

“Demonic creatures”: Reevaluating Tennessee Williams’s “Desperate” Women

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ABSTRACT

Although Amanda Wingfield, Blanche DuBois, and Maggie Pollitt are examined frequently in scholarship on Tennessee Williams’s plays, many critics assume that the three women’s Southern femininity translates to fragility and that their nostalgia for the Confederate past constitutes delusion. Distancing our perceptions of the three women from the common connotations of Southern femininity--frailty, selflessness, and domesticity—and leaning into the more disagreeable facets of Lost Cause nostalgia reveals the classist and racist ideologies that motivate their quests for upstanding Southern aristocratic lives. Critics have been slow to read Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie as rational socioeconomic actors, but this reading emphasizes the three women’s socioeconomic desires, thus de-romanticizing Southern femininity and expounding on its problematic ideological positionalities. Blanche DuBois, Amanda Wingfield, and Maggie Pollitt have been evaluated in terms of their “monstrous” femininity. However, they become less monstrous and more familiar when we recognize the clear race- and class-based motivations for clinging so fiercely to their Southern identities. When we assume that their Southernness is defined by their literal proximity from and ideological relationships to ethnic and racial Others and people from lower socioeconomic classes, their motivations lose some of their critical abstraction and gain a new level of complexity.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams is known for crafting complex female protagonists in his dramas. Although Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche DuBois of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Maggie Pollitt of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are examined frequently in scholarship on Tennessee Williams’s plays, many critics assume that the three women’s Southern femininity stems from inherent fragility and that their nostalgia for the Confederate past constitutes mental instability. Reorienting our perceptions of these women away from the common connotations of Southern femininity--frailty, selflessness, and domesticity—and leaning into the more disagreeable facets of Lost Cause nostalgia reveals the classist and racist ideologies that motivate the three women’s quests for upstanding Southern aristocratic lives. Critics have been slow to read Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie as rational socioeconomic actors, but this reading emphasizes the three women’s socioeconomic desires, thus de-romanticizing Southern femininity and expounding on its problematic ideological positionalities—namely, extreme racism and classism. Although Blanche DuBois, Amanda Wingfield, and Maggie Pollitt have been evaluated previously in terms of their “monstrous” femininity, they become less monstrous and more familiar when we recognize the clear race- and class-based motivations for clinging so fiercely to their Southern identities. When we assume that their Southernness is defined by their literal proximity from and ideological relationships to ethnic and racial Others and people from lower socioeconomic classes, their motivations become more tangible, more complex—and more menacing.

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Finally, but most importantly, thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere. He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together.

Tennessee Williams's plays are often categorized as Southern grotesque, a term applied to works and characters who provide a “merging of the comic and tragic through physical or spiritual deformity.”<sup>1</sup> By this definition, none of Williams’s character creations have been perceived as more grotesque than his women. Scholars have offered relatively uniform assessments of Williams’s female characters. In his widely reprinted article “The Hungry Women of Tennessee Williams’s Fiction,” Michael Schiavi writes that Williams’s female characters are deprived and “wild.”<sup>2</sup> In his review of the 2003 Broadway revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams biographer John Lahr writes that Maggie Pollitt’s “appetite for vindictive triumph has turned her...into a monster.”<sup>3</sup> Such unfavorable assessments have been common in critical receptions across time. In her 1970 article “Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women,” Louise Blackwell asserts that Williams’s women are “deluded” and “maladjusted.”<sup>4</sup> The tradition of calling *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*’s Big Mama and Maggie “witches”<sup>5</sup> began as early as 1970 in Blackwell’s “Predicament of Women” and is sustained in Joan Wylie Hall’s 1995 article on maternity in Williams’s plays.

Williams’s own words reinforce some of these views. He called Blanche DuBois, *A Streetcar Named Desire*’s complicated, elusive protagonist, “a demonic creature; the size of her feeling was too great for her to contain.”<sup>6</sup> In the director’s note for Act I, Scene I of *Streetcar*, he

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Mayberry, “A Study of Illusion and the Grotesque in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 111 (1999), 359.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Schiavi, “The Hungry Women of Tennessee Williams,” in *Tennessee Williams: A Casebook*, ed. Robert Gross (Routledge, 2002), 118.

<sup>3</sup> John Lahr, “Bitches and Witches.” *The New Yorker*, vol. 79, no. 34 (2003), p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Louise Blackwell, “Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women,” *The South Atlantic Bulletin* 35, no. 2 (1970), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Joan Wylie Hall, “The Stork and the Reaper, the Madonna and the Stud: Procreation and Mothering in Tennessee Williams's Plays,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1995), 678.

<sup>6</sup> “Tennessee Williams,” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012).

writes that Blanche's "uncertain manner...suggests a moth."<sup>7</sup> In his notes, Williams continually reminds the reader that Blanche is completely incongruent with her surroundings. However, the sources of this incongruence are given little attention in *Streetcar* beyond describing Blanche's mannerisms and mode of dress, which stand out starkly against those of the hardy, rugged residents of the New Orleans French Quarter. The causes of Blanche's mental break are vaguely presented and mostly subtextual: it is gradually revealed that she is grieving the loss of a lover, her ancestral home, and financial security, but it's unclear whether or not these losses *caused* her mental break. Blanche's desperation is the crux of *Streetcar*'s drama, but its sources go largely unexplored in the text.

Although the women populating Williams's fictional Southern worlds are often written off by critics as mentally ill and oblivious to the world around them, in this thesis I will apply pressure to this critical impulse by arguing that Williams's women are actually frustrated actors navigating a swiftly changing marriage market. Throughout their respective texts, Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche DuBois of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Maggie Pollitt of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* recognize the decreasing value of their own social capital and are hyperaware of how they must navigate the socioeconomic worlds they inhabit. Where other scholars pity Williams's female characters for their beautiful longing for a bygone era,<sup>8</sup> I assert that these women are caught in a period of cultural transition and wrangling with highly practical concerns of class standing, financial stability, gender performance, familial reputation, and ancestral heritage. They are not merely clinging to unrealistic and mythical memories of the

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<sup>7</sup> Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2004), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 77.

past—they are deeply concerned with their narrowing possibilities for living out fulfilling futures that meet their standards of class and race distinction.

In the antebellum South, prestigious family lineage, whiteness, and class standing would have all but guaranteed Williams's women's class security. However, the sociocultural textures of the South shifted immeasurably in the twentieth century. During the 1940s and '50s, when the plays are set, the South was being transformed as a less stringent and more fluid caste system emerged that offered more ways to be middle class (and made it more difficult to remain in the upper class). While Southern blacks were generally far from any elevated class standings, their place in the South was being reconfigured as they could no longer be kept out of the economy<sup>9</sup> and were finally given the freedom to leave the South if they chose and could afford to, effectively costing the South their cheap labor force.<sup>10</sup> By the middle of the century, the Civil Rights movement was in its infancy, stirring up even more unwelcome (to whites) confrontations around the harsh realities of racial difference in the South.

Southern institutions of labor shifted dramatically, as well. By the middle of the twentieth century, the region had finally succumbed to mechanization, industrialization, and diversified industries.<sup>11</sup> Agriculture was mechanized, further banishing “the plantation atmosphere of industrial work,”<sup>12</sup> and a “new,” much more complicated, “class system evolved.”<sup>13</sup> Although the

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<sup>9</sup> Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the Great Migration, see James Gregory's *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) and Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (Vintage, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 83.

<sup>12</sup> John Beck, Wendy Frandsen, and Aaron Randall, *Southern Culture: An Introduction* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2009), 107.

<sup>13</sup> Beck, Frandsen, and Randall, *Southern Culture: An Introduction*, 105.

planter continued to hold a place in the South as a stronghold of wealth, political connections, and social savvy, their numbers dwindled dramatically.<sup>14</sup> The dissolution of the South's plantation culture also rendered useless the women trained to cultivate and perform it. Upper-class women's anxieties about their own inherent value as women and as gender performers were ratcheted up as the plantation economy and culture that had defined the South slowly vanished. Remaining in the South's highest class was even more important as the "intermingling of the races"<sup>15</sup> was becoming commonplace in all but the highest echelons of the Southern class hierarchy. As these changes permeated Southern culture, they affected the emphasis placed on marriage: a failure to climb socially gave rise to the risk of class and race contamination. Maggie, Blanche, and Amanda—and the femininity they perform so stringently—are all direct products of these sweeping societal changes.

Even in scholarship that does not immediately discount Amanda's, Maggie's, and Blanche's desires to secure their futures, their hunger for human connection and secure livelihoods is often cast by critics as a biographical or metaphorical representation of Williams's own experiences as a gay playwright seeking "visibility" onstage. Schiavi writes that Williams's women "cannot hide their passions; their bodies and behavior keep them at a high profile.... [T]he stories' hungry women help Williams to stage a personally familiar war that the theatre of his time did not tolerate."<sup>16</sup> Nancy Tischler, a foundational early scholar on Williams, asserted that most of Williams's protagonists were self-portraits; if they were not directly paralleling him, she asserts, they were fictional representations of other significant figures in Williams's life.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Streetcar*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Schiavi, "Hungry Women," 108.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy Tischler, "The Distorted Mirror: Tennessee Williams's Self-Portraits." In *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Stephen Stanton (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 153.



However, such a view flattens the possibilities for analyzing female experiences in the plays by reading them as substitutes for Williams's experiences as a white gay man in mid-twentieth century America.

Williams's fixation on the homosexual experience does pervade many of his works, and critics often attempt to fill "the hole in the... fabric"<sup>18</sup> of Williams's plays by finding links between Williams's characters and his own personal homosexual experience. However, this heavy-handed biographical approach to the plays often obscures their unique and nuanced handling of sexuality. Rather than combing the texts to identify and label autobiographical moments and themes embedded in Williams's plays, examining the plays independently of their writer can provide a different, more intriguing, and less reductive reading of Southern culture as perceived by one of the South's greatest playwrights. Williams's own personal experience undoubtedly "structures and informs"<sup>19</sup> the texts, but neutralizing the gender norms and motivations at work in the plays and making the female experience interchangeable with Williams's devalues the female experiences the plays depict. In contrast, my project allows Maggie, Blanche, and Amanda to speak for themselves, free of any such biographical weight, thus permitting a more investigative reading of their goals, desires, and problematic ideological stances.

The common, single-faceted critical readings of Blanche, Amanda, and Maggie that I have described present these women as pathetic and depressing, three embodied personifications of the South's antiquated marriage economy. However, these women can easily be read as

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<sup>18</sup> William Poteet, *Gay Men in Southern Literature: Ritual, Initiation, and the Construction of Masculinity* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 25.

