ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO:
WOMEN AND FIRST-CLASS PERFORMANCES IN THE PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
In English

By

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Washington, D.C.
May 1, 2008
The research and writing of this thesis 
is dedicated to Professor Pamela Fox, Robert and Florence Goff, and my Class Fictions 
colleagues who share my interest in and passion for working-class studies.

Many thanks, 
Jennifer Goff Didsbury
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“What I mean is—he thinks I’m sort of—prim and proper, you know! (She laughs out sharply) I want to deceive him enough to make him—want me . . .”

—Blanche, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

“Brick, y’know, I’ve been so God damn disgustingly poor all my life!—That’s the truth, Brick! [. . .] Always had to suck up to people I couldn’t stand because they had money and I was poor as Job’s turkey. 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!”

—Maggie, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

“When inequality is the general rule in society, the greatest inequalities attract no attention.”

*Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America*

When we think of working-class depictions on the modern American stage, playwrights such as Arthur Miller and David Mamet might spring to mind. *Death of a Salesman* and *American Buffalo* have left indelible impressions of the working-class
experience on the American psyche since both plays are known for the characters’ use of the vernacular as well as depictions of, for example, the quotidian struggles of traveling salesman Willy Loman.¹ Notably, however, both Miller’s and Mamet’s plays are dominated by male working-class characters. In fact, feminists have critiqued both playwrights for privileging a male worldview and marginalizing women in their plays (Fearnow 100). That said, second-wave feminists also have “virtually exclud[ed] from consideration” working-class women’s consciousness from feminist theory (Zinn et al. 291). As a result, analysis of working-class women in American literature remains sparse. It is worthwhile, then, to consider another playwright who critiqued the American dream and its devastating effects on the common man and woman: Tennessee Williams.

Certainly, The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire are widely recognized as seminal works that depict working-class characters and class stratification. Having written The Glass Menagerie (1944) before Death of a Salesman (1949), Williams was one of the first playwrights to place “working class figures […] on the stage within a very strong psychological context” (Seyd). Furthermore, the American Theatre Critics Association named A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) “the most important play of the twentieth century […]” over Death of a Salesman (Kolin and Curley 244). However, what differentiates Williams from Miller and Mamet is his inclusion of women as central figures in the schema. Furthermore, not only are female

¹ Miller’s essay “Tragedy and the Common Man” is also well-known, thus making his name and works synonymous with working-class literature.
characters included, they often dominate the stage in sheer number and, arguably, in presence.

However, surprisingly little feminist theory has been devoted to the female characters in Williams’ plays. And, though literary critics such as C. W. E. Bigsby, Philip Kolin, and Felicia Hardison Londré have long acknowledged and analyzed the theme of class division within Williams’ plays and have also given nods to the feminist themes in Williams’ work, a paucity of critical writing explores the working-class as a *sui generis* theme in Williams’ plays and (specifically) women’s roles within the American capitalist hierarchy. Those examinations that do analyze the effects of class tend to focus on *The Glass Menagerie* or on the male working-class characters such as Stanley Kowalski, thus providing only cursory analyses of the effects of class hegemony on the female characters in Williams’ work.

In addition, Williams’ oeuvre has not been examined specifically in regard to what class theorist Janet Zandy characterizes as “the invisibility of class” as an “indicator of ‘labor’s untold story’ and institutional resistance to the recognition of class differences” (84). Ironically, the notion of class categories must be dismissed by capitalist culture, since acknowledging an “under class” of workers implies an inherent inequality, a term that is anathema to the American dream ideal. Indeed, as recently as 1979, sociological surveys revealed that public perception was that “social class [was] of dwindling significance in advanced industrial societies” (Jackman 444). I would argue that Zandy’s assertions about the “invisibility of class” and “labor’s untold
story” are particularly complex themes in Williams’ plays due to the presence—indeed, preponderance—of female characters.

Therefore, to help contextualize class within Williams’ plays, particularly as it relates to women and labor, I will focus primarily on Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, though I will also explore Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), since she provides a positive model for feminist working-class agency. Certainly these are two of Williams’ best-known works to which much critical attention has been paid. However, if we apply working-class studies and feminist critical lenses to these works, certain questions arise: How do the female characters affect and/or problematize the definition of “working-class”? How might gender alter traditional class markers, particularly as we consider bourgeois preconceptions about the laboring body? How does agency become redefined when we consider class not as a neutral category, but a specifically gendered one? And how do traditional, patriarchal definitions of “masculinity” and “class” inform the way working-class femininity gets constructed?

Most (if not all) critical interpretations automatically impose upper-class status on Williams’ “mad heroines,” citing their fall from graceful Southern society as the reason for their descent into insanity. I will argue that their class status is more complex than such essentialist readings propose. The tacit suggestion of most critics is that Blanche and Maggie the Cat occupy a position of so-called “genteel poverty.” Though this may be true, this moniker carries various social and economic implications that I would like to unpack in light of working-class theory. As Zandy suggests, we
need to explore “the ambiguity, imprecision, and contradiction in confronting definitions of the working class [...] simultaneously recognizing the working-class ground of struggle, a visceral and material and psychic state not easily or theoretically translatable” (146). Examining Williams’ plays through this lens challenges the assumption that Blanche DuBois, for example, is an “aristocratic” foil to Stanley Kowalski’s plebian brutishness (Roderick 94). Though the theme of class struggle certainly exists, such a binary reading becomes more complicated if we apply feminist and working-class studies theory to the text.

Similarly, the definitions of labor and property (which operate both as leitmotifs and tropes in Williams’ plays) also come into question. In this regard, both feminist and class theory can shed light on what constitutes work as well as the ways in which the body is either exploited as property or is consciously used to achieve agency—topics that preoccupied Williams throughout his life. The fact that so few feminists have critiqued these characters from the standpoint of class hegemony is troubling, particularly since he raises critical questions about women’s roles in American culture—questions that still exist in contemporary society.

Specifically, Blanche and even Maggie the Cat are consistently characterized as Southern belles, petrified of losing their beauty, who stand in marked contrast to the physically overpowering, working men (i.e., Stanley and Big Daddy) who surround them. Critical analysis of these characters reveals a pattern of labeling them as “weak” and/or hysterical “victims” of a world too harsh for their tender sensibilities (Cardullo
80; Quirino 70; Riddel 30). But are they in fact victims, or rather intelligent, savvy women whose attempts to be seen (literally and metaphorically) as women of value—“soft and attractive” (Williams, Streetcar 515)—actually constitute “work,” since their actions are motivated by the need for economic survival? As sociologists Maxine Baca Zinn, Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Bonnie Thornton Dill suggest, “The failure to explore fully the interplay of race, class, and gender has cost the field [of women’s studies] the ability to provide a broad and truly complex analysis of women’s lives and of social organization” (295). The same principle is true in the field of literature: If we consider these female characters in light of the ambiguity of their place within the social hierarchy, the application of victim status may need to be reconsidered.

My discussion of Williams’ plays will begin with admittedly broad explanations of class categories within the context of capitalist patriarchal definitions, followed by an attempt to further inform those definitions with recent working-class studies (and feminist) theory. In his essay, “They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation,” Peter Hitchcock confronts the way in which assumptions about class affect its representation and argues for the need for theory when reading (or misreading) working-class characters. Recognizing the assumptions we (and others) make about class—particularly the way in which sociological markers translate into cultural representations—is paramount because of what Hitchcock observes as “the elusive and unstable nature of class itself” (20).
Traditional notions about how we read and interpret class create binaries that make the working class visible while simultaneously eliding “working-class subjectivity” (Hitchcock 21). Hitchcock’s assertion about the difficulty of representing class (because of this paradox) becomes even more complicated when we consider class through a gender-specific lens focusing on “the received ideas that govern [class’s] apprehension” (21)—that is, the assumptions that are made about how class is defined through dress, language, and the body itself. The inherent “limitations of social science with regard to working-class women” (Zinn et al. 290-91) are especially problematic in Williams’ plays because the female characters resist—indeed, defy—being identified by working-class markers. Instead, they attempt to gain agency through conscious performance of upper-class markers using language, for example, “to escape class subjectivity” (Fox 106). Still, Williams has written these characters with keen attention to their struggles for the specific purpose of exposing the myth of the American dream, which elides all those who fall outside patriarchal, capitalist definitions of “productive” members of society.

