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Hiding Behind the Closet Door: Representations of the Homosexual Experience in A Streetcar Named Desire

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Abstract

Themes related to homosexuality and the homosexual experience are interwoven in many layers throughout Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This research paper analyzes contemporary commentary on homosexuality from the 1940s and '50s, Blanche's experiences with light and perception, and moments of homosociality between the male poker players, to interpret how the homosexual experience is represented and exposed on stage through the two main characters in the play, Blanche and Stanley. Williams uses a heteronormative context to portray the homosexual experience, thus mirroring the way gay men had to navigate life in the closet while presenting to the public a façade that mimicked that of the hetero-norm. Ultimately, Williams uses illusions to make a comment on the greater society's attitudes towards homosexuals. Homosexuals were forced to present themselves in illusory manners to be accepted within society; they had to navigate the world inside and outside "the closet". Thus, Williams uses this theme of illusion and perception in various instances in the play to showcase this type of mentality. Also explored is the concept of the homosexual v. homosocial. The Poker Night scene exemplifies the concept of the homosocial and serves as another avenue through which the homosexual experience is evoked. We see, through Blanche and Stanley, the way homosexual themes were incorporated from small lighting details to a larger scope present within male relationships in the play. Undoubtedly, there is so much more to do with homosexuality in *Streetcar* than readers may originally realize, and this paper only dips our toes into a newer lens through which *Streetcar* can be viewed and analyzed.

Keywords

homosexuality, A Streetcar Named Desire, homosocial

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ABSTRACT

Themes related to homosexuality and the homosexual experience are interwoven in many layers throughout Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire. This research paper analyzes contemporary commentary on homosexuality from the 1940s and '50s, Blanche's experiences with light and perception, and moments of homosociality between the male poker players, to interpret how the homosexual experience is represented and exposed on stage through the two main characters in the play, Blanche and Stanley. Williams uses a heteronormative context to portray the homosexual experience, thus mirroring the way gay men had to navigate life in the closet while presenting to the public a façade that mimicked that of the hetero-norm. Ultimately, Williams uses illusions to make a comment on the greater society's attitudes towards homosexuals. Homosexuals were forced to present themselves in illusory manners to be accepted within society; they had to navigate the world inside and outside "the closet". Thus, Williams uses this theme of illusion and perception in various instances in the play to showcase this type of mentality. Also explored is the concept of the homosexual v. homosocial. The Poker Night scene exemplifies the concept of the homosocial and serves as another avenue through which the homosexual experience is evoked. We see, through Blanche and Stanley, the way homosexual themes were incorporated from small lighting details to a larger scope present within male relationships in the play. Undoubtedly, there is so much more to do with homosexuality in Streetcar than readers may originally realize, and this paper only dips our toes into a newer lens through which Streetcar can be viewed and analyzed.

“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” (Williams 114; Scene 6). These and the lines that follow provide the only insight we have into the character of Blanche's dead husband, Allan Grey. What do these lines mean? Was her husband just young and naïve? Did he just happen to have a soft and gentle demeanor? More information from Blanche requires us to conclude that her dead husband was gay and engaged in homosexual experiences. Blanche's confession about her husband is the only scene where a homosexual character is somewhat prevalent, not physically, but certainly in the minds of the audience; we neither see nor hear Allan on stage but can picture him in our minds.

A Streetcar Named Desire, by Tennessee Williams, is a play about Blanche DuBois, a former school teacher, who travels to New Orleans to stay with her sister Stella and Stella's husband Stanley Kowalski after the loss of Blanche's family home in Mississippi. While in New Orleans, Blanche's peculiar personality and perpetual anxiety are constantly questioned and tested by Stanley, who is determined to uncover Blanche's mysterious past. During her stay in New Orleans, Blanche becomes romantically involved with one of Stanley's friends, Mitch. However, Blanche's personal anxieties and Stanley's constant questioning and brute behavior send Blanche into a downward spiral after it is revealed that her dead ex-husband was gay. It is never explicitly stated that Allan is gay, but it is strongly implied. Despite this being the one scene where there is any mention or

reference to a gay character, there are a multitude of subtle nuances throughout the play that carry homosexual undertones and themes. The inclusion of these themes and relations to the homosexual experience are small, but powerful, and help make *A Streetcar Named Desire* quite a progressive and radical play once these nuances are uncovered and explored deeply.