<sup>19</sup> Poteet, *Gay Men in Southern Literature*, 28.

fighting actors, baring their teeth against a swiftly-changing marriage market that they were not aptly prepared to face. As Dianne Cafagna writes,

These women seek a means of survival or escape.... Williams's women struggle against an emotional and social tide that prevents any lateral movement. As adults they are thrust unwittingly into the depths of the predatory caste society of the South. To survive they must struggle up like fighting fish against the surface of reality; to escape they must scuttle down the depth of illusion to rock bottom.<sup>20</sup>

Although Cafagna empowers Williams's women more than many other critics do--she alludes to their underpreparedness for such a cutthroat society, and she recognizes the women's restricted "movement"--she nevertheless resorts to an unpleasant dichotomy to assess the women's mental state: retreat to the "rock bottom" of illusion or "struggle up" to face reality. The reading I present in this thesis allows Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie to remain tragic figures, especially in the face of grave losses, but infuses the characters with some agency, desire, expectation, and action. It imbues the women with social knowledge and cognizance of their own instability on the marriage market as they struggle to navigate its unknown territory.

Simone de Beauvoir addresses many of the gender phenomena present in *Streetcar* and *Menagerie* in *The Second Sex*, a foundational treatise of the early feminist Second Wave published in 1949.<sup>21</sup> This discussion of gender in context is particularly beholden to the

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<sup>20</sup> Dianne Cafagna, "Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat: Illusion and Reality in Tennessee Williams," In *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*, ed. Martin, 119.

<sup>21</sup> The closeness of the date of *The Second Sex's* publication and the publication dates of the plays I'm studying here might create some confusion as to why I'm including de Beauvoir's text in this thesis. I am *not* suggesting that Williams was directly influenced by de Beauvoir. (Although that may be true, I do not make such a claim here.) Rather, I am using *The Second Sex* as a contemporary critical lens for understanding Amanda Wingfield, Blanche DuBois, and Maggie Pollitt, and I find it interesting that

foundational theoretical and feminist-existential work of Simone de Beauvoir, who argued against gender essentialism in the trailblazing text *The Second Sex*. She asserted that gender is constructed socially, informed by culture and not by physical or psychological essentialism. De Beauvoir's insistence that gender is constructed socially is especially useful for reading Williams' female characters, who often operate as extensions of the cultures that created them—and, especially in the cases of Blanche and Amanda, the cultures to which they desperately wish to return. Although this concept seems far from novel today, in the mid-twentieth century, it was only beginning to emerge in gender theory and philosophy.

Of particular interest in this study is de Beauvoir's attention to the explicit links between feminine domesticity and space; her mid-twentieth century lens on this relationship lends itself to my reading. De Beauvoir explicitly conceptualizes the inseparability of feminine domestic performance from the physical space that defines and confines women: "The ideal of happiness has always taken material form in the house.... [I]t stands for permanent separation from the world," she writes, clearly drawing the connections between domesticity aptly performed, physical space, and the concept of privacy. She further emphasizes the orderliness and consistency of the house and women's responsibilities in maintaining domestic order:

Within its walls the family is established as a discrete cell or unit group and maintains its identity as generations come and go; the past, preserved in the form of furnishings and

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Williams seemed to recognize and dramatize many of the same issues that de Beauvoir did in her critical text. I find *The Second Sex* an appropriate critical lens into the same period as the plays, but I am not insinuating that Williams identified with second-wave feminism in any conscious, explicit ways.

ancestral portraits, gives promise of a secure future.... [N]either time nor space fly off at a tangent, they recur in their appointed cycles.<sup>22</sup>

Class and femininity are intrinsically linked in the domestic space; furthermore, the femininity Blanche and Amanda know how to perform only works in the sort of space de Beauvoir describes here. Without impermeable walls to surround the family, without the “furnishings” that will recall the family’s longstanding, dignified social position, that dignity is trivialized, jeopardizing the family’s socioeconomic status because it is not appropriately performed. Amanda and Blanche can only find what de Beauvoir calls “social justification”<sup>23</sup> in a space that validates their class standing--otherwise, they will be “incongruous to th[eir] setting,”<sup>24</sup> as Williams says of Blanche when she arrives in New Orleans’ French Quarter. Blanche and Amanda’s incongruity is rooted in their desire for a stark spatial and ideological differentiation between races and classes of people, for a type of “permanent separation”<sup>25</sup> that sequesters them far from any lower-class persons or ethnic Others. Such a social order existed on the plantation, but is not viable in the urban centers the Wingfields and the Kowalskis inhabit.

As de Beauvoir names the values inherent in this performance of femininity--“fidelity to the past, patience, economy, foresight, love of family and of the native soil”<sup>26</sup>--she could just as easily be describing the Lost Cause fervor that long defined Southern femininity.<sup>27</sup> The cultural value of the Southern plantation is a common thread in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass*

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<sup>22</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 501.

<sup>23</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 503.

<sup>24</sup> Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: New Directions Books, 2004), 5. All references to *A Streetcar Named Desire* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically, in-text, from this edition, unless a footnote is required for clarity.

<sup>25</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 501.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 501.

<sup>27</sup> Beck, Frandsen, and Randall, *Southern Culture*, 210.

*Menagerie*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, becoming a site of personal validation. For Amanda Wingfield, Blanche DuBois, and Maggie Pollitt, Southern femininity is defined by their literal proximity to the plantation as well as their ideological alignment with what the plantation represented historically. The privacy, fiscal security, and class standing that the plantation house promises remain the three women's desired goal, and the small apartments that the Wingfield family and Stella and Stanley Kowalski inhabit are diametrically opposed to plantation values. The feminine performances they have practiced to perfection are useless in the class-stripping urban spaces, described by Williams as engineered to "avoid fluidity and differentiation,"<sup>28</sup> that they find themselves trapped within.

The hostility inherent in the cramped apartments inhabited by the Wingfields and the Kowalskis and Amanda and Blanche's clear unpreparedness to navigate these sociopolitical contexts inspires considerable audience sympathy, even as the two women seem manipulative and unreasonable. This sympathy is demonstrated in Williams scholarship; if a critic does not totally condemn the characters as monsters, restrained pity that also acknowledges the women's unlikability and their mental instability is the near-universal critical response. Rarely do critics apply any pressure to the women's motivations or the causes of their presumed mental breaks or disillusionment. The critical diagnosis of the women's mental health is polar, with some critics all but calling Amanda and Blanche insane<sup>29</sup> and many others simply considering them delusional; none ever conceive of either woman being capable of recovery.

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Jacqueline O'Connor, *Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1997), 45.

That critics often hesitate to make Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie's motivations tangible and refuse to consider any instigating factors for the women's actions other than psychological frailty is due at least in part to the intense critical resistance to reading Williams as a socially-minded writer. This critical impulse is of long standing; Nancy Tischler, a foundational Williams scholar, wrote this about Williams in an essay published during his lifetime: "Where [Williams] strove to make *Menagerie* more significant by relating it to the Depression and the growing violence abroad, his prose sounds ponderous and irrelevant to the play's tone."<sup>30</sup> Her clear dismissal of Williams's attempt to engage the political has been sustained in Williams scholarship to the present, as when Michael Hooper writes that Williams failed "to address political topics on a regular basis."<sup>31</sup> Such assertions ignore significant portions of his texts, and reading against the grain of Williams's work reveals even more striking sociopolitical statements.<sup>32</sup>

The consistency of Williams's concerns with the female experience is made clear in his characterizations of Maggie, Blanche, and Amanda. Each of these women inhabits her respective text in a state of panic, fearful that she will lose her home, her inheritance, her claim to femininity, and her opportunity to create a legacy. Although these concerns are enmeshed and entangled in one another, I will examine a dominant theme from each text that showcases the ways that the three plays reflect on and complicate mid-twentieth century Southern women's

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<sup>30</sup> Tischler, "The Distorted Mirror," 165-166.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Hooper, *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 220.

<sup>32</sup> In fact, it is not even necessary that we read against Williams to locate this impulse; he himself admits in his essay "The World I Live In," printed in Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: New Directions Books, 2004) that "without planning to do so, I have followed the developing tension and anger and violence of the world and time that I live in" (181). It seems a sweeping assumption indeed to presume that this statement in no way addresses the political.

experiences of marriage, marketability, and bargaining. Amanda and Blanche are similar in that both women struggle to differentiate illusion from truth, especially regarding marriage prospects (and, thus, opportunities for financial security). Amanda's concerns revolve around her daughter's marriageability and her family's dire fiscal standing; Maggie is motivated by her desire to conceive a child, continue a family line, and preserve the Pollitt family's (and, by association, her own) respectability; and Blanche is mourning the loss of her family's plantation home, which left her without a significant class symbol or any real societal bargaining power in a society in which family names and property ownership are some of the most distinctive markers of racial purity. Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie are far from "monstrous"<sup>33</sup> for fighting to secure prospective solutions to each of these very human concerns, but their fears do stem from the insidious loci of racism, class anxiety, and a crisis of Southern identity.

The argument I present in this thesis relies on several nuanced critical assumptions. The first of these assumptions is that acknowledging a character's agency is not the same as endorsing the actions their agency affords; to acknowledge Blanche's choices and motivations, for instance, is not the same as endorsing her racist linguistic habits. Second, studying the American South responsibly in any capacity requires discovering how systems—social, linguistic, and economic—have not only allowed but perpetuated racist and classist ideologies. To study the South is to engage in active confrontation with an ideological positionality that has fiercely resisted serious interrogation. This nuanced critical position—acknowledgement that is not affirmation—is inherent in all responsible work in the field of Southern studies.<sup>34</sup> As David

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<sup>33</sup> Lahr, "Bitches and Witches."

<sup>34</sup> The remarkably fierce response to events such as the HBO Max *Gone with The Wind* controversy of 2020 highlights the urgency of such work. (I am sure that much scholarly material on that event is being developed.) Although Southern studies is not a field at the forefront of the humanities in America, one must wonder if this is because too many critics and readers have decided that engaging problematic

Cunningham so eloquently writes as he defends his research in *Klansville, U.S.A.*, explanation and engagement with how and why particular historical milieu “enabled”<sup>35</sup> racist Southerners is essential if we are to reconcile our national identity with our deleterious past.