**Dominant Patriarchal Definitions of Class**

The definition of class in America has been historically difficult to nail down. As Joan Acker points out, “Class, although essential for making sense of the contemporary world, is a highly contested concept and a curiously vulnerable idea, subject to reassessment as political climates and work structuring change” (2). After
all, hierarchical class delineations are not supposed to exist in a country founded on the axiom that all are created equal. As a result, myriad books and studies have attempted to define how class works in the United States and, certainly, striving to apply a hard and fast sociological definition to class falls outside the parameters of this essay. Still, we cannot dismiss the notion of classification all together. As Pierre Bourdieu suggests:

The struggle of classifications is a fundamental division of the class struggle.

The power of imposing a vision of divisions, that is, the power of making visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is the political power par excellence: it is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society. (qtd. in Schocket 109)

Williams himself was a keen observer of this power play and both played to and against class stereotypes. Therefore, before we can move on to Williams’ understanding of class and his depiction of class on the American stage, it is important to provide an overview of the ways working/lower-, middle-, and upper-class have traditionally (albeit implicitly) been defined and, later, to explore the extent to which education and the accumulation of wealth complicate these categories. My discussion will focus specifically on the way the female characters in Williams’ plays force the already fluid definition of class in America into greater ambiguity.
For now, I would like to provide a rudimentary outline of the traditional, patriarchal\textsuperscript{2} (tacit) understanding of class categories that is defined, mainly, by the extent of influence an individual wields within the dominant, capitalist power structure. Again, these categories are not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, since class is so ambiguous in America, I am specifically focusing on the extent of individual (not collective) influence to inform the general definitions of the following categories. Furthermore, I based these definitions largely on my own anecdotal understanding of class, but also on the categories set forth in Mary R. Jackman’s article “The Subjective Meaning of Social Class Identification in the United States.” Her analysis focuses specifically on “commonly used social class terms” (444) and references a baseline study conducted in 1945, which would reflect the public perception of class categories during the time that Williams was writing the particular plays I discuss. I also took into account my reading of Williams’ understanding of class as recorded in his journals (excerpts of which are provided in greater detail in subsequent chapters). Finally, I relied on Alain de Botton’s discussion of class as tied to status, or “[o]ne’s position in society […] one’s value and importance in the eyes of the world” (vii) since this notion preoccupied Williams throughout his life.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{2} I assert that our assumptions about class are patriarchal, since they are predicated on a history of masculine dominance within the capitalist structure.

\textsuperscript{3} See Chapter 1.
Basic Class Categories

Working Class

Someone who falls within the working-class category is: an individual whose occupation garners a low income and requires the use of his or her body; one who lacks advanced education; and one who executes, rather than assigns, tasks and asserts little or no influence within society.

Middle Class

A middle-class individual’s income allows him or her to live comfortably; is one who possesses advanced education; and one who retains some independence and/or influence within his or her occupation.

Upper Class

The upper-class person usually possesses extensive education; earns significant wealth (either through inheritance or career choice); does not have to use his or her body in the working environment; and exerts tremendous influence within the dominant power structure.

Again, there are additional categories into which individuals may fall (e.g., upper-middleclass), and certainly there are other factors that affect how we infer someone’s class status. I have provided these brief definitions simply to provide some
framework of the discussion of class vis-à-vis the way Williams viewed his own class and how we might (or might not) view his plays as working-class texts.

With these rudimentary categories outlined, I can now focus on how Williams’ upbringing and relationship to class status shaped the ways the female characters in his plays resist binary class categorization and evoke larger questions about the ways in which women’s struggles within the capitalist system are overlooked—particularly poor women’s.
CHAPTER 1

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: WORKING-CLASS OR CLASS TRANVESTITE?

Not surprisingly, if we use the patriarchal definitions of class as outlined in the Introduction, identifying Williams’ class is difficult at best. His father, Cornelius Coffin (“C.C.”) Williams, was a traveling shoe salesman who (nevertheless) hailed from a prominent Southern family (Thornton 26). His mother, Edwina, was the daughter of a minister. Though she possessed “the beauty and social inclinations of a Southern belle,” she did not possess the wealth, nor was she actually from the South; she was originally from Ohio (Hale, “Early Williams” 11; Adler “Williams” 300). Still, she prided herself on having been reared in a cultured environment that she felt endowed her with a certain refinement, and she maintained a distinct pecuniary obsession throughout her life since “only money and status mattered” (Hale, “Early Williams 13)—an obsession that Williams inherited.

The family originally shared the residences of Edwina’s parents, first in Columbus then Clarksdale, Mississippi. When C.C. was promoted to the position of manager with the International Shoe Company, he moved the family to St. Louis, which he saw as a city of opportunity (Londré 304). However, C.C.’s alcoholism, philandering with “light ladies,” the onslaught of The Great Depression, and Edwina’s fixation with keeping up with St. Louis’ country-club set kept the Williams family on financial tenterhooks (Hale, “Early Williams” 13). They moved multiple times, living
in apartments that are credited as inspiring the set for *The Glass Menagerie* (Londré 304).

The family’s financial precariousness led Williams to his own internal debate about what constitutes “work” and, thus, confusion over how he fit into the class stratum. Having published his first story in 1924 (when he was 13), Williams was already addicted to writing. Though supported by his mother, Williams’ father, referring to him as “Miss Nancy”4, lacked any tolerance for the increasing amount of time Williams devoted to his craft, since he felt Williams’ time would be better spent at a job that earned money (Hale, “Early Williams” 13). In an attempt to prove to his father that his writing was “work,” he entered a literary contest, for which he won five dollars; he “was convinced that he could make writing pay and thus earn his father’s respect” (Hale, “Early Williams” 13). His attempts proved to be in vain, since his father never acknowledged or supported Williams’ talent. As a result, he would struggle for the rest of his life with an obsessive need for his plays to be commercial successes.

Despite his mother’s objections (because of her desire to maintain the appearance of genteel affluence) and Williams’ own assertions that he could earn money from his writing, C.C. put him to work in the shoe factory so that he could help support the family income (Hale, “Early Williams” 15). The grueling nature of the work and Williams’ insistence on proving to his father that he could earn a living

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4 “Miss Nancy” was a pejorative epithet applied to homosexuals in the first half of the 20th century.
through writing, resulted in his nervous breakdown. As he recorded in his journal: “When I came home from work I would tank up on black coffee so I could remain awake most of the night, writing short stories which I could not sell” (Thornton xi). After his collapse, Williams never returned to the shoe factory. Still, the experience of working there affected Williams profoundly and inspired his depictions of rounded, psychologically complex, working-class characters at a time when such portrayals did not exist (Seyd).

Yet, Williams’ attempt to situate himself within the American class hierarchy continued to plague him. His work at the factory and his exposure to St. Louis’ extensive “Hooverville” led to his association with Jack Conroy, a self-educated coal miner who founded *Anvil, The Magazine of Proletarian Fiction*, which published stories by working-class writers (Hale, “Tom Williams” 14). Williams submitted two stories to *Anvil*, neither of which was ever published. Despite his work at the shoe factory, his support of Socialist Norman Thomas for president, and his connections to the Union of Artists and Writers (UAW), Conroy and the other UAW members (who saw themselves as authentically working class) perceived Williams as living “in the bourgeois ‘decadence’ they despised, his father a member of a country club and his mother a prospective Regent of the D.A.R.” (Hale, “Tom Williams” 15). Williams recorded his painful understanding of their characterization of him in his journal: “[. . .] they think I live in an ‘ivory tower’ and perhaps I do! Only it isn’t solid ivory. There’s a great deal of plain disgusting mud” (Thornton 37). Still, Williams remained indelibly
influenced by his relationship with Conroy and the other activists: “I don’t think any writer has much purpose back of him unless he feels bitterly the inequities of the society he lives in” (qtd. in Hale, “Tom Williams” 20-21). Indeed, he would go on to produce one of the keenest critiques of the American dream myth in modern drama, *The Glass Menagerie*.