Analyzing contemporary commentary on homosexuality from the 1940s and '50s, Blanche's experiences with illusion, and moments of homosocial relations between the male poker players, allows the viewers to see that the homosexual experience is represented and exposed on stage through the two main characters, Blanche and Stanley. Williams uses a heteronormative context to portray the homosexual experience, thus mirroring the way gay men had to navigate life in the closet while presenting to the public a façade that mimicked that of the hetero-norm. Ultimately, Williams uses illusions to make a comment on the greater society's attitudes towards homosexuals.

Homosexuals were forced to present themselves in illusory manners to be accepted within society; they had to navigate the world inside and outside "the closet". Thus, Williams uses this theme of illusion and perception in various instances in the play to showcase this type of mentality. A second theme has to do with the concept of the homosexual v. homosocial. The Poker Night scene exemplifies the concept of the homosocial and serves as another avenue through which the homosexual experience is evoked. We see, through Blanche and Stanley, the way homosexual themes were incorporated from small lighting details to a larger scope present within male relationships in the play.

When looking at literature about *A Streetcar Named Desire*, critiques and analysis regarding themes and issues about gender and sexuality representation tend to follow two different paths. One of those paths uses a more heteronormative lens to discuss gender and sexuality where scholars focus on heterosexual relationships and stereotypical representations of man and woman. The second path focuses heavily on *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a commentary on homosexual relationships, and thus these scholars pursue their analysis from a queer lens. Scholars corresponding with the first area of literature about *Streetcar* focus on gender and sexuality by analyzing the play through a heteronormative lens, and thus focusing on themes regarding heterosexuality and relationships between men and women. For example, Ram Panda uses a deconstructive lens to explain oppositions between men and women that are expressed in the play, and then explains how these oppositions expose a patriarchal ideology. He says the "Stanley-Stella relationship is one of the supreme examples of hierarchization of activity/passivity opposition" (Panda 53) and notes how Stanley's activeness instantly pacifies Stella and puts her in an insubordinate role, thus highlighting the patriarchal ideology of the play. With this example, Panda also shows us an instance of female victimization, which is something Anca Vlasopolos does in her work. She focuses on typical female victimization in *Streetcar*. Vlasopolos, for example, analyzes Stanley's violence and says Stanley's "male friends make amends for him and take care of him, respectful of his capacity for violence, and Stella returns to Stanley, accepting his mastery over her" (330). Vlasopolos uses this explanation to show how Stanley's emotional and enraged outbursts are a way for him to restore his authority. Here, we see how female victimization viewed through a

heteronormative lens plays to themes of male dominance in relation to gender, like the way Panda uses oppositions to show male dominance from a patriarchal ideology. This is different from literature in the second area that emphasizes homosexuality in *Streetcar*.

Some of the literature regarding gender and sexuality analyzes *Streetcar* as commentary for homosexuality or critique it as a homosexual text. Thus, this group of literature is focusing on the play using queer theory and lens. Scholars like Francisco Costa discuss the ways in which the play confronts being a homosexual in a heteronormative society. Costa argues that “Williams manages to ally his homosexual economy of desire to a heterosexual one imposed by heteronormativity” (77). Here, Costa is saying that the heteronormative aspects of the play are driven by instances of homosexuality. Other scholars offer similar views by discussing homosocial interactions between male characters in *Streetcar*, in which the homosocial male relationships emphasize the homosexual themes of the play. Keith Dorwick discusses the importance of the ambiguity between the homosexual and the homosocial as Williams’ way of presenting implicit themes related to homosexuality. He says, “Throughout *Streetcar*, Williams consistently places Stanley and his poker-playing boys in a liminal position in which the homosocial operates” (80). Dorwick shows us how the subtlest placement of characters and interactions between them in the Poker Night scene exhibit homosexual themes. Dorwick, like Costa, recognizes that Williams uses seemingly heteronormative interactions to portray homosexual relations. Similar to Dorwick and Costa, other scholars use a queer-focused lens to note the subtleties in Williams’ diction that creates themes of homosexuality.