In the first chapter, I argue that Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois are motivated by their desires for the privacy and social validity offered by the plantation house and the race and class systems that supported it. I examine Amanda and Blanche’s insistence that fiscal security and blood purity are the only ways to guarantee domestic happiness and ensure successful marriage matches. In my second chapter, I focus on Maggie Pollitt, who I argue is Williams’s most assertive female character, and describe how her final-act interventions restore and affirm her domestic agency and provide her land, money, and the hopes of a child to inherit it all in the future. These three readings work in concert to demonstrate Blanche, Maggie, and Amanda’s social cognizance and reveal their race- and class-oriented motivations for attempting to determine their own fiscal and social futures.

## **I. “I’m fading now! I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick”: Race and Class Anxieties in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire***

When Tom Wingfield introduces himself to the audience as *The Glass Menagerie*’s narrator, he distinguishes between truth and illusion in the narratology of drama: “I have tricks up my pocket, I have things up my sleeve, but I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives

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material is not “worth” the trouble of confrontation—or that our comfort is too valuable to be jeopardized by the honest examination of problematic texts.

<sup>35</sup> David Cunningham, *Klansville, USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.



you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.”<sup>36</sup> Paranoia, nostalgia, and illusion are at the forefront of *The Glass Menagerie*, driving the plot forward as Amanda Wingfield, the well-meaning but deluded mother character in the play, consistently relies on those feelings in her attempts to influence her children and regain some of her lost class standing. “[Amanda] is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia” (xvii), writes Tennessee Williams of Amanda.

Williams writes that the play is a “memory play” (xix), with its primary dramatic focus on Amanda’s lived experiences and psychological state. These experiences are presented to the audience through Amanda’s long, meandering monologues that recall her past as the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner, in which she enjoyed her privileged life while on the marriage market in the Mississippi Delta. Amanda’s idyllic memories stand in stark contrast to the Wingfields’ present situation; during the play’s action, the family lives in “one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units... in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population” (3). Williams frequently relies on harsh, unfeeling physical spaces to emphasize the inherent gentility of his female characters. By placing his women in settings so far removed from their natural or preferred settings, he thrusts their incongruence into sharp relief.

Such is also the case with Blanche DuBois, perhaps Williams’s best-known character. Generically *A Streetcar Named Desire* could not be described as a memory play, but memory and the burden of nostalgia feature just as prominently in it as they do in *Menagerie*. Blanche, the infamous protagonist of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is just as appalled by her fiscal insecurity

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<sup>36</sup> Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: New Directions Books 1999), 4. All references to *The Glass Menagerie* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically, in-text, from this edition, unless a footnote is required for clarity.

and lack of class status as Amanda is--and she is even more enfeebled by her lost status. In many ways, Blanche is a more abstract and artistic version of Amanda, a displaced and de-classed Southern belle longing for her illustrious prior experiences and for opportunities to employ the social skills and techniques she was taught as a wealthy young Southern woman. Both plots see the two women in settings that are hostile to their high-class sensibilities and expectations for day-to-day life. Amanda and Blanche chafe against the realities encapsulated in these classless spaces, which they perceive as hellish, and constantly review the past in order to divine where they went wrong--never assuming that impossible norms for gender performance and unrealistic social expectations are what has failed them.

*The Glass Menagerie*, noted for its heavily autobiographical elements,<sup>37</sup> vaulted the previously obscure Williams to fame. *Menagerie* also set the tone for Williams's future plays, jumpstarting a subgenre of drama that quickly became popular in the 40's and 50's in which the stage serves as a dream-like space and the play is presented as "a mobile concurrency of past and present."<sup>38</sup> In *Amanda Wingfield*, Williams presents a prototype for his "desperate" women: Women out-of-place, navigating an unfamiliar set of sociocultural guidelines that disrupts the Southern woman's understanding of what it means to be marketable to respectable men. Through her retellings of her (as she would tell it) legendary past as a wealthy young woman living on a plantation, Amanda willingly invites--or, as her son Tom would imply, drags--her children into her history. This gesture is clearly meant to re-establish some of Amanda's pride; in the play's opening scene, Amanda is anxiously waiting for any "gentlemen callers" (7) to appear for her daughter Laura. When Laura suggests that no such visitors will come, Amanda vaults into a

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<sup>37</sup> See chapter 1, "Blood Hot and Personal" in John Lahr's *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Arthur Miller, *The Penguin Arthur Miller: Collected Plays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), 26.

retelling of her own experiences with calling suitors. Tom is exhausted with his mother's constant reminiscences, but Laura begs him to indulge Amanda:

Tom: I know what's coming!

Laura: Yes, but let her tell it.

Tom: Again?

Laura: She loves to tell it. (7)

Amanda's consistent re-hashing of her past successes with suitors serves to validate her as a trustworthy actor on the marriage market and assures her that she has prepared Laura for an advantageous marriage. However, as the family's poverty worsens and Laura remains single, Amanda's self-assuredness edges closer and closer to mistaken faith. In increasingly delusional ways, Amanda imagines in Laura a second chance for class advancement; in reality, a fiscally-sound marriage is their only hope of avoiding destitution and maintaining any class standing at all.

*Streetcar's* Blanche DuBois is similarly styled. She experiences "shocked disbelief" (5) at the socioeconomic state in which she finds her sister Stella, who has married Stanley Kowalski, a Polish American man with a military background. Stella and Stanley are barely above the working class; Stella has strong faith in Stanley's potential to grant her fiscal security--"Stanley's the only one of his crowd that's likely to get anywhere," she says confidently--but they live humbly in a "poor" section of New Orleans "where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races" (3). This setting shares no similarities at all with Belle Reve, the family plantation where Blanche and Stella grew up. Having lost Belle Reve because she could not afford to keep it, Blanche appears on Stanley and Stella's doorstep. She seems completely blindsided by the "conditions" Stella is living in, and is appalled that Stella is comfortable in

such surroundings. “Aren’t you being a little intense about it?” Stella asks Blanche casually. “It’s not that bad at all! New Orleans isn’t like other cities” (12). Stella’s acceptance of her situation astounds Blanche, who takes a suspiciously long time to accept that Stella and Stanley do not live as she and Stella did at Belle Reve. As Blanche begins to feel more and more trapped in the context Stella is now inhabiting, she grows increasingly agitated and desperate for a means of escape, calling imaginary suitors from her past in an attempt to find a fiscal solution to what she passionately considers a “desperate situation” (78).

Amanda and Blanche’s increasingly maniacal attempts to achieve any semblance of their prior socioeconomic statuses is not merely a result of psychological fragility, but a practical desire for what they consider a safe, “decent,” satisfactory existence. However, they refuse to secure that existence through any but the most “proper” (68) means available to them--“proper” being heavily coded language for the values and ideologies of the Southern plantation. During a particularly heated tirade about how much she detests Stanley Kowalski, Blanche tells her sister that it is her duty to foster “progress” in art and nurture the “tenderer feelings... that we have got to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag!” (83). Blanche’s assertion that refined femininity must be upheld by Southern women takes on a vague patriotic implication when she makes the standard a literal “flag”; one cannot help but wonder if she is imagining the Confederate battle flag, locating her benchmarks for femininity within Confederate ideology and identity.

Early feminist-historical scholarship on Southern women focused intently on their performances of, or refusals to perform, appropriate femininity during the Civil War. The foundational text on gender interplay during the American Civil War is Catherine Clinton and

Nina Silber's *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*,<sup>39</sup> published in 1992. This text ushered in a rich decade of scholarship on southern gender norms, including Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (1996)<sup>40</sup> and DeAnne Blanton's *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (2002).<sup>41</sup> As they are in any culture, Southern feminine performances were fraught with socially coded meaning. However, after the Civil War was over and the Confederacy was defeated, white Southern women took on a new responsibility: to ensure, as mothers and wives, that the culture of the illustrious South of the past would not fade, even as its legal legitimacy was stripped away.<sup>42</sup> Confederate identity thus long remained synonymous with white Southern identity in the deep South. The Old South's standards for gender performance, feminine manners, and male/female relationships proved strikingly resilient, maintaining their prominent place in Southerners' conceptions of themselves and serving as an effective, publicly displayed measure to test a person's innate Southernness.<sup>43</sup>

Lost Cause ideology continued to inform notions of gender well into the twentieth century. Since women were held responsible for Southern cultural production, literally through childbirth and more abstractly through the domestic tasks of child-rearing, wifehood, and

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<sup>39</sup> Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Drew G. Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Faust also published foundational work in her text *Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992) which included important scholarship on gender dynamics during the antebellum period and during wartime.

<sup>41</sup> DeAnna Blanton, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (New York City: Vintage, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Sally McMillien, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>43</sup> Beck, Frandsen, and Randall, *Southern Culture: An Introduction*, 218. For more on femininity defined by the standards of the Old South, see Sally McMillien, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

household management, standards for Southern femininity remained relatively unchanged from the Old South through the post-bellum period because gender was so crucial to setting and maintaining the boundaries between races and classes in the region.<sup>44</sup> Expected to balance these deeply sexualized traditional roles--wife and mother--with the intense “sexual repression required of the antebellum aristocratic woman,”<sup>45</sup> Southern women engaged in a complex performance of gender that was consistently defined by the inherently aggressive, chivalrous, and powerful Southern masculinity that stood as its opposite.<sup>46</sup>

Standards of femininity are of utmost importance to Amanda and Blanche, who take great pride in being masters of feminine illusion. “I have to deceive him enough to make him want me,”<sup>47</sup> Blanche says of Mitch, one of Stanley’s friends whom she hopes to seduce, and Amanda tells her daughter that “all pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be.”<sup>48</sup> In a speech that closely resembles Mr. Darcy’s list of feminine skills required for a lady to be considered truly “accomplished,”<sup>49</sup> Amanda details the qualifications and skills the quintessential Southern lady possesses: “They knew how to entertain their gentlemen callers. 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” (8). She directly attributes her marital opportunities to her skills as a Southern woman: “My callers were gentlemen all! [They were] some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta--

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<sup>44</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Harper and Row, 1988), 104-108.

<sup>45</sup> Hooper, *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams*, 179.

<sup>46</sup> For more on standards of masculinity in the South, see Lorrie Glover’s *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) and Tison Pugh’s *Queer Chivalry and the Myth of White Masculinity in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *Streetcar*, 95.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Menagerie*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford Classics, 2008), 29.

planters and sons of planters!” (8). To Amanda, her comportment was a symbol of her class, but also a guarantee of future class security.

