

Seeing Through *The Glass Menagerie*

The Emerging Specter of Male Beauty

Re-readings

In Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, written and first produced before World War II had ended, the figure of the defiant, nonconformist young male, which would haunt American culture during the late 1940s and through the 1950s, first appears on stage; presciently, Williams creates a character who will dominate much of the literature of the postwar period. The young man who escapes the traditional, approved social and sexual norms and attempts, through his alienation, to thwart the middle-class rules that impose themselves on the individual, remains a romantic emblem of youthful defiance in an oppressive and repressive era. Tom, the narrator of the play and a character in it, and his father, in whose footsteps he follows and whose likeness he bears, anticipate a long line of angry young men that would give meaning to a generation struggling through the age of conformity.

In the midst of this drama, is the image of the handsome, grinning man, the attractive but dangerous icon around whose memory Tom and his family live their lives. The handsome face of the escapee, of the absent yet present father, whose image hangs on the wall in an enlarged photograph, becomes central to the play. Thus, the notion of male beauty is introduced as not merely attractive but dangerous as well.

Tom's gender and sexuality in the context of the culture surrounding him are especially radical in this wartime work. In *The Glass Menagerie*, connections and disconnections between gender and sexuality play out in a complex and sometimes ambiguous way. Although his later works would more overtly portray the interplay between these two separate but related constructs, Williams's first Broadway success quietly but seriously questions

how men and women become who and what they are. If the writing seems more implicit and less controversial in *The Glass Menagerie* than in those later, often sensational plays, it is nonetheless highly revealing here: Our inner desires and our performances of them for the outer world combine in an uneasy alliance, the latter striving to hide and shield the former, the former seeking fulfillment in spite of the latter.

The Glass Menagerie may at first glance seem a strange place to look for evidence of a questioning of gender and sexuality, for the traditions of watching and reading that have surrounded this text have helped shape generations of responses to it that rarely lead to such a question. As Michael Paller puts it in *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth Century Broadway*, the “perception of *The Glass Menagerie* as a pleasant, non-threatening affair stems from the reactions of the newspaper and magazine critics who witnessed the first production. . . .” At the same time, readers of what Paller calls Williams’s “nice play” (33) seem to miss the references that would lead them to an understanding of how the play comments on what at the time were considered not-so-nice subjects. The apparent understatement in both the play’s dialogue and visual elements is, in fact, a careful encoding of issues that Williams wished to explore. These wary inquiries, about sex and the objects and practices of sexuality and about the nature of masculine and feminine behavior, were intended to communicate to audiences—perhaps specifically to important subgroups within those audiences—in a time when any serious interrogation of gender and sexuality was, at least on stage, usually taboo.

The same may be said for readers: Mark Lilly, for example, suggests that “gay readers can see the various meanings . . . in a way unperceived by heterosexuals . . .” (153). In any case, initial reactions to the play and subsequent reception of additional stagings, along with readings of the scripts, helped create the myth that this script was, despite the playwright’s subsequent career, somehow innocent of the rather adult themes that characterized his subsequent oeuvre.

Indeed, according to one late twentieth-century literary critic’s reckoning, “Williams’s first Broadway success, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944),¹ is rare among his works in that the sexuality of his characters is not a significant factor” (Fisher 15). Such a statement conforms to the long-time practice of how this script is interpreted. In reality, however, not only are the sexuality and the gender of the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* a significant factor, but also as in all Williams’s work, they probably constitute *the* significant factor. That they and their importance are not immediately obvious to many make them perhaps even more significant.

Any discussion of the play’s dramatic, as well as theatrical, text is complicated by the fact that there are two “official” versions, both printed

within a year of the play's Broadway premiere, a "reading" text prepared by Williams in 1945, in which he attempted to restore many of the cuts and changes made by the first production, and a "performance" text from the same year, which reflects the changes made to and also the original direction of the premiere production.² Choosing between the two is difficult, for the reading text includes many of the innovative stage techniques Williams had first envisioned in composing the work; the performance text incorporates many of the alterations made by Williams and others before the play first opened in New York. Most who have read the play know it from the reading version; most who have seen the play know it from the performance edition.

Because my intention is to discuss *The Glass Menagerie* not merely as a text assigned to students but rather as the basis of stage performances, I rely on the performance text. This version of the script is very close to the reading version. Where the two coincide, I first note the page number for the performance version, then for the reading version. Where the two diverge, I will indicate any significant inconsistencies parenthetically.

In examining the written text(s) of this play, I attempt to locate (as most critics try to do) certain signs, some linguistic, some visual, some nonverbal, to support my thesis. Nonetheless, there remains one sign that is conspicuous not because of its presence but because of its absence. This forbidden topic, the great unmentionable, is appropriately signaled by an apparent lack of signs, and this lack has been traditionally read to point to something left indeterminate. This absence, still, is telling. Indeed, in an earlier work, Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, a prolonged lack of sound that is dramatized in the form of a whispered conversation between two characters whom the audience cannot hear, serves to name the particular perversity from which two other characters allegedly suffer. Similarly, in *The Glass Menagerie*, "the love that dare not speak its name" echoes through the artifice of euphemism and the profound silence that inevitably and unavoidably name it. For Hellman, such silence was a matter of taste and tact—she was able to "name" the characters' supposed "crime against nature" without offending anyone; for Williams, however, this silence is part of an ongoing defensive strategy in an era when homosexuality was almost universally despised.