When looking at literature related to homosexuality in *Streetcar*, Blanche’s character is only ever briefly mentioned but is never examined more fully. Nicholas Pagan points out an interesting connection between Blanche’s last name and homosexuality. Specifically, he uses a queer lens to argue that “If we look even more carefully at the language of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we may notice that as well as reading Blanche as a woman, it is possible to read her as a gay male”, and explains that Blanche’s last name, DuBois, is typically pronounced like that of W.E.B DuBois, where the end sounds like “boys”. Pagan’s example of the subtle change in pronunciation of Blanche’s last name shows, again, how Williams was able to slyly hint at homosexual themes. After Pagan’s explanation of Blanche’s last name, I was curious to look more into Blanche’s character and see if there are any subtle parallels to homosexuality. This led me to an analysis of the theme of perceptions and illusions in relation to Blanche, who is always obsessed with her appearance and how others are viewing her. I also noticed that Stanley often comments on her appearance. Thus, looking for themes of homosexuality through Blanche and the light bulb/paper lantern as well as Stanley and his homosocial relationships is important to understanding the dynamics of this seemingly heteronormative relationship. By looking first at Blanche’s interactions with the light bulb and lantern, and then Stanley’s homosocial relationships, we move from a more minutely focused scope to one that is more prominent and blatant to the audience. This movement from the smallest detail to a more prominent type of relationship among men shows us how Williams designed homosexual themes into even the smallest parts of the play.

Before delving more into the topic of Blanche and Stanley, let us first understand a little bit more about the homosexual experience in the 1940s and 50s in America. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, like many of Williams's other works, reflects his experiences as a gay man in 1940s and '50s America. Today, it could be considered a homosexual text, but at the time of its publication, *Streetcar* was simply a funny, yet dramatic play full of love, desire, and conflict. David Savran's article "'By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty': Mapping the Closet with Tennessee Williams" offers us some insight into the way Williams decided to portray his sexuality in his work. Savran tells us the following:

Throughout Williams's work, his homosexuality is both ubiquitous and elusive... Williams insisted, with some justification, that he could not stage his homosexuality directly or candidly during the 1940s and '50s, believing that 'there would be no producer for it' given the homophobic program of the Broadway theatre. (58)

This information from Savran provides an important foundation for our understanding of why the homosexual themes in the play are portrayed in the manner that they are. Most importantly, we learn that in the 1940s and '50s, Broadway theatre had a homophobic air. Thus, we can assume that those attending the Broadway shows did not come to a Broadway show expecting to see homosexual characters at the forefront, or even in the background for that matter; homosexual characters were to simply not exist.

The anti-homosexual campaign that swept the government and military in the 1940s found its way into other areas of life by the

late 1950s. After the World War II, gay men and lesbians were incessantly harassed and arrested. Savran tells us, "The late 1940s and '50s were particularly trying, as the House of Committee on Un-American Activities pursued a campaign against homosexuals almost as vigorously as they did their crusade against alleged Communist 'subversives'" (60). Here, we can see how, while also fighting communism, the government was waging an internal war on homosexuals, whom they believed "posed great security risks" (Savran 60). Like the government, Hollywood and Broadway followed a similar ideology, thus forcing homosexual writers like Williams to produce plays in which the homosexual themes could be concealed or missed completely. Thus, Williams had no choice but to keep his gay characters off stage and highly elusive. Public perceptions, attitudes and the threat of being denied a producer for his plays, required it be so.

On May 31, 1950, an article was published in *The Washington Post* called "Pervert Investigation." It is an article written by a psychiatrist that expresses concerns about the federal investigation of homosexuals in the government leading to blackmail of individuals who are homosexual, and those that may only have homosexual impulses. This article was written in response to the anti-homosexual campaign mentioned above. By looking at the diction and phrasing in the article, we can see that it was common for people in the 1950s to consider homosexuality as a crime that is just as disturbing as rape and perversion. This highlights the unaccepting attitude of mainstream society towards the homosexual community, as well as their perceptions of homosexuals as perverts.

The writer of the article makes a telling comparison between a homosexual and a

rapist. The writer says, “The unrestrained heterosexuality of the rapist is certainly as menacing to the public safety as any homosexual behavior” (“Pervert Investigation”). Here, we have a direct juxtaposition of a rapist and a homosexual. According to the psychiatrist, any homosexual behavior was “certainly as menacing to the public safety” as a heterosexual individual who forces members of the opposite sex to engage in sexual acts without consent. Saying homosexual behavior was a threat to public safety implies that people at this time had a general fear of homosexuals and found their behaviors to be equally as horrible as a rapist’s. We also know from this article that homosexual behavior was something inadmissible under the law. Not only is there an investigation being conducted, there is also a mention of “charges of homosexuality” in regard to the government pervert investigation that this article is responding to. This line tells us that an individual might be charged under the law for engaging in homosexual behaviors, or for simply being homosexual. Homosexuals could even be admitted to psychiatric institutions and hospitals because they were considered sexual psychopaths.