Amanda identifies what she interprets as her own failure on the marriage market as she relates to Laura the circumstances in which she met Mr. Wingfield, who left her and their two children shortly after Laura was born. As she is “feverishly” (53) preparing Laura for Jim O’Connor’s arrival, she discovers a dress she wore during the summer she met Laura’s father. The root of Amanda’s paranoia about Laura’s prospects is revealed in the recollection:

See how I sashayed around the ballroom, Laura?...I had it on the day I met your father...I had malaria fever all that spring. The change of climate from East Tennessee to the Delta--*weakened resistance*. I had a little temperature all the time--not enough to be serious--just enough to make me restless and giddy! Invitations poured in.... “Stay in bed,” said mother, “you have a fever!”--but I just wouldn’t. I took a little quinine and kept on going, going!... That was the spring I had the craze for jonquils. And then I--then I met your father! Malaria fever and the jonquils and then--this--boy....” (53-54)

Here, Amanda considers falling in love to be a moment of susceptibility. She attributes her “weakened resistance” to the fever, implying that, at least in this instance, love was as detrimental as physical illness and an indicator of a reduced constitution and unsound mind. Amanda’s regret is palpable; she blames her present class and fiscal state on this diversion from her logical approach to the marriage market. In a dramatic shift from traditional critical perceptions of Amanda as overly sentimental, this passage illustrates that she interprets her flight of passion as a breach of logic that culminated in her own marketability being wasted.

Blanche DuBois is equally practical and pragmatic in her approach to the marriage market after her first attempt at securing a match went awry. While critics often designate Blanche as a romantic woman easily swept away by sentimentality and materiality,<sup>50</sup> she is actually fiercely pragmatic; her reasons for performing the stilted version of femininity that Stanley derides her for are practical and heuristic. However, she also recognizes the tension between that performance and the toughness required for personal independence:

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft--soft people have got to shimmer and glow--they've got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a--a paper lantern over the light.... It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft *and attractive*. And I--I'm fading now! I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick. (92)

Blanche is shockingly self-aware here--aware of her shortcomings as well as of the social mores that govern her comportment. Critics have seen Blanche, who is obsessed with illusions, as capable of deluding only herself, not of presenting an illusion of her own; however, she is painfully aware of the performative nature of her gender presentation and believes that the future she craves depends on her ability to perform her elevated, antiquated version of femininity well. Blanche's tragedy rests in her mistaken belief that the rewards of feminine performance remain the same in New Orleans as they were in the Old South; this is detachment from reality, but not delusion. She and Amanda cling to their more fortunate pasts--and meditate over where they might have gone wrong--in efforts to justify their methods and reclaim some of their personal dignity.

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<sup>50</sup>O'Connor, *Dramatizing Dementia*, 27.



For Amanda and Blanche, dignity implies a specific set of sociocultural mores. Williams consistently draws attention to the Wingfields' poverty; from the rickety apartment Amanda and her children live in to Tom's unreliability as a breadwinner, poverty marks the contours of Amanda's deep shame. Amanda is very much a representation of "the ideals of the Old South,"<sup>51</sup> and as such, her displacement and total lack of social community equate to the loss of a kingdom. However, it is the family's poverty and lack of an assertive patriarch that truly wreck their prospects. Desires for the South of their childhoods and for fiscal security can be held simultaneously, but the latter is certainly a more immediate--and alarming--concern for both Amanda and Blanche. Critics have struggled to pin down and explicitly name the motivations that Williams's women act on, but when we examine the socioeconomic situations those women inhabit, their motivations become more concrete.

Amanda's losses are made clear early in *The Glass Menagerie*: being abandoned by her husband, and the subsequent poverty she and her children face, have caused her social difficulties and emotional volatility. One of Williams's most well-recognized lines introduces Mr. Wingfield: "He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and kicked the light fantastic out of town" (5). The otherwise unnamed Mr. Wingfield, who left Amanda, Tom, and Laura "a long time ago," does not appear in the play except as a "larger-than-life-size photograph hanging over the mantel" (5). However, in a gesture that places the blame for the family's near-poverty on his absent father, Tom counts him as a "character" (5) in the play. The inclusion of a figure who never appears is a pointed allusion to his significance in Amanda's mind and memory: her marriage to him signifies the end

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<sup>51</sup> Tischler, "The Distorted Mirror," 167.

of her youth and the beginning of her class-related troubles, and his appearance in Amanda's memories is always accompanied with pain and regret.

Wingfield's abandonment of the family sets the tone for the rest of the play and explains much of its drama: the family's poverty; Laura and Tom's lack of social standing; and Amanda's wistful longing for her past, a time when she had myriad options for the future as well as numerous elevating class markers (namely wealth, land, and a prominent family name). The fact that Mr. Wingfield's portrait remains hanging over the mantel is especially significant in light of Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that the household is meant to preserve the past "in the form of furnishings and ancestral portraits."<sup>52</sup> The Wingfield apartment is full of relics from the past: Wingfield's portrait, Laura's yearbook, and Amanda's dress. However, these relics and Amanda's overbearing performance of Southern belle maternity do not magically create class or security. No level of performance or clinging to the past can lift the family from poverty.

Blanche also faces this harsh reality. Everything about her, from her formal mode of dress to her word choice, affected accent, and genteel Southern-belle mannerisms, indicates that Blanche is more refined than—and too refined for—the humble lifestyle Stella and Stanley lead. Almost universally hailed by critics as an embodied "eulogy for the Old South,"<sup>53</sup> Blanche serves as an unwelcome reminder to Stanley of how far removed Stella is from her rightful caste now that she has married him; it is his class anxiety that motivates the horrifying rape in the play's third act. Blanche's blatant distaste for Stanley's ethnic otherhood and unimpressive class

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<sup>52</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 501.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Hooper, *Sexual Politics in the Works of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 126.

standing pits the two characters against each other immediately, instigating the tragic conflict of the third act.

Although Stella seems completely comfortable with her life in New Orleans, she nevertheless is “embarrassed” (15) by Blanche’s scathing estimation of the decidedly lower-middle-class life she and Stanley share. The physical space Stella and Stanley inhabit is particularly revolting to Blanche, who is appalled that there are only “two rooms” (15) in their apartment. Blanche’s revulsion seems particularly reminiscent of Victorian ideals of domestic space.<sup>54</sup> Mitch, the closest thing to a male counterpart to Blanche in *Streetcar*, alludes to similar notions of gendered domestic spaces: “Poker should not be played in a house with women” (65) he intones, calling for the separate spheres of the Victorian era while also drawing attention to how the practical realities of social gatherings change when men and women must share small, intimate spaces. The spatial intimacy that defines Stella and Stanley’s life in the Quarter violates Blanche’s rules of self-governance, eliminating the private and forcing her performed femininity into action during every waking moment.<sup>55</sup>

Blanche’s desire for privacy is so great that it motivates her increasingly delusional thinking. When Blanche is nearing her breaking point, right before the rape occurs, she tells

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<sup>54</sup> Although the concept of public and private spheres is deeply ingrained in gendered historical scholarship, especially in regard to Victorian ideals of the Cult of Domesticity, the “angel of the house,” and Victorian home design, rhetorics of public and private spheres have remained remarkably pervasive in modernity, as well. A foundational publication is Barbara Welter’s 1966 *American Quarterly* article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860”; also see Linda Kerber’s 1988 article “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History.”

<sup>55</sup> This is most likely why Blanche spends hours of her days and nights in the bath; it is the most private space she can find in Stella and Stanley’s apartment. Although these moments of privacy reveal her extreme (and obsessive) dedication to her gender performance, my interpretation renders Blanche more aware of how performative her gender really is; if she is looking for even a brief escape from it, she recognizes its oppressiveness in at least some capacity.

Stanley (untruthfully) that Shep Huntleigh, an outrageously wealthy “oil-millionaire” (155), is coming to take her away to the Caribbean with him. Blanche is enraptured by the thought of escaping the Kowalskis’ apartment and New Orleans: “When I think of how divine it is going to be to have such a thing as privacy once more--I could weep with joy!” (156). Stanley responds with his typical tonally indistinguishable wry humor--“This millionaire from Dallas is not going to interfere with your privacy any?”--and Blanche is quick to explain the nuances in her use of the term “privacy”:

It won't be the sort of thing you have in mind. This man is a gentleman and he respects me. [*Improvising feverishly*] What he wants is my companionship. Having great wealth sometimes makes people lonely! A cultivated woman, a woman of intelligence and breeding, can enrich a man's life--immeasurably! I have those things to offer.... Physical beauty is passing.... But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart-- I have all those things! (156)

According to Blanche, elevating class markers--“great wealth,” “beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit”--all run counter to Stanley and Stella’s lifestyle in the Quarter. Every characteristic of the lower middle class is, in her mind, completely inhospitable to such refined traits, and the tension between the lifestyle Blanche imagines as befitting her station and Stanley and Stella’s repellent one is intrinsically tied to the concept of privacy, which is just as much a matter of physical space as it is of ideological alignment.

Like Blanche, Amanda’s desperation to return to Southern plantation life is rooted firmly in class and racial stratifications. “No no--you be the lady this time and I’ll be the darky” (7) she says to Laura when her daughter offers to go fetch something from the kitchen. Racial slurs

feature prominently in Amanda's stories, and throughout *Menagerie* she consistently alludes to non-white races and ethnicities to suggest exorbitant menial labor. For instance, when Tom finally secures a meeting with a potential suitor, Jim O'Connor, and informs Amanda that he'll be coming to dinner, she responds harriedly that she will have to "work like a Turk" (43) in order to get the apartment ready. Amanda views her position in the "lower middle-class" (3) as an injustice against not only against her gentility, but also her whiteness. This is embedded deeply in the characters' references to enslaved people and also in Williams's stage directions and production notes; he calls the lower middle-class in general "fundamentally enslaved" (3). Although there are no black people explicitly present in *Menagerie*,<sup>56</sup> their presence is keenly felt as a counterpoint to white dignity. Amanda likens herself to a black person--more specifically, a black slave--when she is being self-deprecating and her deepest anxieties center on losing any more markers of whiteness and becoming too much like the classless Blacks who served her on her family's plantation during the height of her desirability on the Southern marriage market.<sup>57</sup>

Blanche's fixation on retaining her whiteness is even stronger than Amanda's; although Amanda consistently references her prior superiority to Blacks as a marker of her inherent class, Blanche is forced to confront her racism more directly when her sister marries Stanley Kowalski. Blanche's revulsion to Stanley is clearly class- and race-motivated. Her distaste for her brother-in-law is revealed immediately: after she reunites with Stella and attempts to ask about him, she

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<sup>56</sup> Of course, the play could be staged so that the characters could be played by people of any race; however, Williams will sometimes indicate that certain characters are white, Black, Mexican, et cetera. No such direct racial casting is given here in Williams's notes. (The only black protagonist in Williams's corpus is Chicken from *The Kingdom of Earth*, as Michael Hooper observes in *Sexual Politics* [141]).