On the one hand, Williams, feeling the bite of financial instability, sympathized with societal injustices and longed to identify with working-class causes. But to members of the UAW, he was bourgeois due to his prominent family connections and the lengths to which his mother went to ensure that he behave like a gentleman. Furthermore, besides his job at the shoe factory, Williams had never had to use his body for labor, whereas Jack Conroy had been a miner (Hale, “Early Williams” 16). And despite the fact that he wrote proletarian plays that were “powerful indictment[s] of an uncaring society” (Hale, “Early Williams” 19), the writing he produced was not regarded as authentic “work”—ironically either by the UAW activists or by his bourgeois father. As a result, he was haunted by a paradoxical obsession with the way in which his writing was equated with monetary success throughout his life.

When Williams moved to New Orleans to try to obtain a Works Progress Administration job, he became financially destitute. His journals include exhaustive lists of bills (Thornton 253) and lengthy recordings of his pecuniary problems:

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5 His father also participated in the charade. When Williams was finally able to attend college (the tuition for which was supplied by earnings from his job and contributions from his grandparents), C.C. Williams insisted that he pledge Alpha Tau Omega fraternity and, later, join the ROTC. When he failed the latter, his father made him leave school (Gussow and Holditch 1101).
Friday, 17 October 1941

Friday Midnight

Difficulties—financial. Blue devils dispersed. I am flat broke—stony—literally not one cent. Bummed a couple of cigarettes off a queen at Jean’s. Guess I’ll have to sell a suit tomorrow. Hate to. But I do love to eat and one must have beer money on Sat. Night in the Quarter—Rent over due [sic] 3 or 4 days. [. . .]

Monday, 20 October 1941

Drank half a pitcher of water to relieve my hunger. Found a few grapes left in bottom of sack—two were eatable.

When hunger drives man to a crime, it should not be considered a crime—except against the man who committed it. (Thornton 247, 251)

However, despite these impoverished conditions, he still managed to finagle funds from various resources: Friends and his grandparents would send him checks, and he would occasionally receive packages of “Shoes, shirts, candy” from his mother (Thornton 245). Though he resisted relying on his family for money, he succumbed when destitution prevailed: “Hatred of my father & fear—yes, fear—make it about as impossible as usual to live at home. Also poor Mother’s gross lack of sensitivity. Grand has been ill and I returned partly to see her, partly because my finances got horribly muddled” (Thornton 257). Yet, his journal entries also imply that he would occasionally receive money from his sexual partners6, thus blurring the line between

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6 See page 19 for a more comprehensive discussion of Williams’ sexual identity.
consensual intimacy and prostitution: “I wake up with no money for breakfast and the landlady right outside my door. [...] Bill loaned me $5.00—God bless him!—I still have my good suit. / Had a pretty satisfactory ‘roll in the hay’ this evening [...]” (Thornton 247). The fact that Williams ultimately possessed connections that provided money while simultaneously trading sex for money certainly complicates his class status.

“The Catastrophe of Success”

Williams wrote for years and suffered several setbacks before the success of *The Glass Menagerie* catapulted him to fame and financial security. When *Battle of Angels* (which later became *Orpheus Descending*) closed due to negative reactions to the play’s “explicit sexuality” (Thornton 217), Williams felt the disappointment keenly:

[Battle of Angels] ended rather disastrously—in failure—but it gave me a taste of glory—it brought me within sight of the ‘bitch goddess’7—then whisked me rudely back to the near-oblivion I came from.

I survived it all fairly well.

Now I am entering another phase—

seems more dangerous, perhaps, than anything yet.

Revised script rejected.

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7 Williams borrowed the phrase “bitch goddess” from William James who described it as “a symptom of the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS” (qtd. in Thornton 226).
$280.00=total funds.

No new scripts.

Two months to find some solution.

Then destitution. (Thornton 227)

Despite this disappointment and his almost neurotic obsession with seeing his plays as commercial successes, his attitude toward success was paradoxical. As his journals and later essays about his work reveal, he simultaneously demanded and rejected financial success. Indeed, his attitudes about success as tied to status and financial freedom underscore the ambiguity of his class.

After The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire secured Williams’ position as one of the best playwrights of the twentieth century, he submitted an essay to the New York Times called “On a Streetcar Named Success” in which he wrote candidly about his struggle to understand his identity as it was characterized by publicly defined achievement:

The sort of life I had had previous to this popular success was one that required endurance, a life of cleaving and scratching along a sheer surface and holding on tight with raw fingers […] I was out on a level plateau with my arms still thrashing and my lungs still grabbing at air that no longer resisted. This was security at last. / I sat down and looked about me and was suddenly very depressed. […] You cannot arbitrarily say to yourself, I will now continue my life as it was before this thing, Success, happened to me. […] You [know that]
the public Somebody you are when you “have a name” is a fiction created with mirrors and that the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you. Williams’ remarks echo the kind of liminality expressed by contemporary working-class writers such as Dorothy Allison and bell hooks, who admit to despising being poor but who also struggle with the unfamiliarity of financial comfort (Hollibaugh and Allison 16; hooks 102). But can we classify Williams as “authentically” working-class? In his essay, “Undercover Explorations of the ‘Other Half,’ Or the Writer as Class Transvestite,” Eric Schocket argues that Stephen Crane (and other middle-class authors of the late nineteenth century) tried to establish the “authenticity” of their depictions of (and solidarity with) the lower class by choosing to live in impoverished conditions (110). There is evidence that Williams falls into this same description—a middle-class playwright who “attempted to move ‘inside’ and collapse the distance between the subject and object into one performative, narrational ‘body’” (Schocket 110). Though his poverty while he was in New Orleans was legitimate, some might argue that it was choice rather than authentic lack that led to his impoverished conditions. Neither Allison nor hooks possessed such a choice. Their financial destitution was imposed on them from birth, and they did not have family connections who could bail them out. As Zandy points out, “Ambivalence suggests a middle-class sense of choice. Accepting responsibility for the circumstances of your life is a working-class value, coming as it does out of a recognition that there may not be an
official backup support system, no private trust fund, only the extension (and sometimes sacrifice) of self […]” (119).

Indeed, Williams’ letters reveal that he was intent on constructing a starving-artist identity for himself. In 1939, when his work began to receive more attention, he told his family “not to use ‘fancy stationary’ [sic] if they wrote to him in care of [his agent, Audrey] Wood, ‘as my circumstances are supposed to be desperate, you know’” (qtd. in Moschovakis 484). But the issue of Williams’ working-class authenticity may be a red herring. After all, Zandy also asserts, “Certainly, writers born into middle-class circumstances—with the appropriate imaginative and class-conscious leap—can and do write working-class texts” (85). I would take Zandy’s point a step further and argue that the class into which Williams was born matters less than the class that was ascribed to him due to his sexuality.

**Sexuality, Class, and Identity Construction**

Williams, who was reared to measure himself by public expectations, was plagued by the angst of locating his identity vis-à-vis “the ideals of success laid down by our society” (de Botton vii). Simultaneously, because he was a homosexual and a sensitive observer of the human condition, he also felt “bitterly the inequalities of the

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society he live[d] in” (Hale, “Tom Williams” 20-21). Indeed, it is Williams’ sexuality that both complicates and, paradoxically, clarifies his location within the class hierarchy. As Allean Hale points out, “In 1939 a homosexual was outside the law, outside the Church, branded a pervert by conventional society” (Hale, “Early Williams” 21). As a result, he was automatically relegated to the position of Other.