For more than half a century, then, the prevailing method of interpreting *The Glass Menagerie* was to preclude that which is unspoken and unseen. "If Williams had wanted us to know what Tom does when he goes out at night, he would have told us or showed us," goes the self-fulfilling explanation. Yet much of the play is clearly devoted to the meaning of absence and to the presence of that which is not there. Even if we would like to stand by Lear's assertion that "nothing will come of nothing," we cannot avoid the fact that "nothing" is certainly capable of signifying "something."

If Tom's rebelliousness is due, at least in large part, to the conflict between his feelings about his sexuality and his attempt to "perform" a "masculine" role, much the same may be said of Williams himself, whose ambivalence and marginalization as a homosexually identified male cast him, certainly in his own eyes, as an outsider. Nonetheless, neither he nor the character is the gay liberator who would emerge in the late 1960s. Williams firmly believed, in contrast to the identity politics that would later gain currency, that one should not be identified by one's sexuality because sexuality was highly private, even idiosyncratic, and peculiar to oneself.

Chez Wingfield

The first act or part (act in the performance version, part in the reading text) of *The Glass Menagerie* follows life inside the apartment of the Wingfield family in Saint Louis. Amanda, a former Southern belle who has been abandoned by her alcoholic husband some years earlier, is striving to take care of her two grown children, Tom, who fancies himself a poet but currently clerks in a shoe warehouse, and Laura, a sickly, desperately shy girl with a limp. As scene follows scene into the intermission—in the performance version, Scenes 1 to 6, in the reading version Scenes 1 to 5—the principal action builds from Amanda's realization that Laura is incapable of earning her own living to Amanda's plan to try to marry her off; Amanda hints to Tom, whose unhappiness at home and work becomes increasingly observable, that once Laura has secured a husband, he may leave.

In the second act or part of the play, Tom brings home to dinner a work acquaintance, who turns out to be the very young man with whom Laura was once infatuated in high school. The meeting ultimately turns disastrous when Jim, Laura's would-be gentleman caller, reveals that he is already engaged.

This summation necessarily excludes the better part of the play, which is dramatized in a somewhat fragmented way and with the device of Tom, at a later age, telling the story. George W. Crandell asserts that "[t]he success of . . . [this narration] depends upon willing subjects, viewers who will permit the fictional character, Tom Wingfield, to define the spectators' point of view" (6). Yet others, such as Brian Richardson (683) and Nancy Anne Cluck (84), remind us that, as Williams himself cautions, "The narrator is an undisguised convention of the play. He takes whatever license with dramatic convention is convenient to his purposes."³ The self-conscious monologue that sets up the opening scene is addressed directly to the audience:

I have tricks in my pocket—I have things up my sleeve—but I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that

has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. (Performance 11; Reading 144, with slight variations)

This comparison of a magician's routine with a dramatic performance, which implies that traditional stage realism is nothing more than a set of illusions that give the impression of reality and that reality itself is highly illusory, is continued later in the play, when Tom speaks to Laura about a stage magician, Malvolio, whom he has just come from seeing; however, coming as they do at the beginning of the play, of course, these lines seem enigmatic, and the succeeding information does little to clarify them: Tom speaks of the play being set in "that quaint period," the Great Depression, "when the large middle class of America was matriculating from a school for the blind" (11; 145, with "huge" instead of "large" and the period described as "the thirties"). Tom makes references to the Spanish Civil War and to American labor conflicts, and declares, "This is the social background of the play" (11; 145). "The play is memory," he announces, and relates the dim lighting, the sentimentality, the lack of realism, and the music, which has just begun to be heard, as stage conventions consistent with memory. He then introduces himself and the three other characters, Amanda, Laura, and Jim, calling the audience's attention to "a fifth character who doesn't appear other than in a photograph hanging on the wall" (11; 145).

The picture, an oversized portrait of Tom's father, "is the face of a very handsome young man in a doughboy's First World War cap" (10; 144), the stage directions tell us. The father, who "left us a long time ago" (11; 145), will reemerge metaphorically in the context of the stage magician. Mr. Wingfield's "vanishing act" will become the one trick that Tom wishes Malvolio would teach him—that is, how to disappear without harming anyone or anything. Such a feat is, in real life, impossible, Tom suggests, and his "very handsome" father⁴ has come to symbolize just how hurtful escape can be to those left behind.

As rambling as the opening monologue may sound, a central trope does emerge as the speech unwinds. The whole idea of hiding tricks in one's pocket and things up one's sleeve refers to the illusion of sudden "magical" manifestation, pretending to conjure what is absent into something that is present. The middle class had "matriculated from a school for the blind," but its sightless members were "having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy" (11; 145); in other words, the experience of trying to read the invisible but decipherable signs of the truth is painful and difficult. The violent visual image of "revolution" in Spain (11; 145, the name *Guernica* is also invoked) and of the less horrific but analogous "shouting and confusion" in Midwestern cities, amplifies the

“fire” of the “Braille alphabet.” The summation of characters, both those who are present and the one who is absent, and the ironic description of the vanishing father—“He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distance” (11; 145, distances)—set the tone for the father’s non-presence: His last communication was “a picture-postcard from the Pacific Coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words: ‘Hello—Good-bye!’ and no address” (11; 145, adds “from *Mazatlan*, on the Pacific Coast . . .”). Thus, from the play’s first moments, the spectators are asked to consider what they can and cannot see, to question the reality of what is and is not present, and to separate themselves from the conventions of stage realism that attempt to reconstruct an empirical reality that is less true than the one depicted by this play.