<sup>57</sup> The most uncomfortable of such allusions is in the first scene of the play (8), when Amanda uses the n-slur.

stutters, unable or unwilling to even say his name. Stella catches on, warily reminding her sister that “Stanley is Polish” (16), and proceeds to warn Blanche not to “compare him with men that [they] went out with at home” (17) during their youth at Belle Reve, the family plantation. In an attempt to prove Stanley’s eminence, Stella shows Blanche a headshot of Stanley wearing his Engineers’ Corps uniform and numerous decorations. “I assure you I wasn’t just blinded by the brass” (18), Stella says defensively after Blanche, unfazed, implies that Stella must have been taken in by artifice in order to accept Stanley’s “civilian background.” “You saw him in uniform,” she accuses (80). To ensure that Stella is aware of her disapproval, she lumps Stanley in with another marginalized and stereotyped immigrant group, then adds another layer of insult: “[The Polish] are like the Irish, aren’t they? Only not so—highbrow?” (16).

Miscegenation is the root of Blanche’s disapproval and near-literal incomprehension of Stella’s life choices. To Blanche, to be “in bed with a Polack” (22) is a grave travesty that has demolished Stella’s class standing. In a line that recalls the scathing accusations of witchcraft directed at Othello,<sup>58</sup> another staged ethnic Other, Blanche tells Stanley that she “couldn’t imagine a witch of a woman casting a spell over [him]” (39); to Blanche, he is a mysterious, hypermasculine ethnic Other, the master manipulator and seducer, never the seduced.<sup>59</sup> “The Kowalskis and the DuBois have different notions” (35), Stanley asserts angrily after Blanche backhandedly insults his and Stella’s home, attempting to reestablish dominance and defend the

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<sup>58</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, edited by Edward Pechter (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), I.ii.63-65.

<sup>59</sup> Blanche’s estimation of Stanley is at least partly incorrect; he is devoted to Stella, and his cruelty toward Blanche, I argue, is rooted in his insecurities about losing his wife (or, at least, losing his wife’s high esteem) to Blanche’s lofty ideals.

superiority of his lifestyle to Blanche as she forces him to recognize the class divides between him and his wife.

Stella's pregnancy sends Blanche into even more of a frenzy, requiring her to confront how completely Stella has betrayed her family's ideals. Rachel Van Duyvenbode claims that Williams himself was "visualizing his own contemporary fears of cultural degeneration...and repulsion by the prospect of miscegenation"<sup>60</sup>; however, I argue that one need not look so far into the writer's psyche to identify the site of Blanche's revulsion.<sup>61</sup> Instead of being a by-product of Williams's identity manifesting itself in the text, Blanche's horror at the fact that Stella's child will be the child of an immigrant is baked into the upper-class Southern culture Blanche was raised within. By conceiving a child with Stanley, Stella has rid herself of any way to legitimize her familial heritage and class standing, making her transition from a Southern belle of Blanche's caliber to a lower-middle-class woman of New Orleans permanent. The threat of a tainted bloodline fuels Blanche's disdain for Stanley and her confusion that Stella could be so "matter of fact" about being, according to Blanche, "married to a" Polish "madman" (73). The baby will be evidence of Stella's self-demolition of her own class standing.

Blanche does acknowledge, albeit indirectly, that the baby will at least be white: "I hope candles are going to glow in his life and I hope that his eyes are going to be like candles, *like two blue candles lighted in a white cake!*"<sup>62</sup> She blesses the baby with a specific and strange

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<sup>60</sup> Rachel V. Duyvenbode, "Darkness Made Visible: Miscegenation, Masquerade and the Signified Racial Other in Tennessee Williams' "Baby Doll" and "A Streetcar Named Desire"." *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001), 205.

<sup>61</sup> In the notable "Sleeping With Caliban: The Politics of Race in Tennessee Williams's *The Kingdom of Earth*," Philip C. Kolin counters Duyvenbode's idea, claiming that Williams did not use nonwhite characters arbitrarily but consciously engaged with race in meaningful ways. His reading is as sympathetic to Williams the man as Duyvenbode is condemning.

<sup>62</sup> Williams, *Streetcar*, 134, emphasis added.

comparison that feels intentional in its allusion to race. However, even as she muses on the baby's whiteness, she nevertheless considers him<sup>63</sup> corrupted, or at least tainted, by his patrimonial lineage. In a pointed accusation of Otherness poorly disguised as a joke, Blanche reminds Stanley that she sees him as biologically different from her and Stella: "You healthy Polack, without a nerve in your body, of course you don't know what anxiety feels like." Stanley immediately responds with a cool denunciation of the slur Blanche uses and of her assertion that he is Polish at all: "I am not a Polack. People from Poland are *Poles*, not Polacks. But what *I* am is a one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth...so don't ever call me a Polack" (134). Stanley's pronouncement of his own ethnic designations reveals the different ways he and Blanche conceive of ethnicity. He is "American," just like Blanche, and thus she has no right to assume she is racially superior to him. However, for Blanche, "American" is a loaded designation, full of racial and class strata that are inferior to her own position and breeding. Stanley's inferiority is wrapped in his ethnicity, his class, and the "bestial" nature Blanche observes in him: "He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one!" (83).

While Blanche and Amanda do fall victim to mental and emotional instability--to deny such would ignore explicit characterization in the texts--the blame for that instability is too often misplaced, attributed to mere psychological frailty. Instead, it can be linked to the two women acclimating to racial- and class-oriented cultural shifts that render Blanche and Amanda's ways

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<sup>63</sup> The baby is never referred to with any pronoun other than "he," even before the child's birth. Every character in the play who refers to the baby uses "he" pronouns, but Blanche and Stanley seem particularly caught up in the idea of the child being a boy. The cultural significance of this phenomenon should not be lost in a play that places such a heavy emphasis on family lineage and family gender performances; that the child is a boy (and he is a boy; the blanket he's wrapped in at the end of the play is blue, a dated but nevertheless effective way to indicate gender) solidifies Blanche's horror that the child will become just like his boorish father.



of seeing the world impractical. In order to survive the new Souths of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the plays' female characters must adjust their priorities and gender performances according to changes in race and class dynamics. Williams presents two ways to do this: as Stella does by accepting a place in the lower middle class among people of non-white and non-Western origin or as Maggie Pollitt does by violating the rules of Southern femininity in order to gain its traditional benefits.

## II. "I've always *liked* Big Daddy": Maggie Pollitt's Fight for Southern Aristocracy

Performativity is integral to the construction of all gender identities,<sup>64</sup> but the standards of Southern femininity particularly emphasize performance as an indicator of social congruence in a region that relies on gender performances to signify class standing and racial purity. According to Tara McPherson, the performative nature of gender is a significant contributor to the constructed Southern culture that Americans, Southern or not, claim to know so well, where "appearances are everything and... a genteel mise-en-scene of Southernness is constructed via a carefully-manipulated stage set of moonlight, magnolias, and manners."<sup>65</sup> In a more jarring pronouncement, Dianne Cafagna calls Southern tradition an oppressive "stranglehold."<sup>66</sup> If Southern masculinity and femininity are staged performances, we should take special interest in seeing gender played out literally as a constructed plot and setting performed on a stage for an audience. The layers of performed meaning multiply in Tennessee Williams's 1955 play *Cat on*

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<sup>64</sup> For foundational scholarship on gender performativity and the social regulation of gender, see Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>65</sup> Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 150.

<sup>66</sup> Cafagna, "Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat," 119.

*a Hot Tin Roof*: the drama centers on a son whose pre-assigned masculinity is barely being performed and a father whose masculinity is over-performed to a point of unbelievability. *Cat* thematizes idealization of the past, shifting conceptions of Southern race identities, and a bitter battle for fiscal security waged by a woman--Maggie Pollitt, the eponymous “cat on a hot tin roof.”<sup>67</sup>

In the stage directions for Act II of *Cat*, Williams emphasizes the play’s status as a domestic drama by writing that he was “trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis” (2). But what is the Pollitt family’s “thundercloud?” Is it the cultural and fiscal disintegration of their Southern elitist way of life? Is it the decline of their patriarch’s health? Or is it the crumbling of Brick’s carefully reconstructed illusion of the past, his idealized fantasy of homosocial bliss with his college friend Skipper? Williams certainly never intended to tie *Cat* down to just one problem; rather, a much more broad and gruesome thread—decay—runs through each of the plotlines that constructs *Cat*’s complex narrative. With its concurrent family catastrophes, the drama feels immediate, disorderly and acutely believable.

No character in the play seems more frustrated with the cultural breakdown running rampant in the family than Maggie, Brick’s wife. By Blanche or Amanda’s standard, Maggie has married well: the Pollitts are still in full possession of their land and, as we can conclude from the numerous interactions the Pollitts have with non-family members, their name retains its high-ranking class status. This should be a roaring, supreme success for Maggie, who did “channel

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<sup>67</sup> Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: New Directions Books, 2005), 31. All references to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically, in-text, from this edition, unless a footnote is required for clarity.

[her] energies into marrying well and hitching [her] stars to men with potential”<sup>68</sup> by marrying Brick the summer after their college graduation even when she sensed things were “not right”<sup>69</sup> between them. After securing such an advantageous marriage, Maggie’s work should be finished since, according to Julie Levinson,

The female characters in traditional success sagas are most often loyal helpmeets-- devoted wives, dutiful secretaries, or adoring mothers-- whose competence and nurturance enable the male characters to pursue their goals.... [T]hey gaze admiringly while the key players claim their trophies.... Accoutrements of male success, the female characters’ success is defined relationally while their own subjectivity is suppressed or denied.<sup>70</sup>

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* presents a polar opposite of this classic success narrative. From *Cat*’s beginning to its end, Brick is “inert”;<sup>71</sup> his “politely feigned interest” in Maggie masks “indifference, or worse” (17) toward his wife. Maggie, unbearably frustrated with her husband’s failure to act on anything except his nostalgia and his alcohol addiction, almost literally drags her husband from place to place and through the social situations required of him. She covers and compensates for his failures by lying for him and completing his responsibilities.