Therefore, Williams’ homosexuality is a key factor that actually prevents him from identifying as working-, middle-, or upper-class—especially in pre- and post-World War II patriarchal, capitalist culture, which automatically placed homosexuals outside any normative classifications. More significantly, though it is well-known that Williams was homosexual, less well-known is how far outside normative America he placed himself, as evidenced by a conversation with a friend that he recorded in his journal:

‘We [homosexuals] ought to be exterminated’ said Oliver. ‘for the good of society.’ [sic] I argued that if we were society would lose some of its most sensitive, humanitarian members. A healthy society does not need artists, said Oliver. What is healthy about a society with no spiritual values?—Then you think spiritual values are identical with us? Said Oliver. No, I admitted sadly, but we have made some unique contributions because of our unique position and I do not believe that we are detrimental to anyone but ourselves. […] Some day society will take perhaps the suitable action. […] I appear to be a vile creature, do I not? Unclean and vicious. (Thornton 234-35, 251)
This entry reflects his tremendous loneliness, emptiness, and even self-hatred. Yet, while he felt condemned, and—indeed—condemned himself, he also defended his right to express himself. Williams’ ambivalence about his own sexuality while simultaneously defending the expression of sexuality generally is critical, since it informs the characterization of the women in his plays, who struggle with their desires vis-à-vis the societal expectation that they suppress their libidos. The adherence to or rejection of the code of chastity is distinctly connected to the way class is constructed and marked, particularly in women (as I will discuss with regard to Blanche and Maggie).

In addition, the performative implications of this interchange are stunning. Essentially, Williams’ sexuality created an inner conflict that produced a dual identity, a theme of liminality that surfaces repeatedly in the female characters in his plays: “If only I could realize I am not 2 [sic] persons. I am only one. There is no sense in this division. An enemy inside myself!” (Thornton 33). The inner conflicts Williams suffered—as a man who was somehow simultaneously bourgeois and proletariat (Hale, “Tom Williams” 18) as well as sexually repressed and licentious—surface in the female characters in his plays. These characters underscore the aporia that is introduced when the myth of the American dream confronts the realities of class stratification, gender discrimination, and sexual repression.
CHAPTER 2
BLANCHE DUBOIS: SOUTHERN BELLE OR FIRST-CLASS PERFORMER?

Given the influence of his mother and Williams’ own preoccupation with maintaining appearances, Philip Kolin, among other critics, has suggested that the character of Blanche DuBois is heavily based on Williams himself (246). Specifically, Blanche’s character brings to the fore the issue of liminality with which Williams also struggled. As such, her character reveals his own anxieties about class and his simultaneous sympathy for the working-class position. After all, while Blanche “represents all that is sacred within [Southern aristocratic] culture—the love for language, the appreciation of art and music, the ‘beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart’” (Roderick 94), she is also a former prostitute. As a result, Blanche’s ability to perform upper-class and maintain the appearance of the Southern belle while she secretly resorts to whatever means she can to survive actually poses a subversive threat to the patriarchal system.

This threat has not gone unnoticed by critics, such as John Mason Brown, who was quoted as recently as 1988:

Her abiding tragedy comes neither from her family’s dwindling fortunes nor from her widow’s grief. It is sprung from her own nature. From her uncontrollable duplicity. From her pathetic pretensions to gentility even when she is known as a prostitute in the little town in which she was brought up. From her love of the refined when her life is devoted to coarseness. From the
fastidiousness of her tastes and the wantonness of her desires. From her incapacity to live up to her dreams. Most particularly, from her selfishness and her vanity, which are insatiable. (qtd. in Berkman 34).

The blatant misogyny of Brown’s critique aside, his assessment of Blanche utterly ignores her economic predicament and reveals the extent to which working-class concerns are invisible within the dominant power hierarchy, even in academic circles. Brown’s censure of Blanche reveals what Dorothy Allison calls “the politics of they” (qtd. in Baker 118). Allison’s comment refers to the myths perpetuated by “socially constructed categories […] produced by heteropatriarchal bourgeois culture”—myths that label the poor/working-class as worthless untouchables (Baker 118). While Williams—through Blanche’s predicament—calls attention to the harsh economic realities faced by single women in post-World-War-II America, Brown only perpetuates the patriarchal, capitalist constructions of women and class that Williams would decry. He conveniently neglects to point out that Blanche has lost her teaching position and glosses over her “dwindling family fortunes” and the death of her husband, failing to note that both of these events have left her financially destitute. Yet, he then condemns her for resorting to prostitution while simultaneously scoffing at her “pathetic […] incapacity to live up to her dreams.” Brown’s condemnation of Blanche serves as evidence of the type of Catch-22 in which poor women (and also the homosexual male and women generally) found themselves in post-war American culture—a predicament and struggle Williams seeks to expose in A Streetcar Named
"Desire" as tragic and unjust. The tacit assumption of Brown’s statement is that Blanche should have pulled herself up by the proverbial bootstraps, yet he acknowledges no room for her attempt to use high heels instead of boots. For Brown, Blanche is intolerable since she dispels the “middle-class mythology of the noble poor—those ‘hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable persons’” (Baker 117). She is particularly despicable for Brown since she is a woman who is supposed to claim (or at least aspire to) some “breeding”; therefore, she should know better. Blanche is not a woman on the brink of destitution relying on the only tools she has to survive. Rather she is a “known prostitute” and her “life is devoted to coarseness.” In a word, she is trash. Ironically, Brown’s patriarchal ideology misses the nuance of Williams’ character and his overall critique of the American dream myth, which requires that one fit into dominant culture before one can reap the benefits of it. Blanche is well-aware of how the Browns of the world view her. Indeed, her overwhelming shame over her past is what impels her to “pretensions of gentility.”

Even less scathing assessments of Blanche nevertheless reveal a similar type of class discrimination—specifically where women are concerned. For example, Bert Cardullo creates a distinct class binary: “To be sure, the nobility and grandeur of Blanche’s character are marred [emphasis added] by her intemperance, be it manifested through her passion for drink, her appetite for sex, or her intolerance of

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9 Though women and working-class issues constitute the focus of this essay, much as been written about Williams’ depictions of homosexuals and the injustices they suffered. Notably, much of Blanche’s mental deterioration results from the guilt she suffers for publicly denouncing her young, homosexual thus leading to his suicide.
Stanley’s life-style (all of which she strives with varying degrees of willpower, and success, to overcome)” (83). Notably, drinking and the overt expression of sexuality have been traditionally marked as signifiers of the lower-class and, therefore, are deemed to constitute “contaminated” and “undesirable” behavior (Stallybrass and White 136-37). Still, it is interesting that Stanley’s drinking and sexual appetite, though marking him as lower-class, do not “mar” him, but simply signify his class and character. Because she is a woman, Blanche is held to a different expectation. Furthermore, while Cardullo affords consideration to Stanley’s “life-style,” he proffers no explanation as to why Stanley should not be held to the same standard and be sensitive to Blanche’s destitute situation.

This double-standard can be attributed in large part to the iconic myth of the Southern belle, a literary and social archetype with which Williams was quite familiar since his own mother, originally from Ohio, was adept at performing the role.

According to Kathryn Lee Seidel, the archetypal belle

[...] is the young, unmarried daughter of a landed (and thus aristocratic) family, who lives on a great plantation. She is of marriageable age, ready to be courted. Although she may be only sixteen or seventeen, she is regarded as being at the zenith of her life. [...] She is exuberant, a bit vain, and rather naïve. Proud of her aristocratic heritage, she has one flaw, “a vein of romance in her composition”; she desires not just a man but a “gallant cavalier,” perhaps from the novels of Sir Walter Scott. (3-4)
Furthermore, there is “Southern society’s traditional emphasis upon the beauty of the belle, its insistence that she be innocent, its denial of her sexual desire, and its forbidding her to have sexual experience” (Seidel 31).