An article published in the *New York Times* on April 3, 1944 and another article published in the *Washington Post* on March 3, 1949 demonstrate how homosexuals were considered psychopaths during the 1940s. The 1944 article, titled “Psychopathic Ills Are Emotional, Not Due to a Lack of Intelligence,” details the personality of a psychopath and offers information for dealing with soldiers suffering from what we know now as post-traumatic stress disorder. The article says, “Also in the group of psychopaths are alcoholics, narcotic addicts, homosexuals, and sexual perverts.” Thus, we are told that being a homosexual at this

time meant you were a psychopath and could then be institutionalized. The 1949 article then negates the 1944 article, and thus shows progress in the way people were to consider homosexuals. The 1949 article, titled “Homosexuals Held Not All Psychopaths,” cites a doctor who tells us that “without other detrimental factors in the personality, a homosexual probably could not be committed to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for treatment as a sexual psychopath.” We learn two things from this quote: 1) that homosexuals were previously held for treatment in hospitals, and 2) progressive thinking was slowly but surely starting to happen. This change in thought is radical for the time and is important in showing us how the homosexual community had not only fears of being arrested, but previously had to fear being sent to hospitals and institutions for treatments because they were considered mentally psychotic.

The three articles I have presented are important in establishing a context for the world in which Williams lived as a gay man. They help us understand that the mainstream society in the 1940s and 50s had a very negative perception of, and attitude towards, homosexuals. By being compared to rapists, perverts and psychopaths, homosexuals were placed in a category that was considered socially unacceptable, open to charges under the law, and subject to institutionalization. Thus, we can conclude that secrecy became crucial for those in the homosexual community. Coming out as gay was not acceptable, so staying in the closet and toying with illusions and perceptions was inevitable for fear of exposure and public ridicule. This idea of illusions and truth is portrayed in *Streetcar* via Blanche and her obsession with a paper lantern and light bulb.

The Closet, the Light, Truth, and Perceptions

In *Streetcar*, Williams offers many symbols and themes related to illusions and the concept of truth and lies. Specifically, Williams uses a light bulb in Blanche DuBois's bedroom to symbolize truth, and a paper lantern that covers the light bulb to symbolize illusions and selective truths. The paper lantern covers the light bulb in the same way Blanche masks the truth with fibs and distorted versions of the truth in order to present herself in a certain way.

Before Blanche covers the light bulb with the lantern, we are given subtle hints through her dialogue about the nature of illusions and false appearances within Blanche's lifestyle and demeanor. In Scene Two, Blanche and Stanley are arguing about the papers from Belle Reve. Blanche says something to Stanley that gives us a clue to her self-perception and values. Blanche says, "I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth" (Williams 41; Scene 2). Here, Blanche openly admits that she lies, and tries to downplay the nature of her lying by calling it a "fib," the minor version of a lie. This is important to the characterization of Blanche because it tells the reader that everything she says might be a lie, and it is up to the audience to discern the truth; however, she tells us if the topic seems serious enough, then we can assume she is telling the truth. This presents some ambiguity and automatically makes the audience feel like they can't trust Blanche because she openly admitted to being dishonest. Most importantly, Blanche's statement that "a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion" introduces an important theme about the concept of illusions and truth that are introduced time and time again throughout

the play. This line tells us that there is a 50-50 chance Blanche is being her true self. Otherwise, she is doing everything she can to impress in a certain way. It is in the next scene that we start to see these qualities come to fruition in Blanche's actions towards the covering of the light bulb in the bedroom.

When Blanche first meets Mitch, she has him cover the bedroom light bulb with a colored paper lantern. While Mitch is placing the lantern, Blanche says something that tells us a great deal about the significance of the light bulb as a symbol for truth, and Blanche's character as a whole. She says, "I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action" (Williams 60; Scene 3). Here, Blanche compares her hatred for the naked light bulb to her hatred towards rudeness, indecency, and profanity. This is an interesting comparison because a naked light bulb emits a light that is harsh and incredibly potent, similar to rudeness and indecency. That is often why we put a shade or cover over a light bulb; the shade softens the light and creates an atmosphere that is more comforting and calm, thus removing any harshness. For Blanche, putting the paper lantern over the light is a way of softening the mood and altering the appearance of the room while also altering *her* appearance and the way others view her. Again, the light bulb symbolizes the naked truth, and the lantern symbolizes Blanche's manipulation of the truth and its impact on the way others perceive her.