The vast differences between the classic success narrative Levinson has outlined and the realities of Maggie’s life after following its formula reveal the cracks and fissures in the gendered boundaries that signal how we define and determine success. Although Dianne

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<sup>68</sup> Julie Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), 110.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 60.

<sup>70</sup> Levinson, 110.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *Streetcar*, 162. This instance of Blanche’s inertia mirrors Brick’s absolute refusal to overcome his weaknesses or emotions.

Cafagna writes that Maggie “is not interested in the idea of aristocracy” but in “the aristocrats themselves,”<sup>72</sup> I assert that aristocracy is Maggie’s primary motivation throughout *Cat*. Her actions and manipulations are calculated--and, eventually, successful-- attempts to maintain a firm grasp on the Pollitts’ money, land, and class standing. Maggie married Southern aristocracy not because of her interest in “aristocrats,” but because of her desire to attain the fiscal and social securities that come with being one of them.

Maggie is not allowed to violate the clear gender boundaries of the formula for success without facing scorn from her sister- and brother-in-law, Mae and Gooper; their derisive contempt for Maggie is evident in every interaction that takes place between them. Critics from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*’s debut in 1955 to the present have shared Mae and Gooper’s disdain. Maggie’s success at the end of the play is, according to John Timpane, earned through “manipulation and mendacity”; she “feeds” off her conditions.<sup>73</sup> William Poteet describes Maggie as animalistic, primitive, and powerful--she “stalk[s]” her “bedroom in feline fervor”<sup>74</sup>--but he also diminishes her goals and enterprising nature, calling her “a cat *just* trying to stay on a hot tin roof,”<sup>75</sup> implying both an incredible struggle and an insignificant desire (she is fighting to stay on the roof, but her efforts are exclusive to that endeavor). Mark Winchell concludes that Maggie is the story’s villain in the same way that Stanley becomes *A Streetcar Named Desire*’s villain when he rapes Blanche:

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<sup>72</sup> Cafagna, “Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat,” 120.

<sup>73</sup> John Timpane, “Weak and Divided People: Tennessee Williams and the Written Woman,” in *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama*, edited by June Schlueter (London: Associated University Presses, 1989), 171.

<sup>74</sup> Poteet, *Gay Men in Southern Literature*, 35.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

Had Williams not found Maggie... charming, he could easily have made her into a female Stanley Kowalski. Brick's assumption that she has driven Skipper to his death (much as Stanley helped drive Blanche insane) seems implausible only because Williams convinces us of Maggie's sincerity and decency.<sup>76</sup>

Winchell's reading assigns a remarkable amount of power to Maggie as an entity independent of her author; he insinuates that Williams himself must tame Maggie and that without his favor, she would have destroyed first Skipper and then Brick. This scholarly impulse is markedly different from the critical perception of Williams's more "pitiable"<sup>77</sup> leads, who are still monstrous but embody their monstrosity in a far less devouring way. They are terrible, but pose no threat. It seems far easier for critics to generate sympathy for Blanche and Amanda, completely awash in waves of nostalgia, than for "Maggie the Cat" (125), who lies to the Pollitts to secure hers and Brick's future and to foil Mae and Gooper's scheme to usurp Brick's inheritance.

Even more sympathetic readings of Maggie can be brutal, however. Animalistic descriptions are common: Maggie possesses an "animal sexuality,"<sup>78</sup> and she "hisses down the curtain of *Cat* with the spoils of truth she has extracted from Brick and Big Daddy's beautiful lies."<sup>79</sup> Another critic suggests, in contrast, that in spite of her feminine power, Maggie is "afraid of facing her own inner truth."<sup>80</sup> Part of the critical unwillingness to express true sympathy for Maggie is informed by Williams himself. He settles the matter early in the play: "It is constant

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<sup>76</sup> Mark Winchell, "Come Back to the Locker Room Ag'in, Brick Honey!" *The Mississippi Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1995), 708-709.

<sup>77</sup> Timpane, "Weak and Divided People," 171.

<sup>78</sup> Cafagna, "Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat," 122.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

rejection that makes [Maggie's] humor 'bitchy'" (24), Williams writes in a nuanced but unsettling moment that is simultaneously accusatory and sympathetic.

This study of Maggie does not attempt to prove or disprove Williams's assessment of her, but instead to explore how the critical resistance to Maggie's power is enmeshed in the term's applications and connotations. Michael Hooper points to a potential explanation of Williams's "bitchy" designation in his recent book *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest*. Some of Williams's women, Hooper writes, "have learnt to love without the company of men and, in doing so, have assimilated typically masculine aspirations like a desire for ownership and control. They are often considered monsters."<sup>81</sup> I argue that Maggie's ostensible "bitchiness" may be located in her usurping Brick's role as the assertive figure in their marriage—and that her desires to control her own future manifest in assertive power that is almost masculine. This gender role reversal is solidified in Maggie's feelings about Big Daddy:

I've always sort of admired him in spite of his coarseness, his four-letter words and so forth. Because Big Daddy *is* what he *is*, and he makes no bones about it. He hasn't turned a gentleman farmer, he's still a Mississippi redneck... but he got hold of [the Straw and Ochello plantation] an' built it into th' biggest an' finest plantation in the Delta. --I've always liked Big Daddy.... (54)

Maggie lays out the exact traits she admires in Big Daddy: his shameless self-identification, his refusal to become genteel in the traditional Southern sense, and his deft handling of capital. Big Daddy embodies these traits, but they are also inherent facets of Southern masculinity. To be too soft is undesirable and even freakish, as Brick so clearly demonstrates; and as a wealthy white

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<sup>81</sup> Michael Hooper, *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest*, 202.

man, Big Daddy has the freedom to remain “a Mississippi redneck” (54) as long as he continues to manage and expand his assets competently.<sup>82</sup>

These facts about Big Daddy are intrinsically tied to the options he is provided as a wealthy white Southern man. Maggie says that she has always admired Big Daddy, but this assertion is less about Big Daddy himself than it is about Maggie’s desire to be as *she* is, to manage her own way into wealth, and to reject the restricting social niceties embedded in Southern feminine performance. Maggie’s frustration stems from her blatant desire for power and the kind of mobility that’s regarded as exclusively masculine. Although she wants to be taken seriously as a social actor with agency and drive, she knows that her femininity prevents that. Maggie’s frustration--her “bitchiness”--manifests in a sharp tone and a calculating personality. Her characterization dramatizes the tension between her feminine gender performance, her inherently feminine goals (i.e., to have a child, a successful marriage, and fiscal security), and the traditionally masculine means she employs to achieve those goals. Even as her embodied self is blatantly feminine and sexual, Maggie commits numerous gender transgressions.

Maggie herself recognizes that she is not performing femininity as she’s supposed to. She admits to Brick (and herself) that a hardness has come over her: “I’ve gone through this--*hideous!--transformation, become...frantic!*” she says as she “struggles for expression” (27). She identifies this change as a departure from traditional performances of Southern femininity,

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<sup>82</sup> It is notable that Big Daddy and Big Mama’s refusal to accommodate genteel social mores may have harmed their efficacy in integrating into high society; Mae thinks that Big Daddy and Big Mama’s coarser ways “may account for their failure to quite get in with the smartest young married set in Memphis, despite all” (69). Big Daddy has numerous options for self-expression, but his choices may have affected his class persona nevertheless.

adding sadly that she is “not thin-skinned any more, can’t afford t’be thin-skinned any more” (27).<sup>83</sup> However, after this admission of weakness--an ironic weakness indeed, given that it is actually a tendency toward greater resilience--Maggie’s composure is restored; Williams writes in the production note after the line that Maggie “recovers her power” (27). Composure under duress defines Maggie’s interactions with the other family members, but she is equally self-assured in her conversations (i.e., arguments) with Brick. Although she is consistently on the defensive around the family, she is more transparent in her dealings with her husband: “I don’t have the charm of the defeated, my hat is still in the ring, and I am determined to win!” (31). In a drastic departure from Williams’s earlier female characters, Maggie is under no illusions. Blanche and Amanda both recognize the manipulations inherent in Southern feminine performance--when Laura comments to her mother that “it’s like [she’s] setting a trap,” Amanda agrees heartily--but Maggie’s distinctly competitive language implies that her task is not a manipulation and careful *concealment* of the truth, but is instead a grittier, more brutal fight to *confront* the truth and demolish any barriers that stand between her and what she desires. She says she lacks “the charm of the defeated” (31); she may have a different type of charm, then, or no charm at all.

Later in the same scene, Maggie reiterates the game-like nature of her struggle to force Brick’s hand: “that’s the first time I’ve heard you raise your voice in a long time, Brick. A crack in the wall? Of composure? I think that’s a good sign... a sign of nerves in a player on the

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<sup>83</sup> Blanche has undergone a similar change; as Stella and Stanley are discussing Blanche’s departure from the Quarter, Stella says biting to her husband, “You didn’t know Blanche as a girl. Nobody...was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change” (136). This transition from tenderness to hardness is a turning point for Blanche and for Maggie; however, the two women respond in dramatically different ways, with Maggie eventually claiming the change and designating it good while Blanche would rather “take to the streets” (79) than demean herself by accepting any way of life other than the one she idealizes.



defensive!” (33) Maggie’s co-opting of language from Brick’s own arsenal of sports-announcing vocabulary emphasizes her usurper status in the relationship. She acknowledges the game, resisting attempts to conceal it with any illusion. Maggie’s strength lies in her ability to remain confrontational and above Brick’s lethargic approach to life and responsibility, as well as in her ability to resist the guilt that comes along with performing gender incorrectly--hurdles that Brick, caught in the throes of his sexuality crisis, cannot jump.

The fact that Brick cannot overcome these hurdles--or the literal ones he breaks his ankle attempting to jump--insinuates that Maggie is actually much better at these “games” than he is. Even her *physical* prowess is noted in the text. Near the middle of Act One, Mae produces an archery set and asks who it belongs to. “That’s my Diana Trophy,” Maggie explains, saying that she won it in “an intercollegiate archery contest at Ole Miss” (36). As the scene continues, Maggie adds that she and Brick are “goin’ deer-huntin’... as soon as the season starts. I love to run with dogs through chilly woods, run, leap over obstructions” (37). Maggie is nearly always read as deeply sensual and in touch with her femininity, but she is just as much in touch with the literal brute strength and emotional toughness supposedly characteristic of Southern manhood.