Though most critics suggest that Blanche was delusional, unable to separate the reality of her circumstances and desires from her adherence to the Southern belle role, I would argue that she is actually painfully aware of her liminal position. Multiple examples in the play testify to Blanche’s self-awareness and her conscious attempts to hide her true class: “Daylight never exposed so total a ruin!” (Williams, Streetcar 475); “I’m very adaptable to—to circumstances” (Williams, Streetcar 499). Perhaps the greatest evidence that Blanche understands the need for her Southern belle performance lies in two key exchanges involving Mitch:

**BLANCHE:** [...] He hasn’t gotten a thing but a goodnight kiss, that’s all I have given him, Stella. I want his respect. And men don’t want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly. Especially when the girl is over—thirty. They think a girl over thirty ought to—the vulgar term is—“put out.” ... And I—I’m not “putting out.” Of course he—he doesn’t know—I mean I haven’t informed him—of my real age! [...] What I mean is—he thinks I’m sort of—prim and proper, you know! *(She laughs out sharply)* I want to *deceive* him enough to make him—want me . . .

**STELLA:** Blanche, do you want *him*?

**BLANCHE:** I want to *rest!* I want to breathe quietly again! [...]
This interchange is critical since it reveals Blanche’s shrewd understanding of sexual politics in a patriarchal culture as well as her awareness of how dependent she is on the persona of the Southern belle for her economic survival now that she has lost her “pitiful salary at the school” (Williams, *Streetcar* 480). Though it may be true that the “successful belle never forgets that she is engaged in a covert activity, and that her victim(s) must remain totally unaware of what she is up to” (Matthews 136), the stakes are much higher for Blanche. She could move to another town and return to prostitution, but she dares to desire a different life for herself, one that allows her to “rest” and “breathe quietly.” Feeling as though she has run out of options, her very existence depends on her ability to class-pass—to hide her past, her drinking, her sexuality, and other markers—in order to convince Mitch she is not “common,” but rather worthy of marriage.

The other exchange reveals Blanche’s outright admission that she makes the choice to lie, favoring a life of the imagination over a reality that would condemn her to insult, poverty, and squalor:

**BLANCHE:** Of course, you don’t really mean to be insulting.

**MITCH:** No, just realistic.

**BLANCHE:** I don’t want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth. I tell what *ought* to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!—Don’t *turn the light on*! (Williams, *Streetcar* 545)
Blanche knows full well that her true identity—an aging woman who possesses sexual desire, an alcoholic, and a woman who worked as a prostitute to stay alive rather than wasting away “nobly”—equates to a pariah. Blanche’s performance as a Southern belle is not as much an attempt to snare a man as it is to ensure her own economic security. Still, she does desire love and respect desperately, so she tells what “ought to be the truth” to elicit those qualities from those who would scorn her if they knew the reality of her circumstances. If she is delusional, it is due to her belief that by following the rules of society, she can achieve happiness: “I’m going to do something. Get hold of myself and make myself a new life!” (Williams, Streetcar 506), she exclaims to Stella. As Mary Ann Corrigan asserts, “Williams depicts the total defeat of a woman whose existence depends on her maintaining illusions about herself and the world. Blanche is both a representative and a victim of a tradition that taught her that attractiveness, virtue, and gentility led automatically to happiness. But reality proved intractable to the myth” (56). When she does her best to create “a new life” and is exposed by Stanley, she has no other options other than utter escape into fantasy or death.
CHAPTER 3
ALL PLAY AND NO WORK? LABOR REDEFINED

Though the Oxford English Dictionary defines labor as “exertion of the faculties of body or mind [emphasis added],” labor within the American capitalist context is more commonly associated with physical work that generates wages and leads to the accumulation of wealth. Specifically, as Joan Acker suggests, labor is defined by “the masculine model,” thus subordinating and even nullifying feminine modes of labor (99): “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the taken-for-granted, generally accepted form, attributed to leaders and other influential figures at particular historical times. Hegemonic masculinity legitimates the power of those who embody it” (82). Therefore, considering labor through a feminist lens complicates the way in which work is performed in Williams’ plays. As a result, redefining labor in this way also problematizes class categories—particularly for Blanche.

Williams and His “Body” of Work

While in New Orleans (and, later, in New York), despite frequently being unable to pay his rent or even eat, Williams never secured a long-term job, though he served as a waiter, an elevator operator, an usher, and a bellhop—all for brief stints (Gussow and Holditch 1012-13). Instead, he worked feverishly on his plays and relied on his looks and charm to provide him with the bare minimum of economic
sustenance. Indeed, his journals reflect his obsession with his looks and his belief that his body was more valuable than his thoughts:

Remember the New York days—the plush days when I had a room at the Woodrow. [...] O I want to have money again. I love the pleasures, the sensual pleasures so much. And how I loathe [...] the indignity of being broke. I suppose I am too much body, not enough soul. Oh, I have thoughts—yes. But they don’t seem to get anywhere.

Only the body seems to get anywhere. (Thornton 251)

This journal entry reveals Williams’ keen understanding of the way certain physical attributes are idealized in Western culture. Even though he was ever-critical of the ways in which people were afforded or denied status based on these ideals, he nevertheless defined his own worth by society’s criteria. Furthermore, he understood the necessity of “looking the part” if he wanted entrée into particular social circles. Indeed, despite a particularly difficult period when he was literally starving and was about to be evicted from a room in a boarding house, he resisted selling his “good suit” since he felt it was his only calling card into polite society (Thornton 251).

As a result, though he empathized deeply with the marginalized and alienated—particularly due to economic injustice—he never wanted to remain within their ranks. For Williams, then, maintaining his physical image was of paramount importance since he associated it with upward mobility and security. Indeed, it became

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10 See Introduction.
his obsession: “Though I’ve had considerable success in my work—play bought by Theatre Guild and apparently headed for Fall production—my emotional life has been a series of rather spectacular failures. […] I am losing my looks alarmingly” (Thornton 195). Both critics and Williams himself have noted this connection between the playwright and one of his most famous characters, Blanche DuBois (Adler, *A Streetcar* 41; Kolin 244). For both, creating and maintaining appearances through language and physical artifice constituted the essence of their work. But Blanche is not the only character with pecuniary concerns who tries to use her body to secure her financial future. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Maggie reflects an obsession with clothing and beauty, linking it directly to her economic survival:

> And my poor Mama, having to maintain some semblance of social position, to keep appearances up, on an income of one hundred and fifty dollars a month on those old government bonds! […] The dress I married you in was my grandmother’s weddin’ gown. . . .
> So that’s why I’m like a cat on a hot tin roof! […] You can be young without money but you can’t be old without it. (Williams, *Cat* 908)

Unlike Blanche, who hides her impoverished past out of utter mortification and is destroyed by the glare of exposure, Maggie—while ashamed of her poverty—does not let her shame consume her. In fact, she admits her objectives and her means to achieve them openly. She recognizes the way patriarchal class hierarchy manifests its hold on her and offers a flagrant rebellion. Time and again, she confesses to her impoverished
background: “[...] I was poor as Job’s turkey. You don’t know what that’s like” (Williams, Cat 907); “All my family ever had was family—and luxuries such as cashmere robes still surprise me!” (Williams, Cat 919). Furthermore, she does not back down when Mae tries to shame her background:

Mae: Oh, for God’s sake! Maggie’s climbed back up her family tree!
Margaret (sweetly): What, Mae? [...] This is a deliberate campaign of vilification for the most disgusting and sordid reason on earth, and I know what it is! It’s avarice, avarice, greed, greed! (Williams, Cat 955, 967)

Maggie swats Mae with good, middle-class manners, responding to her with a saccharine rhetorical question, thus exposing Mae’s mean remark, which is meant to humiliate her. She then escalates into rebellious fury. Pamela Fox, in her discussion of British working-class narratives, suggests that though the working-class subject certainly feels the injury of shame, shame can also be “emancipatory”: “Self-awareness and confidence become possible because in the process of revealing the shame of being shamed, often one is exposing oppressive societal norms and values as well” (16). Fox’s argument certainly applies to Maggie, who possesses the self-awareness of her shame but also the confidence of her own human dignity. Though she wants to secure her future, she only wants what is due to her (and Brick), whereas Mae and Gooper want more than their fair share. She refuses the hypocrisy and “mendacity” of Mae and Gooper who serve as symbols of the patriarchal capitalistic culture that have relegated her to such a tenuous position.
Conversely, though Blanche (like Maggie) performs upper-class, she never admits to her past, thus leading to her downfall. By not acknowledging her history, Blanche is exposed and “made to feel ‘inappropriate’ by dominant cultural norms” (Fox 13). As a result, she is utterly destroyed since the illusion she has tried to create is no longer credible, and her true self is unequivocally devalued in society.