In the original production, the photograph of the father was of Eddie Dowling, the actor who played Tom. This use of Dowling is evident from stills from the original production and from the promptbook, which specifies,

THIS IS VERY
IMPORTANT
| The actor who |
plays Tom, poses for
the father’s photograph,
with his widest grin.
The photo should be
very large, for
when it lights up,
the play gets some
of it’s [sic] laughs

(Promptbook, *The Glass Menagerie*, 1–2)⁵

From the beginning, then, the audience is asked to see Tom as his “handsome” father and vice versa. This coincidence of imagery serves as a sign during the play to suggest that Tom and the absent man are one and the same, and that with their first glimpse of Tom on stage, “dressed as a merchant sailor” (10; 144), he has already become a man who has disappeared. So Tom is twice present on stage and, eventually, twice absent.

In the short scene that follows the monologue, Amanda harangues Tom over dinner, suggesting that his eating habits verge on the bestial: “Animals have secretions in their stomachs which enable them to digest their food without mastication, but human beings must chew their food before they swallow it down” (12; 146). References to animals abound throughout the play—the very title *The Glass Menagerie* assures that such imagery is

germane—but Amanda’s differentiation of human from animal behavior is especially meaningful. Later in this act (Scene 4 in Performance; Scene 5 in Reading), she proclaims, “Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals! . . . Only animals have to satisfy instincts!” (30; 174) In the role of mother, Amanda repeatedly instructs her now-grown children on how to sublimate their “animalistic” feelings so they can construct what she would call “human” personas. In the first segment of the play, she attempts to correct, along with Tom’s eating habits, his posture (22; cut), his reading material (23; 161), and his tendency to spend his nights elsewhere (23–24; 163–164).

But the real object of Amanda’s pedagogy becomes Laura rather than Tom. Even in this early scene, before she finds out that Laura has dropped out of the business school in which Amanda had enrolled her, she instructs her daughter on how to “be the lady” (13; 147) and to await her “gentlemen callers” (13–15; 147–150). In reminiscing about her own beaux from decades past, Amanda reveals her Southern, middle-class background, describing what a young woman was expected to be: “It wasn’t enough for a girl to be possessed of a pretty face and a graceful figure—although I wasn’t slighted in either respect. She also needed to have a nimble wit and a tongue to meet all occasions” (13; 148). This gender construct, which Amanda, despite the decades that have followed her career as a belle, still plays out, is precisely modeled by the mother for the daughter through role-playing; in the next scene, the pressure to fit Laura into this gender role becomes more intense and less play-like. In fact, as Amanda rattles on about her gentlemen callers, contrasting them at one point with the man whom she actually married (14, “looks at picture on L. wall”; 149), Laura confides to Tom, “Mother’s afraid that I’m going to be an old maid”⁶ (15; 150). She is evidently all too aware of the gender construct that represents the female who is not sufficiently attractive to males. This gender role, of the “old maid,” the unmarriageable female, is the opposite of the one Amanda wishes Laura to play.

It may be worth pausing for a moment over the term *role*, especially in light of its above coupling with *gender*. In recent years, gender has been discussed as performance, primarily but not exclusively by Judith Butler, who asks us to “[c]onsider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (177). Given just the short first scene, we may notice just how much *The Glass Menagerie* is already about role-playing and performance. Tom performs as the narrator and a character; the other characters are described in his monologue according to their roles (“my mother, Amanda, my sister, Laura, and a gentleman caller” 11; 145). When Tom reacts to Amanda’s images of animals salivating by leaving the table, Amanda responds by calling him a prima

donna: "Temperament like a Metropolitan star!" (12; 147) During the scene, Amanda slips in and out of playing the mother; when she asks Laura to act the part of "the lady," she proposes that she will "be the colored boy" (13; 147, "darky"). She also recites a long list of men she could have married, men who were attractive and successful and who left their widows well provided for. "But what did I do?" she asks with a stare at the photograph on the wall, "I went out of my way and picked your father!" (14; 148, with variation) This list, along with Amanda's reminiscences, has, incidentally, clearly been recited before; "She loves to tell it" (13; 147), Laura notes to Tom. In the end, Amanda insists that Laura, who reluctantly remains seated as the "lady," continue playing the attractive, marriageable woman: "Stay fresh and pretty! It's almost time for our gentlemen callers to start arriving. How many do you suppose we're going to entertain this afternoon?" Laura is being tutored on how to reconstruct her gender. It is after this that Laura makes her sad admission, "Mother's afraid that I'm going to be an old maid," as the lights fade into the next scene, in which Amanda plunges into her performance of the injured mother. In the medium of theater, which relies on actors performing roles, Williams offers the audience actors playing characters who seem to be performing their lives.