After Mitch finds out about Blanche's past in Laurel, he goes to see her, and the exchange that then occurs highlights the importance of the light bulb as a symbol for truth. In the scene, the bedroom is dark, which prompts Mitch to say that he has never seen Blanche in the light. Mitch

suggests turning on the light and Blanche becomes fearful. He removes the paper lantern, and immediately Blanche says in a frenzy that she does not want realism, she wants magic. Then she remarks, "I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be the truth...*Don't turn the light on!*" (Williams 145; Scene 9). Mitch turns the light on and Blanche screams and covers her face. The paper lantern that was originally altering her appearance is now gone. Blanche's very first reaction is to cover her face. This shows how Blanche is constantly trying to hide who she is. She covers her face as a last effort to avoid the truth. Also, *what* Blanche says is just as important as *when* she says it. She admits to telling fibs and bending the truth in her favor moments after Mitch removes the lantern, the symbol of illusions. When Mitch turns the light bulb on *right* after Blanche makes the statement about magic and truth, the truth comes out. More truth comes out later in the scene when Blanche confesses to Mitch that she was fired from her job as a teacher because she had an affair with a student (Williams 146-7; Scene 9). Again, more truth is revealed moments after Mitch turns on the unblocked light, and this becomes a significant revelation. In these moments, Mitch is the one to cover and uncover the light, but later in the play Stanley is the one who finally uncovers it all.

At the very end of the play, there is one more significant moment involving the paper lantern and the light bulb when Blanche is about to be taken away by the doctor. Blanche runs back into the bedroom, where she says she forgot something. Stanley, who is with the Matron in the bedroom, suggests "it's the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern?" (Williams 176; Scene 11). Stanley takes the paper lantern off the light bulb. It

is interesting that Stanley is the one to take off the paper lantern because earlier in the play, Blanche compared her hatred for the naked light bulb to her hatred of profanity and obscenity. Now, we have the most profane and vulgar character in the play exposing the light bulb that Blanche equally abhors. Stanley has consistently questioned Blanche's truth and is ultimately responsible for exposing her lies and manipulations. To the matron, this offering of the lantern may look like an act of kindness, but to Blanche, this is another way of Stanley breaking her down. As viewers, we understand that Stanley has not been kind to Blanche, and this offering is a mockery. Regarding the light and the lantern, the stage direction says that Blanche "cries out as if the lantern was herself" (Williams 176; Scene 11). By removing the lantern, Stanley has finally broken Blanche; she is fully exposed and her true self shines through. She can't hide the fact that Stanley raped her, and her other sexual tragedies are fully exposed. Through her illusions, Blanche tried to hide from others and, ultimately, from herself. Blanche has finally reached her breaking point. There is no more lantern to cover the light bulb, no more lies to cover the truth. Blanche's facade has deteriorated and what's left is mental and emotional vulnerability.

But what if the lightbulb and Blanche represented another layer of meaning? What if the covering and uncovering of the lightbulb is a symbol for the way homosexuals had to hide their true sexuality and navigate life in the closet? We can connect Blanche's experience with this lightbulb and lantern to the way homosexuals had to hide who they truly were in the 1940s for fear of ridicule and arrest. As we can see in the 1950 *Washington Post* article, being a homosexual was considered as awful as being a rapist. Thus, being exposed as a

homosexual would subject one to extreme ridicule and judgment from mainstream society. The lightbulb is symbolic of gay men's true sexuality. Gay men used a metaphorical paper lantern to control their appearances to outward society in an attempt to blend in with a hetero-centric acceptable norm. The exposure of the lightbulb is symbolic of a gay man coming out of the closet. We see through Blanche's interactions and obsession with the lightbulb and the lantern a glimpse into the way gay men had to carefully navigate public perception while in the closet, with the 1950 *Washington Post* article showing us *why* this navigation of the closet was important.