Whether or not her hardness and power make Maggie “bitchy” is up for debate; the question centers on whether we assume Maggie’s proclivity toward confrontation and action, as opposed to Brick’s failures of heterosexual manhood, is a positive or negative element of her characterization. Her willingness to take action sets her apart from Amanda and Blanche, who stoically refuse to adapt to the changing socioeconomic conditions that surround them. This willingness is especially prevalent in the 1974 ending of the play, in which Maggie lies about being pregnant in order to restore herself and Brick to Big Daddy’s favor--and to ensure that she and Brick will inherit the plantation upon Big Daddy’s imminent death. Although Maggie

expresses regret about being capable of such manipulations, she nevertheless relies on her powers of shrewd wit and deception in order to secure the future she desires--the type of future Amanda and Blanche want but refuse to acquire dishonestly as Maggie, arguably, does.

However, Brick's lethargy and inertia put Maggie's feminine wiles to the test. Her only reward for dealing with Brick's inefficacy is inclusion in the Pollitt family, in which she grows ever more peripheral and insecure as the consequences of Brick's detachment become more and more significant. His condition has escalated so much that Maggie reports that Gooper and Mae, Brick's brother and sister-in-law, have been making "allusions" to "Rainbow Hill," a "place that's famous for treatin' alcoholics and dope fiends in the movies":

**Brick:** I'm not in the movies.

**Maggie:** No, and you don't take dope. Otherwise, you're a perfect candidate for Rainbow Hill, baby, and that's where they aim to ship you--over my dead body! ...Then brother-man could get a-hold of the purse strings and dole out remittances to us, maybe get power of attorney and sign checks for us and cut off our credit wherever, whenever he wanted!

(21)

Mae and Gooper's thinly veiled threat incites Maggie and merely confuses Brick, who refuses to acknowledge the gravity of his situation. Maggie's tirade about the uncertainty of the couple's financial future after Big Daddy dies reveals her priorities--and how different Brick's are. His response to the family's Rainbow Hill allusions is vague astonishment and detachment, while Maggie's is manic anxiety. Acutely aware of how untenable their current situation is, she explains concretely what Gooper will be able to do to the couple if he inherits Big Daddy's fortune.

Unlike Brick, Maggie deeply internalizes the Pollitt family's disapproval of her and Brick's failure to produce an heir to the Pollitt plantation. One cannot help but wonder if the popular, uncompromising perception of Maggie as a threat to everyone in the play is tied to her ability to perform femininity in every way except the one that is most befitting to women: childbirth. As Brick's spouse and without a child, Maggie finds herself in a tenuous socioeconomic situation: although it's clear that Big Daddy and Big Mama want to turn the plantation over to Brick, their favorite son, Brick and Maggie's lack of an heir--a coded, symbolic acceptance of adult responsibility and literal heterosexual performance--puts their eligibility at risk. With their brood of children, Brick's brother, Gooper, and his wife, Mae, exemplify traditional standards of the Southern family and set themselves up as the obvious choice for the inheritance. Maggie expresses her frustration with Brick's refusal to conceive a child with her and the snide comments it exposes her to: "It goes on all the time, along with constant little remarks and innuendos about the fact that you and I have not produced any children, are totally childless and therefore totally useless!" (19). Although she never seems drawn to children--she actively despises Mae and Gooper's "screamin' tribe" (21)--Maggie recognizes that children are highly valued cultural capital in the Southern world and, more specifically, in the context of the Pollitt family.

Maggie's desperate desire to conceive a child with Brick has not been the object of much critical attention. However, her insistence on a child is one of the most fascinating and complicated elements of Maggie's femininity in performance and reality. She hates Mae and Gooper's five children ("and number six coming" [19]) with a fervent passion; the play opens with Maggie changing her dress after "one of those no-neck monsters" threw a "hot buttered

biscuit” at her (17). She launches into a hate-fueled tirade about Mae, Gooper, and their children while Brick listens “without interest” (19):

Hear them? Hear them screaming? I don’t know where their voice boxes are located since they don’t have necks. I tell you I got so nervous at that table tonight I thought I would throw back my head and utter a scream you could hear across the Arkansas border an’ parts of Louisiana and Tennessee.... [Mae and Gooper] have brought the whole bunch down here like animals to display at a county fair. (19)

This passage certainly does not read as though it’s spoken by a woman desperately in want of a child. It is unclear how much Maggie’s hatred stems from the fact that the “no-neck monsters” are Mae and Gooper’s progeny, from jealousy, or from a general dislike of rambunctious, “rid-blooded” (37) children. Much has been written on Brick’s sexual indistinguishability, but Maggie’s relationship with womanhood is equally indistinguishable and perhaps even more complicated.

Maggie calls Mae a “monster of fertility” and laughs scornfully as she tells Brick that Mae “refused twilight sleep... because she feels motherhood’s an experience that a woman ought to experience fully!” (22). Mae’s overt femininity and maternity repulse Maggie, who seems to believe they are performative exaggerations to be derided. Departing dramatically from the standards of Southern femininity, Maggie eschews sentimentality, charms, and “putting on airs.”<sup>84</sup> In a particularly direct attempt to denigrate Mae’s overstated maternity, she asks Mae why she gave “dawg’s names” (38) to her five children:

**Mae:** Dog’s names?

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<sup>84</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Summer and Smoke* (New York: New Directions Books, 1948), 15.

**Maggie:** [*sweetly*]: Dixie, Trixie, Buster, Sonny, Polly! Sounds like four dogs and a parrot...

Not only does Maggie sneer at Mae's motherhood, but she also does not seem to identify with her own potential maternity in particularly positive ways. The language she uses to announce the pregnancy at the play's conclusion is reminiscent of livestock jargon: "A child is coming, sired by Brick, and out of Maggie the Cat!" (167). This sterility implies that pregnancy and childbirth themselves do not appeal to Maggie (or, at least, they do not carry the same sentimentality for her that they do for archetypal Southern women like Mae). However, she is certain that Big Daddy will sign the land over to her and Brick as soon as he knows that Brick has a child. Since producing an heir is the only way for her to secure the socioeconomic standing she has fought for, Maggie's primary goal becomes convincing Brick to sleep with her when it's "her time" (172).

Brick's refusal to produce an heir is especially fraught in the context of the Pollitt plantation's history. So much of what Big Daddy represents—strong, hard-working manhood, "old" wealth, and power—requires a successor in order to remain valuable after the patriarch's death. However, homosexual desire does not, *cannot*, produce a blood heir: Big Daddy only inherited the plantation because its previous owners, two homosexual men, had no progeny to inherit it. Homosexuality is useless for building a dynastic succession of familial power. Thus, the Pollitts' situation takes on a desperate urgency now that Big Daddy is dying of cancer: the plantation will go to Mae and Gooper and eventually be split among their "five screechers" (110), as Big Daddy coldly refers to his rowdy grandchildren, if Brick and Maggie do not produce a child of their own. Homosexuality in the text takes on another, more dangerous guise: Brick's refusal to sleep with Maggie may result in the demise of his family home. Maggie, ever

defined by her “catty” (39) femininity, represents a titillating, assertive, motivated, and decidedly heterosexual cure for Brick’s sexuality crisis.

Brick, however, blatantly ignores and abhors all cultural signposts of maturity, responsibility, and overt heterosexuality, refusing again and again to sleep with Maggie. While Big Daddy overeagerly embraces all the roles of Southern manhood to a point of inauthenticity, his middle-aged son Brick rejects them with scorn. In *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s*, James Gilbert examines Brick’s stoic refusal to perform manhood: “Williams fashioned a character in Brick Pollitt whose withdrawal into himself, in a rage of self-pity, *refusing to play husband, son, brother, or father*, unleashes a storm of consequences that brought each of these roles into high relief.”<sup>85</sup> Brick’s crisis of masculinity becomes the entire family’s issue, and every other character in the play is compelled to help Brick unlock his gender potential. However, Maggie, particularly trapped by Brick’s refusal to perform masculinity “correctly,” is smothered by their stagnating marriage and wants Brick to desire her sexually not only so they can produce an heir, but also so their fractured union can be repaired. Brick’s parents are equally troubled by his refusal to sleep with Maggie since they desperately want Brick to produce a blood heir to the family plantation. Brick’s “defiant inertia”<sup>86</sup> thus becomes the major concern of every other character in the play as the family’s situation grows more and more bleak.

However, only Maggie wields the power necessary to conquer Brick’s inertia and, essentially, act for him (or, perhaps, in spite of him). In numerous ways, Maggie breaks the mold

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<sup>85</sup> James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 165. Emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 165.

Williams had been using to craft female characters for his dramas. Not too afraid to face her own truth, Maggie is characterized by her acute social understanding. She loves Brick but is also aware of his palpable fear of her: during an argument between the couple, Brick grabs a chair and faces Maggie, raising the chair “like a lion-tamer facing a big circus cat” (41). Mae and Gooper’s plan is also transparent to Maggie, even though they think she is caught in the trap of Brick’s alcoholism and dormancy. She takes great pride in understanding her scheming siblings-in-law, from their “pokes an’ pinches an’ kicks an’ signs an’ signals” (24) to the exact contours of their social standing.

“The social ladder” (25) is of paramount importance to Maggie. Although every Pollitt except Brick is acutely concerned with it, Maggie understands it better than any other character in *Cat*. She is as keenly aware of the dignity that follows the Pollitt name in the Delta as she is of Mae’s more flimsy family name: “Your brother Gooper still cherishes the illusion he took a giant step up on the social ladder when he married Miss Mae Flynn of the Memphis Flynns,” she tells Brick conspiratorially, but “the Flynns never had a thing in this world but money and they lost that, they were nothing at all but fairly successful climbers” (25). For Maggie, Mae’s monstrosity is intrinsically tied to her easy class navigation. Although Mae’s father “barely escaped doing time in the Federal pen for shady manipulations on th’ stock market,” Mae was nevertheless “a cotton carnival queen, as they remind us so often” (25).