That Amanda's response to Laura's disappearance from typing classes is nothing less than a role to be performed becomes obvious when Amanda enters, pronounces her repeated condemnation, "Deception, deception, deception!" (16; 151, "Deception? Deception?"), and then allows Laura to feign innocence so that Amanda can play out to full effect her discovery of the deception. Laura recognizes her mother's role distinctly: "you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the Museum!" (18; 155, "museum"). Once identified as the wounded Madonna, Amanda invokes the frightening, cautionary sign of the old maid:

I know so well what happens to unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position in life. (. . .) I've seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters living on some brother's wife or a sister's husband—tucked away in some mouse-trap of a room—encouraged by one in-law to go visit the next in-law—little birdlike women—without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their lives! (18; 156, "living on the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife . . .")

The implication, of course, through Amanda's use of imagery is that the "old maid" is less than a person, a small, inhuman creature who is to be pitied and loathed. Just as Amanda, the abandoned wife, is the pitiful counterpart to the well-provided-for widow, the old maid is set into a binary pairing

with the happy wife. Having produced this dreaded symbol, Amanda ends her monologue with a question pertaining not to Laura's gender but to her sexuality, "[H]aven't you ever liked some boy?" (18; 156)

Once Laura has confirmed that she has "liked" a boy, Amanda proceeds with added vehemence to align her daughter's gender with her sexuality. The problem, as Amanda perceives it, is that Laura's attraction to males must be more clearly incorporated into her everyday gender performance, which in turn must result in males being attracted to her. When Laura protests that she is unable to play this role—"I'm—crippled!" (19; 157) she objects—Amanda outlaws the culprit word and tries to reduce the handicap to "a slight defect" (19; 157, "a little defect"). Yet like the marriage shoe offered to Cinderella's stepsister, the construct of attractive, marriageable woman simply does not fit Laura.

Scene 2 is the only scene in the first part of the play from which Tom is entirely absent. The audience may wonder how it can be included in the play, if the play is Tom's memory, or maybe they may conclude that this scene has been formed by what Tom has been told; perhaps, however, they have been drawn into the narrative and have stopped questioning how the narrator can and does relate to the narrative by this point. In any case, Tom, at least as Tom, never appears during the scene nor is he even mentioned. Yet Tom's double, the portrait of the missing father, is referred to twice and watches over the scene. When Laura talks about the boy in high school whom she liked, she shows Amanda his photos in the yearbook. "See his grin?" (19; 157) she asks. In the performance version, Amanda actually looks at her husband's photo on the wall and mutters, "So he had a grin too!" (19), but the mere mention of "grin" links the two pictures and the two (or rather three) male subjects. At the end of the scene, while encouraging Laura to "cultivate" something else, in order to make up for her "defect," Amanda remarks that the only thing Laura's father possessed a lot of was "charm" (20; 58); the photo on the wall is once again made prominent.⁷ The implication, then, is that even as Amanda tries to adjust Laura's gender role, the role of the male remains fixed, deceptive, attractive but dangerous, and sardonically grinning.

Just as the image of the old maid presided over the previous scene, Scene 3 begins with the symbol of the gentleman caller. Tom tells the audience that

the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment. An evening at home rarely passed without some allusion to this image, this specter, this hope. . . . [H]is presence hung in my mother's preoccupied look and my sister's frightened, apologetic manner. (20, 159)

Yet, although the scene begins with this image, the monologue takes a sharp turn. Rather than the image of the ideal male, Tom goes on to describe the ideal (marriageable) female, whose image haunts the pages of the women's magazine Amanda is trying to sell over the phone. Ladies in the stories in *The Homemaker's Companion*, as Tom describes them, have "cuplike breasts, slim tapering waists, rich, creamy thighs, eyes like wood-smoke in autumn, fingers that soothe and caress like soft, soft strains of music. Bodies as powerful as Etruscan sculpture" (20; 159). Tom's sarcastic description of ladies' fiction is especially pointed because he, after the monologue, is discovered trying to write (21–22; 162). A fight ensues in which Amanda confronts Tom about where he goes at night. Her skepticism about his explanation that he goes to the movies becomes insistent: "I think that you're doing things you're ashamed of. . . . Nobody goes to the movies night after night. . . . People don't go to the movies at midnight, and movies don't let out at two A.M." (23; 163). As the fight drags on, Tom offers a false confession, a revelation cobbled from scraps of Depression-era popular culture that is so melodramatic that it is humorous:

I'm not going to the movies. I'm going to opium dens. Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals' hangouts, Mother. I've joined the Hogan gang. I'm a hired assassin, I carry a tommy-gun in a violin case! I run a string of cat houses in the valley! They call me killer, killer Wingfield; I'm really leading a double life. By day I'm a simple, honest warehouse worker, but at night I'm a dynamic czar of the underworld. Why I go to gambling casinos and spin away a fortune on the roulette table! I wear a patch over my eye and a false moustache, sometimes I wear green whiskers. On those occasions they call me—El Diablo! Oh, I could tell you things to make you sleepless! (24; 164)

Scene 3, then, which opens with the images of the gentleman caller and the marriageable woman, ends with the construct of the gangster, a mocking representation of the 1930s criminal protagonist celebrated in *Scarface*, *Public Enemy*, and *Little Caesar*.