Meanwhile, Maggie provides an alternative model. She turns the tables and exposes Mae and Gooper even as they try to expose her:

MARGARET: Precious Mommy. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I—!

(She bends her long graceful neck to press her forehead to Big Mama’s bulging shoulder under its black chiffon.)

GOOPER: How beautiful, how touching, this display of devotion!

MAE: Do you know why she’s childless? She’s childless because that big beautiful athlete husband of hers won’t go to bed with her!

GOOPER: You jest won’t let me do this in a nice way, will yah? Aw right—Mae and I have five kids with another one coming! I don’t give a goddam if Big Daddy likes me or don’t like me or did or never did or will or will never! I’m just appealing to a sense of common decency and fair play. […] Big Daddy is dying of cancer, and it’s spread all through him and it’s attacked all his vital organs including the kidneys and right now he is sinking into uremia, and you all know what uremia is, it’s poisoning of the whole system due to the failure of the body to eliminate its poisons.
MARGARET (to herself, downstage, hissingly): Poisons, poisons! Venomous thoughts and words! In hearts and minds!—That’s poisons!

This interchange is revelatory in that it underscores the ways in which the women in the play literally use their bodies to produce capital. Normally an unpaid occupation, motherhood in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is the prerequisite for inheriting Big Daddy’s business, wealth, and land. If Maggie is unable to “produce,” she will lose all financial security. As Joan Acker suggests,

> The aims of capitalist production are to create profit and to extend the control of capitalist organizations, either in competition or collusion, over larger and larger geographic areas and domains of activity. Production is organized, work process are invented, to achieve these aims. The aims of the complex and multiple activities summarized as reproduction are the social/physical reproduction of human beings […] (86-87)

Gooper and Mae, “that monster of fertility” (Williams, *Cat* 886), symbolize the capitalist “poison,” which prizes the acquisition and augmentation of wealth to the exclusion of all other things—including familial love. Mae is a factory, producing children one after the other to prove her value to Big Daddy and, concomitantly, secure an empire for Gooper and herself. Mae’s exposure of the reason for Maggie’s barren condition is an attempt to devalue her and undercut her ability to use her beauty for economic gain. Indeed, as revealed in her exchange with Brick, Maggie is full well of her value, or lack thereof: “[…] you and I have not produced any children, are totally
childless and therefore totally useless!” (Williams, *Cat* 884). Though this statement
reveals that she seeks to share the burden with Brick, he continues to ignore her
throughout the play. His denial of her underscores the extent to which she is dependent
on him to in order to (re)produce. Without him, she will be destitute. As a result, her
desperation increases as Big Daddy’s death becomes imminent.

“A Painful Dependence”: Beauty as Labor

These characters stress the predicament in which women found themselves in
the Cold War era and, indeed, in which they find themselves today: If a woman
“chooses to use her own beauty, or to rely upon it for her own sense of self or worth,
she risks succumbing to/reducing herself to being little more than the object of male
desire and hence eradicating the possibility of her own subjectivity and agency” (Cahill
50). As a result, the beauty culture has traditionally maintained pariah status in feminist
circles. And yet, the reality is that “Woman herself recognizes that the world is
masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are
men” (de Beauvoir 664). Similarly, Williams not only recognized the realities of the
patriarchal power hierarchy; he was critical of it. As a result, if we look at Williams’
plays solely through a patriarchal lens, we run the risk of essentializing the female
characters—particularly as regards their class.

Fortunately, recent feminist theory has begun to explore ways that “feminine
beautification practices escape the workings of patriarchal power” (Cahill 43). Using
examples from Williams’ plays, I would like to complicate this notion further by exploring the way beautification practices actually qualify as forms of labor—a notion undertheorized by middle-class feminists. For example, though Ann Cahill provides a superb argument for the feminist “legitimacy” of beautification practices and exposes the fine line between “process and product” in regard to women’s subjectivity (45), she also admits to asserting her position from “a highly particularized location, one marked by, among other factors, [her] race (white), class status (upper), education (advanced), and familial size and structure (large and traditionally nuclear)” (44). Therefore, I would like to build on her argument and suggest that beautification practices for working-class women often are, indeed, born out of “cultural necessity” (Cahill 44) but still need not represent the sublimation of their identity to the male gaze. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, since women are already defined as “objects” within patriarchal capitalist societies, women can obtain agency by re-appropriating beauty “to remold the outer world and their inner selves simultaneously” (595).

**Mirror, Mirror: How Beauty Works in Williams’ Plays**

If we accept the broad notion that demarcations of class are traditionally identified by the performance (or non-performance) of manual labor, the way class is identified in the characters of *A Streetcar Named Desire* has surprisingly little to do with the actual exertion of labor. The ambiguity of class is particularly complex in Williams’ plays because of “the received ideas that govern [class’s] apprehension”
(Hitchcock 21)—that is, the assumptions that are made about how class is defined through particular sociological markers such as the laboring body.

For example, we do not see Stanley Kowalski working at any time during *A Streetcar Named Desire*, nor do we hear references to his going to or returning from work; he does not even “grease” his own car (Williams, *Streetcar* 504). Instead, he seems to be engaged in quite a bit of play: an endless cycle of poker games, bowling, and drinking with friends. In fact, Williams makes the poker night the central scene in the production. Still, despite his decidedly leisurely activities, Stanley clearly maps as working class. As Thomas P. Adler notes, “The prosperity of the post-World War II years has eluded him and disillusionment with his lot and with a system that does not guarantee personal success even to those who fought to protect it has set in” (*A Streetcar* 52). The class of the leading female characters is decidedly more difficult to identify.

Curiously, the only character we see carrying out traditional forms of manual labor is Stella. Even though she hails from the same background as Blanche and implies to Stanley that her upbringing is superior to his (“[…] you’ve got to realize that Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did” (Williams, *Streetcar* 529)), she appears more aligned with Stanley’s class than Blanche’s since we actually see her cleaning the apartment, fetching things for her sister, heavily pregnant, and subservient to Stanley. Still, it is significant that she is not paid for her efforts, thus suggesting that traditional class markers often operate differently within the
context of gender—particularly if we consider the Cold War era context of the play. Though women were able to enter the traditionally male work force during the war, “their activities threatened the balance of power once the soldiers returned home. So women were once again marginalized, returned to more seemly jobs in the home or on the fringes of productivity” (Adler, *A Streetcar* 79). Thus, Stella is “paid” through the bond(age) of marriage, a contract that allows her food and shelter. In fact, it is only after Stanley assaults her that she “earns” money: “Stanley doesn’t give me a regular allowance, he likes to pay the bills himself, but—this morning he gave me ten dollars to smooth things over” (Williams, *Streetcar* 508). This interchange emphasizes the precariousness of Stella’s position since, as Acker points out, a woman’s “situation in class processes is risky and potentially financially disastrous because she depends for income upon personal relations of distribution within marriage, giving her little power and control over, or access to, the means of provisioning” (63). Still, with few other options in Cold War America, Stella continues to look to Stanley for her livelihood.