Blanche's exposure is similar to her dead husband Allan's. Allan, a character we never see on stage and who only exists in our imagination through Blanche, is never explicitly stated as being homosexual. It is the way Williams skirts around the word, but clearly implies that Allan was a gay man. When describing Allan to Mitch, Blanche says, "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..." (Williams 114; Scene 6). From this description, we can gather that Blanche had a suspicion about who Allan was because she stated that he wasn't "effeminate looking," meaning, he looked like a stereotypical man and did not have feminine features, yet also recognized his effeminate mannerisms. Her descriptions of Allan's mannerisms, such as him having characteristics not typically associated with the stereotypical male, such as "softness and tenderness", are a direct contrast to his appearance. This means that Allan's appearance wouldn't necessarily give him away as homosexual, but his personality might. That "thing" that was still there is his

homosexuality; there was no way that was going away, and Allan used Blanche as a means to hide. Allan's description shows us that it is not always easy to tell who is homosexual and who isn't using solely physical appearances. Thus, Allan and Blanche represent misguided societal perceptions of what a homosexual would "look" like.

As we can see with the "Pervert Investigation" article from *The Washington Post*, even having the slightest suspicion that someone engages in homosexuality could have major consequences. The author says, "It is undoubtedly true that the homosexual individual is open to blackmail." Homosexuals were not wanted in government positions because blackmail of their homosexuality could lead to exposure of state and government secrets. Knowing this, we can then assume that Allan had a "nervousness" to him because of a constant fear of being exposed. We learn from Blanche that Allan had indeed become liable to exposure. She says, "Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that 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 114; Scene 6). Here, Blanche never explicitly states that she saw Allan and the older man in bed together. This is most likely Williams having to be careful to not explicitly talk about homosexuality in the play because, as we discussed earlier, this might have made it difficult to find a producer, or to have an audience. Blanche only tells us that the men were in the room together, and that the man was someone Allan had known for a long time. Thus, by prefacing this explanation with "Then I found out," Williams leaves the audience to determine that Allan was a

homosexual and that this was not just a one-time encounter.

We can assume that the room Blanche entered must have had a door and we have again the symbolism of coming out of the closet. Allan and his older male friend were behind closed doors, but Blanche opened the door and exposed them. She forced them to come out of the closet, and now both men are susceptible to the kind of blackmail described in the *Washington Post* article. Knowing this, we can understand why Allan took his own life after Blanche said, “I saw! I know! You disgust me” (Williams 115; Scene 6). He was afraid of the ridicule from Blanche and others who could potentially find out about his sexuality.

While telling Mitch about Allan, Blanche brings us back to the concept of light in relation to truth and perceptions with the mention of a searchlight. Specifically, she says, “And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this—kitchen—candle” (Williams 115; Scene 6). The “searchlight” Blanche is referring to is symbolic of the potential exposure and outing of homosexuals during the time, which can be seen in the investigation described in the *Washington Post* article. Blanche is telling us that after Allan killed himself, he was no longer having to hide from the searchlight; he no longer had to fear exposure. And with the mention of the kitchen candle, Blanche shows us again how the light is a symbol for the truth about who we really are. Blanche has just spilled the truth to Mitch, and so she mentions the candle as another means to shine a light on the situation.

In the 1944 *New York Times* article, we are told an important piece of information about

a characteristic of psychopaths that relates to Blanche and her connection to homosexuality. Psychopaths, the article says, “rarely tell the truth” (“Psychopathic Ills”). While this sweeping generalization cannot be applied to all homosexuals, we know this to also be true of Blanche. She admits to lying and telling fibs, and in the end is taken away by a doctor for a psychotic break. What is interesting then, is that the 1944 article tells us that homosexuals and sexual perverts are considered psychopaths. Here we have Blanche, who has committed a perverted sexual act with her student, being taken away for a psychotic break. Blanche is also a liar, often trying to manipulate the way other people view her. She perfectly fits the description of a psychopathic personality set forth by the 1944 article. With this connection, we can see how Blanche and her secret of sexual perversion is also symbolic of the experiences of homosexual men.