Tom's comedic admission forms a counter image to the polite constructs of successful and happy male and female heterosexuals that began the scene. Despite the obvious fiction, he manages to disclose his status as an outlaw, someone beyond the paradigmatic sexual and gender roles by which society, as Amanda defines it, and family life have been secured. He has made fun of the desperately awaited gentleman caller and the gentlewomen built like "Etruscan statues." If not the flamboyant crimes Tom describes,

what acts that he is “ashamed of” has he committed? What would someone—in this case, a single, young man—possibly do at a movie theatre all night? And when the theatre has closed, where would he go—and with whom—to do what? By this point, the “indeterminate” nature of Tom’s life away from the family begins to fade. There are clues even in this speech that at first glance appears to be a subterfuge.⁸ Tom divulges that he has been living “a double life.”

Williams, of course, is drawing on a strategy of which homosexual men then and now were and are acutely aware. In situations where heterosexual men reveal their sexuality through references to women, it is safer for a homosexual man not to say something about his own sexuality than to admit his inclinations. One does not have to lie if one says nothing, and yet the refusal to identify oneself, which on one level feels truthful, ultimately serves as an identifier for those with an awareness that in American culture the overwhelming assumption is always that all sexuality is heterosexual and that a refusal to acknowledge that is tantamount to an admission of deviant sexuality. Tom’s initial irony about the idealizations of heterosexual men and women is further compounded by his ironic “confession” to his mother. In Tom’s supposed “secret life,” there are no women, apart from those he claims to pimp for in the “cathouse,”⁹ and there is no glamour girl, no gun moll, no Bonnie to his Clyde. Once again, the fictive alibi, despite its attempt to eradicate Amanda’s curiosity through ridiculous hyperbole, is in itself an admission.

Lilly might add that Tom’s use of paradox (evident in his description of the ideal matron) and camp humor (palpable in his 1930s-B-movie of his secret gangster life) “reject mainstream culture, . . . in favor of a private world, an imaginative space in which gay experience can be albeit indirectly, articulated” (153). One might see in Tom’s wry commentary the kind of irony deployed by gay people to point out the contradictions in the world that condemns them. The “private world,” which Tom keeps hidden from his mother (and the one that Laura ultimately offers to expose to Amanda and Jim), Lilly sees as a space of resistance to the world at large: “[I]t is precisely Williams’s purpose to show that one of the worst tyrannies is to allow oneself to accept the account of the world given by society, or a group within it, as uniquely ‘real’” (154).¹⁰

In the next scene, Tom returns to the apartment. After his angry row with Amanda, which concluded the previous scene, he now comes home very early in the morning, obviously drunk. It is here, on encountering Laura, that he talks about Malvolio’s stage show, pulling one of the magician’s tricks, a rainbow-colored scarf, from his pocket. He describes how Malvolio managed to change water into wine, then beer, and finally whiskey but is most impressed by another stage trick:

But the wonderfulest trick of all was the coffin trick. We nailed him into a coffin and he got out of the coffin without removing one nail. (. . .) There is a trick that would come in handy for me—get me out of this 2 by 4 situation! . . . You know it don't take much intelligence to get you out of a nailed-up coffin, Laura. But who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail? [*As if in answer, the father's grinning photograph lights up. . .*] (26; 167–168, slight variations)

With this in mind, Tom goes to bed but is soon awakened by his mother's instruction to Laura to rouse him.¹¹ Amanda quickly sends Laura out to buy butter, and now, alone with Amanda and her motherly agony, Tom apologizes for his insults. In an attempt to play the “man” of the family, Tom is patient with his mother, tries not to take issue with her. In response to her request that he not become a drinker, he answers wryly, “I won't ever become a drunkard, Mother” (28; 171, “[*turns to her grinning*] I will never be a drunkard, Mother.”) This coy ploy, of course, manages to remain true if only by its phrasing, for as Tom has demonstrated, he is already, like his grinning father, a seasoned alcoholic.

When Amanda tries once more to pry into his nighttime activities, Tom offers her an answer that, in recent terms, sounds like the US Armed Services' policy of “Don't-ask, don't-tell.” Pressed by his mother's demands, he replies,

You say there's so much in your heart that you can't describe to me. That's true of me too. There's so much in my heart that I can't describe to you! So let's respect each other's—(30; 173)

The word cut off is probably “privacy,” but its neutral tone, even unspoken, cannot hide that what Tom does is unspeakable—or rather, is *the* unspeakable.¹² As for his manhood, Tom unwittingly offers his definition of masculinity to explain why his life at work is so unsatisfying: “Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse” (30; 174). This occasions Amanda's retort quoted earlier: “Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals! . . . Only animals have to satisfy instincts!” Tom, the reader of “that insane Mr. Lawrence” (22; 161),¹³ who seems to be in search of an authentic self that he cannot describe to his mother, is thus confronted by the argument that people (as opposed to other creatures) must reconcile their desires with their social obligations. Amanda's unstated condemnation of her husband is that he succumbed to his desires; his behavior, which has come to define masculinity for her, and which she reluctantly detects in her

son, is not consonant with a middleclass heterosexual woman's image of a man; rather, the departed Mr. Wingfield's gender seems in part based on a male's image of men, often referred to as "a man's man," that ultra-masculine and quintessentially homosocial construct of manhood. His grinning portrait becomes a sign of his masculinity, for which marriage (to a woman) is death. Tom has already posed the question of how a male can escape the coffin of family life. Man may be "a lover, a hunter, a fighter . . ." declares Tom, but of whom? For all three, the answer, as the syntactical structure insinuates, is the same.