Meanwhile, Blanche takes exception to this model, reacting with incensed indignation after Stanley strikes the pregnant Stella. Though she is in much worse financial straights than her sister, Blanche refuses to submit to such a paradigm. While her objective is, indeed, to achieve financial security through marriage (the only option left to her lest she return to prostitution), she hopes to do so without risking further bodily or psychic harm, choosing the gentle Mitch as her prospective husband. Therefore, she creates a full-time job out of making herself attractive and performing
as upper-class. After all, it is her only means to achieve any measure of autonomous subjectivity, as de Beauvoir suggests about women, generally: “To care for her beauty, to dress up, is a kind of work that enables her to take possession of her person […]” (589).

Like Stanley, Blanche does not perform any traditional labor during the course of the play. But unlike Stanley who maps as a “worker,” Blanche appears to be a lounging freeloader who takes baths and spends lengthy periods of time dressing up. However, if we read her within the context of her economic destitution and her inability to get another teaching job, her actions take on a different meaning. Williams himself calls attention to the misreading of Blanche as an idle prima donna: “Stanley sees Blanche not as a desperate, driven creature backed into a last corner to make a last desperate stand—but as a calculating bitch with ‘round heels’. […] Nobody sees anybody truly but all through the flaws of their own egos. That is the way we all see each other in life” (qtd. in Kazan xx).

Even a cursory examination of the play in this light reveals that Blanche does not want to live with, or off, the Kowalskis. But she has run out of alternatives. In fact, she constantly makes references to seeking “a way out.” As a result, she makes do with what she has: dressing up in white dresses, fake furs, and a rhinestone tiara. Blanche understands that, as de Beauvoir suggests, “the better showing a woman makes, the more she is respected; the more necessary it is for her to work, the more advantageous it is for her to appear prosperous; smart appearance is a weapon, a flag, a defense, a
letter of recommendation” (595). Therefore, Blanche’s beauty machinations constitute her work. They are all designed to help her create the illusion of value so that she can attract a husband or even the basic economic and physical security she requires to survive: “[I] have got to be seductive—put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings just in order to pay for—one night’s shelter!” (Williams, Streetcar 515). None of her clothes are real. They are all part of the illusion she has worked to create.

Furthermore, though we never “see” her work, she makes significant references to struggle, the condition Zandy refers to as the “common working-class ground” (146). In fact, we learn early on that Blanche has endured several trials since Stella’s departure:

| BLANCHE: I stayed and struggled! You came to New Orleans and looked out for yourself! I stayed at Belle Reve and tried to hold it together! I’m not meaning this in any reproachful way, but all the burden descended on my shoulders. |
| STELLA: The best I could do was make my own living, Blanche. |
| (Blanche begins to shake again with intensity.) |
| BLANCHE: I know, I know. But you are the one that abandoned Belle Reve, not I! I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it! […] I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! […] How the hell do you think all that sickness and dying was paid for? Death is expensive, Miss Stella! […] And I with my pitiful salary at the school. (Williams, Streetcar 479-80) |
The interchange between the sisters is particularly enlightening from a class perspective. It is the first time that Blanche alludes to using her body to earn money to save Belle Reve and, concomitantly, ensure her own economic survival. It also suggests that Stella, too, had to figure out another means for survival. Later, as Stanley reveals, Blanche even resorts to prostitution before fleeing to live with Stella. There, Blanche strives to create a different means to agency despite her past. Language and art are what she holds most dear, and she attempts to be seen within the context of “aristocratic” gentility even though she herself is not a member of the upper-class. She hopes that her performance will buy her the kind of security that will at last afford her some leisure. However, since “her inner qualities are not widely valued in a pragmatic and materialistic society, they are rejected” (Adler, *A Streetcar 79*). As Alain de Botton points out, art and literature are considered “feminine” and, thus, useless in capitalist society: “Indeed, art seemed capable of sapping the very qualities that had made such [industrial capitalism] possible, prolonged contact with it appeared to encourage effeminacy, introspection, homosexuality, gout and defeatism” (123).

Therefore, I would argue that Blanche’s adherence to “genteel” ways is not as much aristocratic as it is feminist. After all, she could succumb to the role that Stella has chosen for herself, in which she remains subservient to her husband and risks abuse and mistreatment. Instead, throughout the play (until she is raped by Stanley11), she

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11 In fact, as I will argue in Chapter 4, part of the reason Stanley rapes her lies in her insistence on independence.
strives to establish her life on her own terms, despite her economic circumstances. She also tries to convince Stella to do the same:

**Blanche:** This—shuffling about and mumbling—‘One tube smashed—beer-bottles—mess in the kitchen!’—as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened!

*(Stella laughs uncertainly and picking up the broom, twirls it in her hands.)*

**Blanche:** Are you deliberately shaking that thing in my face?

**Stella:** No.

**Blanche:** Stop it. Let go of that broom. I won’t have you cleaning up for him!

**Stella:** Then who’s going to do it? Are you?

**Blanche:** I? I!

**Stella:** No, I didn’t think so.

**Blanche:** Oh, let me think, if only my mind would function! We’ve got to get hold of some money, that’s the way out! *(Williams, *Streetcar 506)*

The key aspect of this interchange is not that Blanche refuses to do work, but rather that she resists the idea of cleaning up “for him”—the man who physically assaulted her sister and who threatens her own plan to achieve economic independence.

In fact, Blanche is constantly working, all the time aware that her body is losing its usefulness. She spends much of the play dressing, brushing her hair, and making sure the paper lanterns cover any naked light bulbs so that any bodily defects are hidden or minimized. The motif of mirrors that exists in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as well as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* serves as a constant reminder that Blanche and Maggie
only have a certain amount of time before age will deprive them of their means to economic survival in a culture where “appearances are all” (Adler, *A Streetcar* 84). As a result, the urgency of the work at hand is palpable. Blanche constantly examines herself in the mirror throughout the play, picking it up and putting it down until finally, “Tremblingly she lifts the hand mirror for a closer inspection. She catches her breath and slams the mirror face down with such violence that the glass cracks” (Williams, *Streetcar* 548). Her past has been exposed, and all of her efforts have been in vain. She realizes that she can no longer harness her beauty for economic means. Some feminists might argue that this moment points to the reason beautification practices are ultimately futile and oppressive and actually prevent feminine agency (Cahill 42). However, it is not Blanche’s dressing and making up that result in her demise. After all, while in control of her toilette, she is empowered: “Oh, I feel so good after my long, hot bath, I feel so good and cool and—rested! […] A hot bath and a long, cold drink always give me a new outlook on life!” (Williams, *Streetcar* 535). Instead, her tragedy is the result of the hypocritical duplicity of capitalist, patriarchal logic, which condemns her as a prostitute who is “not clean enough to bring in the house” (Williams, *Streetcar* 547) while conveniently ignoring the fact that “it is [man’s] demand that creates the supply” (de Beauvoir 682).

Maggie experiences similar anxiety and concern over creating a beautiful, high-class appearance. The stage directions in Act One of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* call for multiple mirrors—“a magnifying mirror” which she examines “to straighten an
eyelash” (Williams, *Cat* 885), a mirror at the “dressing table” (Williams, *Cat* 888), and a “long oval mirror” (Williams, *Cat* 903) that she continuously glances at as she walks back and forth in her slip. But while Blanche attempts to conceal her beautification practices and her past, Maggie claims both unabashedly, acknowledging the connection between the use of her body and economic security: “Mae an’ Gooper are plannin’ to freeze us out of Big Daddy’s estate because you drink and I’m childless. But we can defeat that plan. We’re going to defeat that plan! / Brick, y’know, I’ve been so God damn disgustingly poor all my life!—That’s the truth, Brick!” (Williams, *Cat* 907). As Michael Bibler argues, “Fully aware of how patriarchy works against her, Maggie the cat [sic] resents her exclusion from the economic and cultural power given to white men” (392). As a result, she works with what she has to “defeat” the system.