However, Maggie’s scathing assessment of Mae’s class and family background is tinged with hypocrisy when she reveals her own class history. Exhausted by Brick’s refusal to see Mae and Gooper’s plan to “freeze [them] out of Big Daddy’s estate because you drink and I’m childless” (54), she vaults into an angry rant that reveals why she insists her marriage to Brick must grant her fiscal security whether he cares about money or not:

I been so God damn disgustingly poor all my life! That's the truth, Brick! ... You don't know what that's like. Well, I'll tell you, it's like you would feel a thousand miles away from Echo Spring!--And had to get back to it on that broken ankle... without a crutch! That's how it feels to be poor...and have to suck up to relatives that you hated because they had money and all you had was a bunch of hand-me-down clothes and a few old moldy three-per-cent government bonds. My daddy... fell in love with his liquor the way you've fallen in love with Echo Spring! And my poor Mama, having to maintain some semblance of social position... on an income of one hundred and fifty dollars a month!<sup>87</sup>

(55)

Brick says that both he and Gooper “married into society” (82), but if Maggie’s calculations are to be believed, the Pollitts were not very good at assessing the social capital assigned to family names.<sup>88</sup> Both Mae’s and Maggie’s families had lost most of their money due to poor patriarchal management (Mae’s father engaged in “shady” [25] stock market dealings, while Maggie’s father was an alcoholic [152]) and were barely maintaining social appearances. However, Mae Flynn’s family name seems to carry more social capital than Maggie’s since Mae was more broadly accepted. Because Maggie lacked the easy mobility and blind acceptance that Mae experienced and because her poverty seems to have been more severe--she only had two evening

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<sup>87</sup> The fact that Maggie needed her marriage to Brick so desperately adds a new level of risk and calculation to her maneuvers on the marriage market. Brick tells Big Daddy that the summer after he and Maggie graduated from Ole Miss, “she laid the law down to me, said, now or never, and so I married Maggie” (124). This was a risky, but likely a carefully calculated, move from a woman desperately in need of an advantageous marriage. The circumstances of Brick and Maggie’s engagement also reveal the pattern of gender role reversals characteristic of the couple’s relationship: once again, Maggie was the more assertive of the two.

<sup>88</sup> This makes sense when we consider Big Daddy’s relatively recent rise to success. The Pollitts would likely be considered “new money” since Big Daddy is largely a self-made man. As such, the Pollitts had little experience navigating “society” (82) and probably would not be talented “social climbers” (25). In fact, they made themselves totally susceptible to two such persons.



gowns when she debuted, “one Mother made me from a pattern in Vogue, the other a hand-me-down from a snotty rich cousin I hated” (55)-- she assumes her marriage into the Pollitt family was harder-fought.

However, Maggie’s status as a white woman of high class standing, even without the money to back her family name, renders her largely unsusceptible to the threat of non-white infiltration. Unlike Amanda and Blanche, who have lost their class standing and are forced to live among--and like--those “beneath” them by the time of *Menagerie*’s and *Streetcar*’s action, Maggie’s world is still closed off from any possibility of racial encroachment. Engagement with the realities of race relations is unnecessary for Maggie, who is free to focus on maintaining her class standing and, inherently, the presumed racial purity in her family line. Maggie and Doctor Baugh enter a scene early in Act Three mid-conversation; as she enters, we hear her telling the Doctor that her “family freed their slaves ten years before abolition. My great-great-grandfather gave his slaves their freedom five years before the War between the States started!” (135). Maggie’s deeply performative revelation functions to clear her family’s name--and thus Maggie herself--of any racist affiliations or tendencies. We are given no context for this pronouncement in the play since Maggie and Doctor Baugh enter the room speaking--we are not provided the beginning of their conversation.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Because the context of Maggie’s pronouncement was, to Williams, irrelevant, it must have been useful to advancing Maggie’s characterization on its own, without any rhetorical situation. I see her statement’s inclusion in the narrative at all as very pointed, indicating Maggie’s more nuanced, forward-thinking, and pragmatic performance of Southern femininity that leans into some standard traits of womanhood--compassion and wholesome selflessness--that positions Maggie as more progressive than “traditional” Southern women like Mae without transgressing any serious gender boundaries. Maggie’s social cognizance is on full display in this moment--she can identify when gender performances trump performances of regional pride.

Mae's frustration with Maggie's superiority complex concerning this issue is palpable: "Oh, for God's sake!" she cries, "Maggie's climbed back up in her family tree!" (135). This quick exchange between the two women reveals, or at least suggests, their relationships to and performances of white Southern femininity. Both judgement and jealousy could be embedded in Mae's frustrated response to Maggie's distance from the slaveholding past. Mae, another skilled social performer, may recognize (or assume) the blatant performativity of Maggie's pronouncement. However, it is more likely that Mae is casting judgement on Maggie for being proud, genuinely or not, of such an un-Southern family history. Although we are given no information about Mae's family's slaveholding practices, Mae's performance of Southern femininity and her family's easy social mobility suggest that she would be sympathetic to conservative views of race relations and labor. Because the play takes place in the 1950s, contemporaneous with its writing and production, the action occurs at the formal beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in 1954 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Maggie's proud revelation that her family terminated their own participation in slavery in 1856, "five years before the War between the States started" (135), makes a controversial statement about her own race-related opinions, setting her diametrically opposite Mae and her traditional Southern femininity.

One can also imagine that Maggie's staunch refusal to sympathize with slaveholding (and, more dramatically, her flagrant pride at being unaffiliated with it) sounds alarm bells for Mae in terms of who has the right to own Big Daddy's Delta plantation. That someone who expresses such pleasure at being from a family unsympathetic to the Confederate cause could inherit one of the largest plantations in the Mississippi Delta would seem unthinkable for someone who had subscribed to all of the racial and class sensibilities of the aristocratic South.

Although her pride lacks any tangible racial advocacy--that her great-great grandfather stopped slaveholding in 1856 says nothing at all about Maggie's racial sympathies--her transparency sends what would be a devastating signal to Blanche or Amanda that is likely received similarly by Mae. Mae's refusal to allow Brick and Maggie to have the plantation is deeply rooted in a cluster of cultural standards that Mae and Gooper have upheld and Brick and Maggie have not: Mae and Gooper have had white children and are in a literally fruitful marriage, Gooper is a successful lawyer, and Mae is an excellent performer of Southern femininity. Perhaps most importantly, though, regardless of their families' pro- or anti-slavery ideologies, Mae and Gooper do not scorn slaveholding openly, positioning themselves as logical sequents of the plantation and the practices that sustained it in the past.

Despite her unique positionality on slavery and the potential threat she poses, Maggie's rise to power in the family is unstoppable. The play's circular narrative construction reveals Maggie's personal trajectory from the beginning of the play to its end. In the beginning of the drama when Maggie and Brick are in their bedroom, Maggie calls herself "hideous" and expresses sadness about not being "thin-skinned any more" (27). However, by the end of the play, Maggie has reinterpreted and rationalized her transformation, translating it into sheer power she can hold over her husband: "Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn't want to be overpowered by you. But now, since you've taken to liquor--you know what?-- I guess it's bad, but now I'm stronger than you and I can love you more truly!" (172). Whether Maggie has reinterpreted her power over Brick to compensate for a guilty conscience is debatable--indicating that she is still affected by the standards of femininity she was raised to ascribe to, she does acknowledge that her newly-recognized strength may be "bad." However, in a statement that vaguely recalls the altered dynamic between Jane Eyre and Rochester after Jane

cares for him in his state of physical dependence, Maggie indicates that her control over Brick has granted her a greater, “truer” capacity for love.

However, in a departure from any initial parallels to *Jane Eyre*, Maggie’s assertiveness at the play’s conclusion is not indicative of a transfer of power. For all his internal struggling, Brick remains relatively static throughout the play. What changes from *Cat*’s beginning to its end is Maggie’s relationship to and perception of her power over her husband. Maggie’s strength lies in her ability to face the truth and name it, something none of the Pollitts seem capable of doing. When she questions Brick’s sexuality, he defensively accuses her of “naming” his friendship with Skipper “dirty”; she retorts that she is “naming it clean” (59). She solidifies her status in Brick’s life as a harbinger of truth by revealing the facts of Big Daddy’s cancer diagnosis to him before anyone else does (52). At the conclusion of the play, Maggie announces her paramount truth: that she is “stronger than” Brick (172). By explicitly naming and claiming her authority in the marriage, Maggie maintains her grip on the Southern aristocratic class standing she fought for, even as she demolishes any remaining traces of the traditional gender order that existed in her relationship with Brick. At the conclusion of the play, all the Pollitts--and the play’s audience--develop a “tough grudging admiration”<sup>90</sup> for Maggie the Cat, Williams’s most assertive female character who emerges victorious from the Pollitt family’s “thundercloud” with the promises of class standing and a fiscal future.

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<sup>90</sup> Lahr, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, 304.

### III. Conclusion

Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie are misconstrued in much of Williams scholarship, with many critics assuming that their femininity translates to fragility and that their nostalgia constitutes delusion. By distancing our perceptions of the three women from the common connotations of Southern femininity--frailty, selflessness, and domesticity--this reading infuses Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie with new power and personal agency. Leaning into the more disagreeable facets of Lost Cause nostalgia reveals the classist and racist ideologies that motivate their quests for upstanding Southern aristocratic lives--and the social and fiscal security that accompany such lives. Although critics have been slow to read Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie as rational socioeconomic actors, reading with an emphasis on the three women's socioeconomic desires reveals the influence of their Southern contexts more exactly, de-romanticizing Southern femininity and expounding on its problematic ideological positionalities. Blanche DuBois, Amanda Wingfield, and Maggie Pollitt have long been evaluated by critics in terms of their "monstrous" femininity. However, they become less monstrous and more familiar when we recognize the clear race- and class-based motivations for clinging so fiercely to their Southern identities. When we assume that their Southernness is defined by their literal proximity from and ideological relationships to ethnic and racial Others and people from lower socioeconomic classes, their motivations lose some of their critical abstraction and gain a new level of complexity.

Such a reading may constitute an interpretive shift because of assumptions about gender and desire. Amanda stubbornly refuses to accept defeat, reflecting on and re-inhabiting her legendary past self in attempts to teach her children how to secure money and advantageous marriage matches and distance themselves from class and racial Others. Blanche staunchly

refuses to succumb to Stanley's assumptions about what defines human worth or Stella's acceptance of her lower class standing, instead opting for an imaginary millionaire who will grant her the privacy she craves. Maggie wants to emulate Big Daddy and occupy his position of power, social mobility, and wealth. Whether we expect such desires to spring from aristocratic Southern women goes hand-in-hand with whether or not we are willing to accept that Williams's female characters are aware of their own needs and are cognizant of the sociopolitical contexts that surround them. Although Amanda, Blanche, and Maggie are caught in the middle of personal and emotional domestic dramas, their consistent attention to the practical minutiae of socioeconomic life--money, marriage, childbirth, security, and family names--reveals that these concerns are of utmost importance to them. Where others have read this sustained focus as delusion, wistful longing, or obsession, it may be more helpful--and more attentive to the texts--to interpret it as an unwavering, deep-seated desire for superiority and safety.

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