By the end of this scene, Tom, under duress, has agreed to bring home a man "for sister," a surrogate to replace himself in the family. In the next scene, which closes Act I, the prospect of the gentleman caller beams a ray of hope throughout the household. Once Tom has revealed that one of his work acquaintances will be coming to the apartment for dinner the following evening, Amanda erupts with anticipation. Nonetheless, here as in the play's opening, the dramatized action is preceded by an opening monologue that again poses Tom, at a later age, against the events of years past.¹⁴ Tom begins his speech to the audience by describing the Paradise Dance Hall just across the alley:

Sometimes they'd turn out all the lights except for a large glass sphere that hung from the ceiling. It would turn slowly about and filter the dusk with delicate rainbow colors. . . . The young couples would come outside, to the relative privacy of the alley. You could see them kissing behind ashpits and telephone poles. This was the compensation for lives that passed like mine, without change and adventure. (33; 179, with slight differences)

Just as in Williams's later work, in which a streetcar named Desire takes one to the Elysian Fields, the image of a dancehall named Paradise, from which lusty couples emerge to make love in the alley, is charged with erotic significance. In a way, the implied scene of Tom at the window looking down on these couples recalls the first story in Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, in which the male narrator notes with regret that the whistles of men outside are for their girlfriends, rather than for him.¹⁵ Here, even though, Tom hints that the intoxication that these lovers share excludes him; the heterosexual "compensation" they find eludes Tom, although his working life is passed as theirs.

As in the play's opening monologue, the subject shifts from the personal to global events, suggesting that the international "[c]hanges and adventure" lacking from these young people's lives "were imminent this year" (33; 179, "Adventure and change . . ."). References to Berchtesgarden and

Chamberlain's umbrella, and to Guernica, point the World War II audience back to when "Peace in our time" and the triumph of the Spanish Republic glimmered hopefully. Yet the contrast between Europe and America is repeated:

In Spain there was Guernica! Here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dancehalls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows . . . (33; 179 with slight variation)

The image of the rainbow, invoked in an earlier scene to describe Malvolio's magic scarf, re-emerges twice in this monologue, first to describe the pretty colored light swirling into the dim apartment from the dancehall and then to characterize the attractive profusion of popular culture, in which "movies" is followed significantly by "sex." The "brief, deceptive" diversions from the mundane are a substitute for the "changes and adventure" of which Tom has spoken. The comforts of ordinary life, he implies, are short-lived and illusory.

The specter of the gentleman caller, which is coincident with the specter of the handsome, departed father, is of course yet another rainbow. This association is made plain when Amanda quizzes Tom about the young man whom he is bringing to dinner:

AMANDA: Irish on both sides and he doesn't drink?

TOM: Shall I call him up and ask him? . . .

.

AMANDA: When I was a girl in Blue Mountain, if it was (. . .) suspected that a young man was drinking and any girl was receiving his attentions—she'd go to the minister of his church and ask about his character. . . . [T]hat's how young girls in Blue Mountain were saved from making tragic mistakes. (*Picture dims in and out.*)

TOM: How come you made such a tragic one?

AMANDA: Oh, I don't know how he did it but that face fooled everybody. All he had to do was grin and the world was his. . . . (37–38; 185–186 with much variation)

With the portrait of the grinning Mr. Wingfield shining during this conversation and his role as the runaway beau established, Amanda places Tom, if only temporarily, into the role of *pater familias*:

AMANDA: I hope Mr. O'Connor is not too good looking.

TOM: As a matter of fact he isn't. His face is covered with freckles and he has a very large nose.

AMANDA: He's not right-down homely?

TOM: No, I wouldn't say right-down—homely—medium homely, I'd say.

AMANDA: Well, if a girl had any sense she'd look for character in a man anyhow.

TOM: That's what I've always said, Mother.

AMANDA: You've always said it—you've always said it! How could you've always said it when you never even thought about it?

TOM: Aw, don't be so suspicious of me. (38; 186, with much variation)

Perhaps enchanted by his own rainbow—the fantasy of escape without consequences—Tom for once seems to play along. In this brief, carefree moment, he actually admits to having feelings about another man's looks and lets slip a remark about how someone looking for a male partner should judge men, implying that he has considered this question. Amanda even picks up on his comment, but as before she seems unwilling to comprehend its significance, turning back instead to a seemingly less threatening matter, the gentleman caller. The moon rises in the sky, and Amanda calls in Laura, who is still unaware of the expected visitor, to make a wish on it.

Enter the Man

Between the close of Act or Part I and the opening of Act or Part II, Laura has learned that a man is coming to dinner. She is apprehensive about the

visitor even before she learns his name. Amanda continues to prep the nervous girl, dressing her up and placing padding in her bodice, “Gay Deceivers” (42; 192). Amanda, as we have heard earlier, used to work at a department store, “demonstrating” brassieres (16; 134, indicates the store was “Famous-Barr”). Her efforts to change the girl from an old-maid-in-the-making into an attractive young woman, prompt Laura to remark, “You make it seem like we are setting a trap.” Interestingly, Amanda agrees: “All pretty girls are traps and men expect them to be traps” (43; 192, with variation). For a moment, Amanda has pulled back the curtain on romantic heterosexual love and revealed its socioeconomic framework; indeed, her views on the subject seem to be strikingly similar to those of Tom, who sees normative married family life as a coffin from which he must escape. Yet, although Tom seems to rebel against the institution, Amanda wholeheartedly embraces the “trap” of love as the way things must be. That her beliefs are outmoded is perhaps made all the more emphatic when she appears, a few moments later, in a gown from three decades earlier.

