick’s father, has given to Brick and Maggie, during their stay on the plantation. (The word “ghost” recalling the incongruous, white-clad Blanche and Allan Grey haunting Blanche’s heart.)

The theme of homosexuality as the epitome of difference—especially at the time when the three plays under consideration were written and produced—was implicit as early as the autobiographical Glass: Tom is a bachelor, a sailor, and at the end of the play he evokes his “walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions” (115).10

In the short story “The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin” (1949), based on the relationship between Tom Williams and his sister Rose, the identification of the playwright with his sister is best expressed when we are told that when his sister falls in love with Richard he too becomes obsessed with the boy: “She had fallen in love. As always, I followed suit” (90).

In Streetcar, through the character of Allan Grey, the theme colored the plot more clearly, and in *Cat* it assumes center stage, with a few precautions, nevertheless, because of the 1955 Broadway audience for whom the play was written. . . . The main dramatic movement of *Cat* is the gradual revelation of the intensity of Brick and Skipper’s “exceptional” friendship. Skipper drank himself to death before the play begins, his death being the motivating force, the main spring of the action. Ironically playing on the word “normal,” Brick exclaims to his father: “Normal? No!—It was too rare to be normal, any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal” (122—23).

Were Brick and Skipper homosexual lovers? No one knows, not even the author who in a long stage direction (116—17) claims for the playwright the right to remain vague and mysterious. However, a drunken Skipper had confessed his love to Brick, as Brick finally tells his father, even though Maggie may have brainwashed Skipper into believing that his friendship for her husband was not “pure.” In this way, is the Broadway audience distanced from the revelation in a quintuple fashion! Skipper is now dead; Brick relates the confession; Skipper was drunk; he used the telephone to confess his homosexual love; he may have been self-deluded. In other words, the audience do not witness, nor do they hear the confession, and this confession was made by a man who was confused as he declared his love from a distance. What is more, he is now dead. Thus, no more than in *Streetcar* is the archetypal embodiment of social and psychological difference admitted within the theatrical space of *Cat*. Indeed, the homosexual flees or is ejected from the social space. Maggie tells Brick that when she had tried to tear off Skipper’s mask by urging him to confess his love for Brick, “HE SLAPPED ME HARD ON THE MOUTH!—then turned and ran without stopping once, I am sure, all the way back into his room at the Blackstone” (60). Relating an episode in his student life when a pledge in his and Skipper’s fraternity attempted to do an “unnatural thing,” Brick exclaims: “We told him to get off the campus, and he did, he got!—All the way to . . . North Africa, last I heard!” (121) (Emphasis added in both quotations.)

Whatever the nature of Brick’s own feelings for Skipper—whether it be, as he claims, “exceptional friendship, real, real, deep, deep friendship” (122), repressed homoeroticism, or patent homosexuality (even though unconsummated)—what matters at this point is that Brick, who appears to be the ne plus ultra of the American virile ideal, has been in close contact with the very embodiment of difference. He may even have loved him—hence his disgust with everything, hence his death-wish.11 In the middle of an immense plantation—“twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile” (112)—, Brick finds himself in a no-exit situation. All the more so as he has interiorized all the values of his society (as opposed to his tolerant father). If “we gauge the wide and profound reach of the conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel” (122), if he desperately tries to distance himself from Skipper (“His truth, not mine!” 127—), yet, on stage, within the spatio-temporal framework of the play, Brick
is the character who embodies difference (when compared to his brother Gooper, for instance). Both hyper-conventional and different, he sings a paean to "exceptional," "not normal," friendship, at the same time as he is terrorized by the idea of transgression.

In fact, Brick designates "some place elsewhere," another possible society already glimpsed by at least two "virile" American writers whose lives and works are linked to sea voyages—Herman Melville and Jack London whose homoeroticism has often been underlined by critics.\textsuperscript{12} It is also the society evoked in Greek legends approvingly alluded to by Maggie (59). This place elsewhere, this ailleurs, is the domain of the polymorphous love of childhood or of the desexualized world of sublimation in which, in spite of their intensity, human relationships are not tainted by sexuality. Brick exclaims:

One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true!—I had friendship with Skipper.—You are naming it dirty!
... Not love, with you, Maggie but friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing... (59)

Maggie had told him: "life has got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life is—all—over" (58).