Although subtle, this play offers many comments on the treatment of homosexuals and the homosexual experience at the time of its publication. We know from contemporary comments about homosexuals from the 1940s and ‘50s that the mainstream opinions are that to be a homosexual is as horrible as being a rapist or a psychopath. Thus, Williams is careful never to explicitly come out and say Allan is homosexual, or even show his character on stage. Talking about Williams’s own sexuality, Savran says, “It structures and informs all of his texts, yet rarely, especially in his plays, produces the (un)equivocally homosexual character that most critics look for in attempting to identify a homosexual text” (58). Allan is the closest Williams gets to having an “equivocally homosexual character.” This is significant because it shows the way in which Williams uses a heteronormative setting to highlight the

consequences of mainstream attitudes towards homosexuality. Blanche ends up going to a psych ward and Allen commits suicide. Both are not promising or hopeful outcomes. Dorwick tell us that in the 1940s and '50s time, "To be gay is to be unhappy or dead; to be straight is to be both happy and married" (81). We see this presented in *Streetcar* via Allen's death and from Blanche's ultimate demise.

This connection between Blanche's lightbulb, the lantern, and metaphor of closeted homosexuals could also be significant in exposing Stanley's homosexual tendencies. Specifically, Stanley is viewed as an object of lust (when this would typically be the woman), and Blanche is portrayed as sexually active (when this would typically be the man) (Costa 79). Thus, Williams uses a heteronormative system that is subverted by Stanley and Blanche's competition to be the object of eroticism. This erotic focus on both Blanche and Stanley again shows us how these two main characters, while seemingly heteronormative, are meant to provide commentary on the homosexual experience. Focusing more on Stanley's eroticism, Costa says, "Williams places Stanley as an object of gaze and desire, both straight and gay. This erotization of Stanley's male body...has a subversively queer force that undermines the play's heteronormative model" (81). We see this come to fruition during the Poker Night scene where the homosocial and homoerotic tendencies operate most explicitly. In particular, we witness these tendencies when Stanley is left in front of the audience soaking wet in nothing but his boxers. We now move from Blanche and the small lighting detail, to a broader scope that places homosexual themes directly in front of the audience.

Representing the Homosexual Through the Homosocial

Stanley is presented as overtly masculine and heterosexual, often described in animalistic manners, yet his interactions with his poker playing friends in the Poker Night scene have underlying themes of homosexuality. These homosexual themes become prevalent via the use of homosociality, which is categorized as a bond between people of the same sex (Dorwick 80). Specifically, Dorwick notes that, "throughout *Streetcar*... Williams consistently places Stanley and his poker-playing boys in a liminal position in which the homosocial operates" (80). What is liminal about the homosocial relationship between Stanley and his friends is how close they are to the threshold of homosexual behavior. We will see that the men express love and tenderness to Stanley, which is homosocial. These expressions, however, reveal the fine line between homosocial and homosexual. Homosociality has varying means of representation, and the way Stanley and his friends present the homosocial is unique.

A clothing detail for the men in this scene gives us important insight into their characters and informs us of how the homosocial will operate in their group. At the very beginning of the scene, the men are set on stage with Williams providing us with the following details about their on-stage aesthetic and costuming: "The poker players—Stanley, Steve, Mitch and Pablo—wear colored shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green, and they are men at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors" (Williams 46; Scene 3). The men, who are supposed to be the utmost example of physical masculinity, are being compared to, and even wearing,

primary colors, which are something we often associate with small children, or were mostly worn by women. Dorwick tells us that “It is women’s clothing, not men’s sportswear that is wildly colored” (86). This is significant because it shows how the men were taking on something that was relatively more feminine. Knowing this changes our view of them from overtly masculine, to having a touch of femininity. This helps to anticipate a tenderness between the men in a later part of the scene. There also is a comparison between the men and children. The description says that the men are at the height of their “physical” manhood but does not explicitly state the same about their emotions. To be “as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors” does not necessarily mean the poker players are representative of the peak of emotional manhood. If anything, this suggests that their emotional behaviors are driven by sensitivity, fragileness, and delicacy, like that of a small child’s. Like the primary colors, the men rely on one another, and their relationships with one another are special. Knowing this helps us understand the homosocial dynamic of the poker players moments after Stanley hits Stella in the climax of the scene.