The frock is not only the dress that she wore to important balls but also the dress in which she met her future husband. Now, ready to greet the gentleman caller who will save the family, she dons it once more and recollects her youthful romances: Sickened, she says, by a slight case of malaria, young Amanda feverishly plunged into a whirlwind of parties and was successfully pursued by the man she would marry. “Malaria fever, jonquils, and your father” (44; 194, “and then—this—boy” instead of “and your father”), she sighs, virtually equating her physical attraction toward her fiancé with her dizzying performance of the diseased debutante.

Shortly after, when Amanda reveals that the male caller is named Jim O’Connor, Laura too becomes unnerved and feverish, explaining that he was the one whose photo she showed her mother in the yearbook. To Amanda’s question, “[W]ere you in love with that boy?” Laura can reply only, “I don’t know, Mother” (45; 195). That Laura did “love” him, whatever that may have meant to Laura then and now, however, is insinuated by her tremendous panic.

Yet even before this scene has begun, Tom has delivered an introductory monologue in which he (in a later time) tells the audience about Jim, who was always a center of attention that seemed “to move in a continual spotlight.” Tom describes him as a source of energy, “forever running or bounding,” “always just at the point of defeating the laws of gravity.” Yet after being a sports star, “captain of the debating team, president of the senior class and the glee club,” and leading man in the operettas in high school, Jim has gone on to the same warehouse where Tom has ended up, in almost the same lowly capacity. Although Tom admits to the audience that Jim was the only one at work with whom he was on “friendly terms,” he explains their connection rather cynically: “I was valuable to Jim as

someone who could remember his former glory . . .” (40; 190, some variation). Still, if Jim needed him, Jim also was of use to Tom. Jim’s “friendship,” Tom adds, affected Tom’s relationship with the other males at work, who viewed Tom with hostility. “And so after a time they began to smile at me too,” Tom tells us, “as people smile at some oddly fashioned dog that trots across their path at some distance” (41–42; 190–191, with some variation). Jim’s masculine qualities—his sense of leadership and camaraderie—help “normalize” Tom’s queer behavior, such as his hiding out in a bathroom stall to write poetry (41, 190). Nonetheless, when Tom characterizes himself as an “oddly fashioned dog,” he is stating that at least in his own eyes he does not fit in with other males, that he is something “other.”

In contrast to Tom, who deliberately struggles to prevent his gender from revealing his sexuality, Jim O’Connor’s gender more than announces his. From his entrance, Jim is confident, even brash, with moderately hearty jokes to the very withdrawn Laura (46, 198). While waiting for Amanda to enter, Tom offers him a section of the newspaper:

TOM: Comics?

JIM: Sports! Ole Dizzy Dean is on his bad behavior

TOM (starts to door R. Goes out.): Really? (45; 198–199, with variations; in Reading text, Tom’s last line begins with stage direction: [*uninterested.*])

Tom’s lack of attention and sudden departure (to smoke a cigarette) distinguish him from Jim and his typically “masculine” American response. As the play progresses, Jim’s normative masculinity, his ease with playing the young man to Amanda’s belle, his ability to make social conversation, his flirtation with Laura, and his subsequent confession that he is already engaged, all outwardly appear to reflect, for better and for worse, a heterosexual masculine identity.

When Jim follows Tom onto the fire escape to smoke, Tom remains skeptical as Jim tries to “sell” him “a bill of goods” (47; 199), talking up a public speaking class he is now taking. Jim cautions that Tom should open his eyes to his failing career in the warehouse:

JIM: You’re going to be out of a job soon if you don’t wake up.

TOM: I’m waking up—

JIM: Yeah, but you show no signs.

TOM: The signs are interior. (47; 200)

Interestingly, Jim sees no evidence from Tom's external behavior to convince him that Tom is at all serious. Even as Tom offers his "interior" signs, attempting to tell Jim about his theory about life and adventure, Jim cannot understand him. As in the monologue that opened the last scene in Act or Part I, he refers to the "movies":

People go the *movies* instead of *moving*. Hollywood characters have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them having it. Yes, until there's a war. That's when adventure becomes available to the masses! . . . I'm tired of the movies and I'm about to move! (48; 201, with variation)

Jim remains incredulous, so Tom reveals even more: He has spent the money that should have gone toward the electric bill on Merchant Seamen's Union membership. Yet even the card verifying this cannot convince Jim that Tom will actually run away. "You're just talking, you drip. How does your mother feel about it?" (48; 202, with variation). In Jim's construct of how a male lives his life, such an act is not possible. A man must take care of his women; a man must be superior to women and "others" because he is not dependent, as they are, but is the one on whom they must depend. To Jim, it is unthinkable that Tom could leave. Tom explains his forthcoming escape, which will inevitably hurt his mother and sister, as genetic: "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard. See how he grins? And he's been absent going on sixteen years" (48; 202, with specific reference to the photo).