In \textbf{Cat} the best image of this utopian world is the unreachable moon, personified in the masculine: in the Broadway version of the third act Brick addresses it as "you cool son of a bitch." (He envies the man in the moon.) On earth, this "great good place," to borrow Henry James's title, is the football field. According to Maggie, Brick tells his father, he and Skipper

Wanted to—keep on tossing—those long, long!—high, high!—passes that—couldn't be intercepted except by time, the aerial attack that made us famous! And so we did, we did, we kept it up for one season, that aerial attack, we held it high!—Yeah, but—that summer, Maggie, she laid the law down to me, said. Now or never, and so I married Maggie... (124)

Brick is still dreaming about those high passes, about those aerial contacts through the ball in a world of sublimation, as opposed to what Maggie represents as she lays the law down to her husband. Coolness, lawlessness, elevation would appear to be the intrinsic qualities of this world, as opposed to the hot sexuality embodied here below by Maggie and marital duties. Brick is probably also nostalgic for the ambiguities of adolescence. After Skipper's death, his link with that period of life when feelings have the ambivalence and fluidity rejected by adult American society is broken. His nostalgia for that fluidity is not only reflected in the symbolic shower that opens the play, but also in mortiferous liquor through which he, possibly, hopes to rejoin, to swim back to Skipper who, so to speak, drowned himself in alcohol.\textsuperscript{14} It is arguable, of course, that if conventional Brick Pollitt sings the splendor of difference only within the confines of sublimation, it is mainly because this transgressive plea to difference had to be accepted by the Broadway audience. In this respect, it is noteworthy that in the 1974 version of the third act (the third of that act!) Williams is no more explicit about Brick's sexual identity than in the previous versions. Two decades after the premiere of \textbf{Cat}, during the heyday of the sexual liberation, homosexuality was still an all but unbreakable taboo on Broadway.

\textbf{IV}

Tennessee Williams's "difference," that of the gay artist, always finds its way onto the stage, after having sustained transformations required by the genre and the time. The majority of his plays present characters that are too sensitive and/or too sensual to be fully adapted to their conventional social milieu. They sooner or later clash with Reality, with the hostility of normal Boeotians. The theme of the "fugitive kind" can be found as early as 1937 in one of his first plays entitled precisely, \textit{Fugitive Kind}. (In \textit{Glass} a stage direction evokes Laura's "fugitive manner" (28)). The no-exit situation inherent in the theatre intensifies this confrontation. The fire-escape, the gallery, the bathroom, the washroom, are the antechamber to some distant world, the first step to some imaginary beyond where society would be less rigid, more fluid. This "place elsewhere" assumes many shapes and forms: art, the more or less reinvented past, the football field, the sea, death itself. The color that best symbolizes this dreamland is white, the color of purity and mourning: Blanche’s dress and imagined shroud, Brick’s "white silk pajamas" (39) and "white towel-cloth robe" (32), the sparkling transparence of the glass menagerie.

On stage, the dream of fluidity is suggested by the oneric atmosphere, the music, the changing light, the "plastic" theatre decor wished for by Williams (who condemned the theatre of "realistic convention") in the "Production Notes" for \textit{Glass}. In \textbf{Cat}, in "Notes for the Designer" the playwright indicates that "the walls below the ceiling should dissolve mysteriously into air; the set should be roofed by the sky; stars and moon suggested by traces of milky pallor..." And the designer Joe Milzener had this to say about the sets he created for \textit{Streetcar}: "the magic of light opened up a fluid and poetic world of story telling..." (Milzener 141).
Sam Shepard’s Inter/National Stage

Johan Callens

Sam Shepard has come a long way. Broken into the theatre while a student at Mount San Antonio College, in Walnut, CA, he joined the Bishop’s Company Repertory Players on a nation-wide tour and kindly bowed out in New York to try his luck as a writer on the burgeoning Off-Off-Broadway scene. This was in 1963. Three decades later, he has built himself a solid reputation, consecutively using New York (1964–71), London (1971–74), San Francisco (1974 83), Santa Fe (1983 87) and Orange County, Virginia (1987) as home bases and garnering productions of his plays in the major cities of the United States. His film career gave him an even greater exposure, down to the tiniest theatres in the country’s farthest reaches. William Klem has interpreted Shepard’s appearance in Terence Malick’s Days of Heaven (Fall 1978) as the consecration of his mythical status, i.e. mythical and American. A few months earlier, on the occasion of the premiere of Seduced (Trinity Square Repertory, Providence, 25 April, 1978), Mel Gussow and Jack Kroll indeed hailed the playwright as the most “American” of his generation (Klem 397). When Buried Child opened the following year, one feature article for the New York Times was entitled “The Deeply American Roots of Sam Shepard’s Plays,” another “Sam Shepard’s Obsession is America.” More recently Jürgen C. Wolter has ventured that Shepard “is widely considered to be a typically American playwright, if not the most American of contemporary American playwrights,” although this makes cross-cultural transplantation quite hazardous, as the foreign audience is liable to mistake Shepard’s subjective vision of a culture for a confirmation of the media-created type (Wolter 197). For all that, Buried Child received the 1979 Pulitzer Prize, signalling Shepard’s canonization in America, his promotion from “experimental” and “avant-garde” to “exemplary” artist, terms that are anything but unproblematical. In the present article I propose to explore Shepard’s exemplarity.