After Stanley hits Stella, the stage notes detailing the men’s interactions with Stanley to calm him down borderline homoeroticism. After Mitch’s instruction to contain Stanley, the stage notes describe the following interaction between the men: “Stanley is forced, pinioned by the two men, into the bedroom. He nearly throws them off. Then all at once he subsides and is limp in their grasp. They speak quietly and lovingly to him and he leans his face on one of their shoulders” (Williams 63; Scene 3). The first important detail in this stage note has to do with the location. Stanley is taken into the bedroom by two men, a place where

Stella and Stanley have intimate moments and where it is implied sexual relations occur. When Stanley finally subsides, we are presented with an image of Stanley submitting to his exhaustion and entrusting himself with the two men. Looking on stage, we see this man being supported and comforted by other men as if a child. Stanley “leans his face on one of their shoulders,” showing his complete submission to their help and it is truly painted as a tender moment among men, emphasized by the fact that his friends are speaking “lovingly to him.” The sudden change in Stanley, from forceful and fighting, to “limp” and submissive, highlights Stanley’s comfort in the arms of his friends over the arms of his wife (literally and figuratively). Thus, we see how this homosocial interaction between Stanley and his male friends is borderline homoerotic because of the location in the bedroom, and his submissiveness and tenderness with the men.

After the tender moment with his friends, Stanley and the men find themselves near a shower, thus solidifying Stanley as a figure of eroticism and as dependent on the homosocial, which combined reveal themes related to the homosexual experience. Mitch suggests the men put Stanley in the shower, and Stanley forcefully tells his friends to leave. The poker players leave, and there is a moment of silence. Next, Stanley “comes out of the bathroom dripping water and still in his clinging wet polka dot drawers” (Williams 65; Scene 3). This image helps to solidify Stanley as an erotic figure and, as Costa reminds us, not just for heterosexual women, but also for homosexual men. The “clinging wet” boxers suggest a highly erotic image, which is important also for showing how Williams presents homosexual themes in a heteronormative manner. Moments before we see a half-naked

Stanley, he has succumbed to the love and comfort of his friends in a moment of tenderness. These characteristics of tenderness, love, and affection are more often associated with women and children, or gay men. Stanley's homosocial prioritization complicates his sexual behavior to one that is focused more toward men than it is toward women. Compliment the comforting moment with an erotic display of Stanley at the end of the scene and we have an instance where sexual presentation of the characters becomes ambiguous. Thus, this specific heteronormative character has been subverted, but in a more explicit manner than with Blanche and the light.

Conclusion

A Streetcar Named Desire has a multitude of homosexual themes masked within heterosexual and heteronormative relationships, and this is because of the negative perception and attitudes towards the homosexual community in the 1940s and '50s. Savran sums up Williams's writing tactic perfectly when he says the following:

Throughout [Williams's] work for the theatre of the 1940s and '50s, homosexuality appears (ever obliquely) as a distinctive and elusive style, in every word or no word, as a play of signs and images, of text and subtext, of metaphorical elaboration and substitution, of disclosure and concealment. (59)

We see an example of "metaphorical elaboration" with the lightbulb and paper lantern, which represent the disguising of our true identities. We see an example of "in every word or no word" through the descriptions and realizations about Allan, who we are never told is gay, but we know

is gay. We see an example of "text and subtext" from our discussion of the homosocial being borderline homoerotic.

Williams outlines the struggles and the dilemmas of the homosexual experience through the heterosexual characters, and by a presumably gay character that is never seen and exists entirely in Blanche's and the audience's imagination. Contemporary commentary on homosexuality from the 1940s and '50s perpetuates behaviors of homosexuality as disgusting and as horrible as a rapist, or as sick as psychopath. We know this attitude comes from a time in which there was a sort of witch-hunt being conducted against gay men and lesbians. To be exposed as homosexual during this time meant being subjected to embarrassment, ridicule, and potential for blackmail. We dance around the topic of homosexuality while also hitting points about the lengths homosexuals have resorted to because of fear of ridicule and exposure. Ultimately, being a homosexual individual in the 1940s and '50s was not easy and was, in a sense, life threatening. The 1950s marked a transitional period for the homosexual community, as activists began to fight back against sexual discrimination and harassment, exemplified by the fact that homosexuals were no longer to be viewed as psychopaths. We certainly have come a long way in the acceptance of homosexuality and other gender-related causes, especially with the legalization of same-sex marriage in June of 2015, but, it still took sixty-plus years to get to that point. Looking back, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Tennessee Williams were progressive and radical in their attempts to portray the homosexual experience without lucidity and explicitness. Looking forward, there is still more work to be done, perhaps starting with an increase and normalization of homosexual literature.

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