In short, Jim seems everything that Tom is not, all that Tom's father should have been but wasn't. Or at least this is how he presents himself. In Amanda's system of binaries, where the wealthy widow opposes the discarded wife and the happy wife is the positive counterpart to the old maid, Mr. Wingfield, "the bastard," the alcoholic, selfish runaway, is the false gentleman caller, the counterfeit to be avoided at all costs; "Old maids are better off than wives of drunkards!" Amanda asserts at the end of Part I (only in Reading text, 184). Jim, who appears to hold out the hope of a worthwhile, secure future, when confronted by Amanda's performance of Southern charm, performs as if he were a genuine gentleman caller.

However, there is a problem that Laura has already anticipated: Jim may not be single. Earlier, while showing Amanda the yearbook picture, Laura has mentioned that she read a notice in the newspaper that Jim and Emily Meisenbach, the best-dressed girl at school, were engaged (19; 157), something that Amanda has forgotten entirely. Laura's suspicions, which

inevitably prove true, make her so ill that she has to be excused from sitting at the dinner table.

At the start of the final scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda, Tom, and Jim are finishing dinner and Laura is resting in the next room on the sofa. The electricity, the bill for which Tom has failed to pay, gives out just as the meal is over, but Amanda, buoyed by the social interaction and the promise of a son-in-law, makes light of the sudden plunge into darkness and has Jim light some candles. Having set the scene for romance, the overdressed matron, who seems to be ripped from the pages of *Gone With the Wind*, takes her son into the kitchen to wash the dishes, withdrawing so that romance may take its course. And so Jim enters the living room, candle in one hand, a glass of dandelion wine in the other. What follows is a brief encounter that, according to the stage directions, is an unimportant incident for him but for Laura is “the climax of her secret life” (54; 210). It is also a scene without the narrator on stage. In its own way, what is played out is nothing less than a seduction and a betrayal, albeit a rather chaste one. Nonetheless, although sex at least seems to be absent, the scene between the two characters is extremely intimate.

Jim’s foray into Laura’s space is a quick campaign, complete with hearty jokes. He hands her the glass of wine—“Well, drink it—but don’t get drunk!” (54; 211)—and places the candelabra on the floor. He settles himself on the floor as well, asking Laura’s permission to do so only after he has sat down, and then, after requesting a pillow, he has her sit on the floor too, goading her next into moving closer to him (54; 211–212). As he has already indicated to Tom, this is what Jim believes he has learned in his public speaking class, “the ability to square up to somebody and hold your own on any social level!” (47; 199, with variations). Jim literally as well as figuratively brings Laura down to his own level. Once she is there, as he takes out a stick of chewing gum, he muses over the fortune made by the man who invented it and who built the Wrigley Building in Chicago, where two years before Jim saw The Century of Progress exposition. Impressed by the Hall of Science exhibit, Jim assures Laura about “what the future will be like in America,” which will be “more wonderful than the present time is” (55; 212, “even more wonderful”). The irony is that the “present time,” which is the Great Depression, is not wonderful at all, even according to Jim.

Yet Jim’s America remains the land of opportunity or perhaps opportunism. His peculiar views of democratic capitalism lead him to make a number of contradictory statements; in fact, his “ability to square up to somebody and hold your own on any social level,” came as part of the answer to questions that he had just posed: “what’s the difference between you and me and the guys in the office down front? Brains? No! Ability? No!” The

performance of “Social poise!” as Jim calls it, is the key to success in rising above the masses of people (47; 199). Yet people, he explains to Laura,

are not so dreadful when you know them. . . . And everybody has problems, not just you but practically everybody. . . . You think of yourself as being the only one who is disappointed. But just look around you and what do you see—a lot of people just as disappointed as you are. (57; 216, with variations)

So, Jim seems to be suggesting that, whatever her problems, Laura is pretty much like everyone else. People are not really “so dreadful”; they are just pretty much the same. Yet Jim seems to be saying something quite different a little while later, when he describes

[a] world full of common people! All of ‘em born and all of ‘em going to die! Now which of them has one-tenth of your strong points! Or mine! Or anybody else’s for that matter? (60; 221, with variations)

So we are all much the same and all very different? Each one of us is simultaneously common *and* special? His pronouncements quickly turn into sheer Babbittry:

. . . I believe in the future of television! . . . Oh, I’ve already made the right connections. All that remains now is for the industry itself to get under way—full steam! You know, *knowledge*—ZZZZppp! *Money*—Zzzzzppp! *POWER!* Wham! That’s the cycle democracy is built on! (Pause.) I guess you think I think a lot of myself! (60; 222)

Suddenly America is all about being in the right place at the right time. What Jim has to say is in actuality less about America and more about himself. Even when he talks to Laura about Laura—to whom he only intermittently listens—he is talking about himself and justifying his own present and future in an egocentric rhetoric that is obviously inconsistent twaddle.

Jim’s question, then, “I guess you think I think a lot of myself!” is something of an understatement. His performance of interest in Laura masks, at least for her, that he is playing a role. She is unaware that his amateur analysis of her problems—“Inferiority complex!” (59; 221)—is merely a demonstration for his own benefit of his social poise, his ability to talk to anyone from any “level” about anything. The exercise also allows him to consider how good he is at knowing how people think. Laura, however,