To David J. DeRose the playwright’s rise to fame involved a recuperation that could not have occurred entirely without his consent. Twice the critic believes the artist to have surrendered, if not to the lure of Broadway and Hollywood commercialism, at least to their hegemonic capacity to confer national status. Operation Sidewinder and A Lie of the Mind not only premiered in commercial New York venues, resp. Lincoln Center and the Promenade Theatre, for promotional reasons they also coincided with the
baby's gender. Indeed, in the scene in which the baby appears blue is a feminine color: Blanch's jacket is blue, "Della Robbia blue. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures" (169). Blue appears here as the androgynous color par excellence, combining as it does the implicit meaning of the color when associated with a baby and Blanch's explicit comment on the significance of the color in this final scene.

10. In The Enchafed Flood W.H. Auden remarks: "It is not an accident that many homosexuals should show a special preference for sailors, for the sailor on shore is symbolically the innocent god from the sea who is not bound by the law of the land and can therefore do anything without guilt" (122, note 1).

In Footloose in Arcadia, Joseph Noel reports that Jack London maintained that sailors are that way too... Whenever you herd men together and deny them women their latent sex perversion come to the surface. It's a perfectly natural result of a natural cause" (234).

Herman Melville in White-Jacket (1850): "What too many seamen are when ashore is very well known, but what some of them become when completely cut off from shore can hardly be imagined by landsmen. The sins for which the cities of the plain were overthrown still linger in some of these wooden-walled Gomorrah's of the deep" (353–54).

11. The novelist Merle Miller has entitled his autobiography On Being Different: What It Means to Be a Homosexual. Williams has explained that Brick's "overt sexual adjustment was, and must remain, a heterosexual one" (Qtd. in Bigsby 86).

12. See in particular my book Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel and Theatre from Herman Melville to James Baldwin. According to Williams the South is even more homophobic than the rest of the U.S. (Spoto 204).

13. In a deleted passage Maggie had explained: "Y 'leaned on each others shoulders and sang sad songs to the moon! ... I knew the end of the world was comin' for you two, the end of that high cloudy world, not stained by anything—in carnal ... which you and Skipper had created between you like two high-minded spiders weavin' a web for just two!" She also reproaches the two men with making up their minds "to stay celibate forever." Typescript in Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 1, 34

14. In Love and Death in the American Novel, Fiedler explains that, "Water is the symbol of the barrier between the Great Good Place and the busy world of women; and everywhere in our fiction, the masculine paradise is laved by great rivers or the vast ocean...but even in so mild a masculine evasion as James's 'The Great Good Place,' the metaphor of a descent into the waters prevails..." (352).

15. Williams has entitled his 1977 collection of poems Androgyne Mon Amour. On stage: the theme of androgyny culminates in his 1971 play Out Cry in which brother and sister (Felice and Clare) appear as the two halves of one hermaphrodite character. The name of Blanch's lost plantation, Belle Reve, appears to be an androgynous portmanteau word, beau reve + belle reve. In French reve is masculine and reve is feminine. Williams's grammatical mistake—the confusion of

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Tennessee Williams's Plays—underlines the "androgyne" of the dream world; also, the name of the plantation evokes the link between dreams and water ("beautiful dream" and "beautiful shore") in his plays.

16. Notably, Elia Kazan in a book-length interview with Michel Ciment: "Blanche DuBois, the woman, is Williams...I saw Blanche as Williams, an ambivalent figure who is attracted to the harshness and vulgarity around him at the same time that he fears it, because it threatens his life" (Kazan on Kazan 71).

17. During the sexual liberation of the late 60's, 70's, and early 80's, Williams wrote a number of "liberated" plays; notably, Small Craft Warnings (1972), Vieux Carré (1977), Something Cloudy, Something Clear (1981) in which the homosexual figures prominently on stage, as he had done constantly in his fiction and poetry. Revealing enough, those plays are mediocre, to say the least. The "unsaid" (and the tension it provides) is one of the intrinsic qualities of a work of art. "Something Unspoken," the title of his 1958 play about two (apparently) lesbian lovers could serve as an apposite title to his theatre up to the early 70's and, in particular, to Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

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Staging Difference

If it is true that the characters representing transgressive difference (Allan Grey, Peter Ochello, Jack Straw, Skipper, the student driven out of the fraternity, and, later, in archetypical fashion, Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*) do not enter the theatrical space, it is clear that they haunt the wings of the stage and the hearts of the protagonists. Again, it should also be stressed that all the male protagonists harbor some kind of difference even when they function as representatives of normalcy. The most emblematic example being Brick about whom the playwright seems to be in two minds (in two hearts?): he regrets his timidity as regards transgression at the same time as he has him deliver a vibrant tribute to “exceptional,” “not normal” friendship between males. In this respect, Brick should be contrasted with several secondary characters of villainous rigidly heterosexual Anglo-Saxons, from Jabe Torrance (*Battle of Angels*, 1940) to Tom Junior (*Sweet Bird of Youth*, 1959), via George Holly (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 1958). The ultimate fluidity of personality is androgynous, a theme that has its origin, no doubt, in Williams’s identification with his sister Rose. Critics, despite Williams’s vehement denials, have tended, for instance, to see Blanche as a projection of her creator.16

When all is said, if it is patent that the condition of Williams’s truly different people (as opposed to those that function in the plays as representatives of reality) is socially and psychologically far from enviable, it is just as clear that their revenge is their spiritual superiority over the “normal” people of his theatre. The beauty of their inner world—however fragile this world may be—enables them to transcend the petty world of normalcy, the symbol of which might be the “jacket” (177), the straight jacket—as opposed to the “pretty blue jacket” (169)—that the “sinister” nurse, dressed in a “severe dress” (175), in a “plain-tailored outfit” (172), wants to impose on Blanche. In this last scene Blanche (i.e. “the white one”) is dressed in red and blue, and she would like her dead body to be dropped into the blue sea. It is fitting that in *Streetcar* Blanche’s colors should be white, red and blue, the colors of the American flag. *Streetcar*, like most of Williams’s works can be interpreted as a plea for a less repressive, more fluid, more androgynous American Society. In such a fluid society, “undifferentiation,” in the sense of “warm and easy intermingling” of all human beings (contrasted with “interfused mass of automatism”) and absence of discrimination, would be the order of the day.17

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Notes

2. Williams’s brother Dakin, in a letter to Donald Spoto: “The events of *The Glass Menagerie* are a virtually literal rendering of our family life... There was a real Jim O’Connor, who was brought for my sister. The Tom of the play is my brother Tom, and Amanda Wingfield is certainly Mother” (Spoto 114).
3. In “Person-to-Person,” a preface to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* not reprinted in the edition used.
4. “For there is a kind of stasis in a world shaped entirely by the imagination, in the fragile constructions of Laura’s glass menagerie, the memories, real or invented, of Amanda’s gentleman callers, the visits to the movies and even the poems written by Tom” (C.W.F.: Bigsby 41). “And to me it has been providential to be an artist, a great act of providence that I was able to turn my psychosis into creativity—my sister Rose did not manage this” (Michiko Kakutani).
5. Thomas P. Adler describes *A Streetcar Named Desire* as “a guilt play in which the narrator/central character attempts to come to terms with having followed the imperative of individuating himself as a man and developing himself as an artist over his responsibility to care for his sister and mother...” (2).
6. Adler speaks of Blanche’s “Stanley-side,” “as her red satin robe suggests” (64). Stanley appears to be an avatar of Williams’s father, an inveterate poker player, who had been accused by his daughter Rose of having attempted to rape her. Stanley Kowalski also bears the name of a friend of Williams’s with whom the latter was in love. Hence the complexity of the character... See what Signi Falk has to say about this complexity: “Some of the ambiguity in the play arises from the author’s glowing admiration of the capacity of Stan and his friends for unlimited physical pleasure; and, on the other hand, he evinces a sympathy and admiration for Blanche...” (55).

For Nancy M. Tischler it is possible “that the artist secretly admires and even loves the caveron who threatens his existence” (“The Distorted Mirror. Tennessee Williams’ Self-Portraits” 169).
7. Bigsby: “Just why, after all, does Stanley tolerate this lumbering mother’s boy who is apparently so antithetical to his own sensibility?” (64).
8. Adler describes Stanley as “the agent of democratization” (65). In an extremely perceptive article, Pierre Nordon likens Stanley Kowalski to the African-American as seen in post-World War II America when integration was the order of the day: “Mais il se trouve que les traits qui caractérisent Stanley—sa santé, son insouciance, sa vulgarité tapageuse, son goût pour le poker ou pour les boules—coïncident avec ceux du ‘noir’ tel que le transmet la tradition théâtrale des Black Minstrels.” For Pierre Nordon, “aristocratique” Stella’s misalliance with lower-class Polish Stanley calls to mind that of Desdemona with Othello (160-61).
9. Stanley had seemed sure that his child was going to be a boy but the blue blanket in which the baby is wrapped is not enough for the audience to determine the