She grew up in a climate of “hand-me-down clothes and a few old moldy three per cent government bonds” (Williams, *Cat* 907). Therefore, like Blanche, she understands the value of appearances in order “to maintain some semblance of social position” (Williams, *Cat* 907) and have the opportunity to escape poverty. But unlike Blanche, she is expected to do more to keep up appearances in order to maintain her economic standing: She must bear a child. A pragmatist, Maggie understands that she must become part of the capitalist paradigm; she must use her body quite literally to produce results: “So that’s why I’m like a cat on a hot tin roof!” (Williams, *Cat* 908).

Beyond labor then, the body can be used as the locus of another aspect of capitalism: property.
CHAPTER 4  
PROPERTY RIGHTS: CLASS, THE BODY, AND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES

The trope of the body as property runs through several of Williams’ works, perhaps most overtly in his one-act play, *This Property Is Condemned*. But it is also a prevalent metaphor in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in which the characters argue over property rights and estates as they also debate control over one another. In each case, the issues of ownership are intricately connected with the right to public and private spaces.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley evokes the Napoleonic code when he learns that Belle Reve has been “lost” (Williams, *Streetcar* 483-84). This particular allusion is fraught with both class and gender implications, since feminists have condemned the code as “hostile to women’s rights” (Popkin 994) and, specifically, decried the way it engendered “capitalists’ particular exploitation of women’s workers [sic]” (Eichner 86). Within the context of the play, the fact that Stanley tries to assert the authority of the code reveals his need to control the other “property” in his domain, i.e., his wife and, concomitantly, her sister.

As the play continues, both Stanley and Blanche use their bodies to gain power—Stanley through sheer physical strength and Blanche through feminine allure. This power struggle over “property” is reflected in their battles over physical occupation of the small apartment and provides an apt metaphor for the disruption of

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12 The question is further complicated in *Suddenly Last Summer* when intellectual as well as physical “property” is contested as Mrs. Venable attempts to lay claim to Catherine.
the American dream myth. Indeed, Blanche’s arrival suddenly turns Stanley’s private property into public property, thus disturbing his vision of himself as the proverbial king of his castle. Since she refuses to acknowledge his superiority as head of the household, Blanche challenges his patriarchal authority and represents a subversive force that he must eradicate at all costs.

In addition, as Thomas P. Adler suggests, “Since Stanley has been unable, except in bed, to make Stella his queen, even Blanche’s cheap imitation furs and jewelry are indictments that only exacerbate his insecurity” (A Streetcar 52). Though he tries, he is not living the American dream. Despite the fact that Stanley is frequently credited as being unabashedly working-class, defending himself forthrightly and pridefully against Blanche’s elitist attacks, his vehement reaction to Blanche reveals their commonality rather than their difference. Both are secretly ashamed of themselves since both are, in essence, failures within the capitalist system. In terms of bourgeois conceptions of success, Stanley’s life is as much a sham as Blanche’s. He lives in a small apartment, holds no power or influence, and has few possessions. Ashamed of her checkered past, Blanche feels compelled to perform as upper-class with her fake furs, bobbles, and references to literature and art; Stanley, similarly “ashamed of his limitations of class” (Adler, A Streetcar 53) resents her intrusion on his private property as well as her possessions—however phony —since they remind him of his own failure.
As a result, since he understands that “[r]eputation was a prime concern in working-class culture” (Fox 98), he seeks to expose her by violating her most prized and secret possession, her status: “The trouble with Dame Blanche was that she couldn’t put on her act any more in Laurel! They got wised up after two or three dates with her and then they quit, and she goes on to another, the same old line, same old act, same old hooey!” (Williams, *Streetcar* 531). As Fox suggests, “In order to establish the grounds of a ‘good’ reputation, contrast was frequently necessary—another’s status had to be diminished” (99). In addition to demolishing Blanche’s reputation, Stanley then seeks to regain control by violating the last remnants of her personal property—first by ransacking her trunk and, ultimately, by violating her body through rape.

Interestingly Blanche and Stanley’s battle over the physical space of the property also involves the physical space of the body.

**BLANCHE:** Why don’t you bathe, too, soon as I get out?

**STANLEY (calling from the kitchen):** How soon is that going to be?

**BLANCHE:** Not so terribly long! Possess your soul in patience!

**STANLEY:** It’s not my soul, it’s my kidney’s I’m worried about!

Blanche’s commandeering of the bathroom—though providing a humorous interchange—is actually a show of power, since her domination of the space forces Stanley to deny his physical needs. In addition, it is the one private room in the home and thus is highly prized. As Fox points out, “Within working-class culture, the attempt to invent a public/private construct can thus mean much more than simply
“succumbing to dominant cultural directives” (94). Though Stanley defends his Polish, “unrefined” (Williams, *Streetcar* 482) background with pride, he also desperately aspires to appear successful as defined by capitalist ideology (Adler, *A Streetcar* 51). Therefore, his ability to control this private space symbolizes his ability to perpetuate the capitalist model.

Blanche prizes the bathroom as well since it provides security and personal space. As she says to Mitch, “It’s really a pretty frightful situation. You see, there’s no privacy here” (Williams, *Streetcar* 526). Blanche fears Stanley and rightfully so. The bathroom door literally provides a barrier to his intrusion on her. As a result, privacy is of utmost importance to Blanche since it allows her to protect as well as enhance her capital, i.e., her body. It is in the bathroom where she symbolically washes away the stains of her past, thus beginning her ritual of transformation into an upper-class lady of leisure. It is the only place where she can “lay bare her inner nature” (Corrigan 52).

Similarly, Maggie prizes privacy as well, since it symbolizes the extent to which she can control her body and how and to whom she chooses to expose it. As discussed in the previous chapter, she understands her “property value” and how it is enhanced or decreased depending on how well it shows and produces. But she is forced to depend on Brick for part of her success, thus making privacy of paramount importance to her. As long as she can keep the truth of her relationship with Brick private, she can fake her “worth.” Yet the plantation, though ostensibly the family’s home, is first and foremost the site of Big Daddy’s business and, therefore, does not
allow for privacy. Maggie is not a member of the ruling class and, thus, is afforded no personal space. Again and again, members of the family burst in on her, asserting their authority:

**BIG MAMA (loudly, startling Margaret):** Here—I come through Gooper’s and Mae’s gall’ry door. Where’s Brick? Brick—Hurry on out of here, son, I just have a second and want to give you the news about Big Daddy.—I hate locked doors in a house. . . .

**MARGARET (with affected lightness):** I’ve noticed you do, Big Mama, but people have got to have some moments of privacy, don’t they?

**BIG MAMA:** No, ma’am, not in *my* house. (*Without pause*) Whacha took off you’ dress faw? I thought that little lace dress was so sweet on yuh, honey.

Here, Big Mama paints the hierarchical picture. It is her house. She controls the wealth and the property and, therefore, the property within the home—including Maggie. She can come and go as she pleases, while Maggie is not afforded that luxury. Indeed, Big Mama has walked in on her as she is literally exposed, her body laid bare as she is changing into a different dress.

Even Mae and Gooper’s children perpetuate this attitude. At a critical moment when Maggie is begging for Brick’s forgiveness for her role in Skipper’s death, Dixie “*bursts into the room*” to which Maggie responds with “*cool fury*”: “Little girl, your mother or someone should teach you—(*Gasping*)—to knock at a door before you come into a room. Otherwise people might think that you—lack—good breeding. . . .”
(Williams, *Cat* 912). The child responds with “Yanh, yanh, yanh” thus reflecting her parents’ disrespect for her person and “position.”

But more is at stake for Maggie than an insult to her self-respect. The lack of privacy also threatens to expose Maggie’s lie of being pregnant, thus eliminating her as a contender for Big Daddy’s estate. After she makes her announcement, Gooper demands the name of her gynecologist. Mae then reveals that she has been listening in on the couple at night:

**MAE:** How can you conceive a child by a man that won’t sleep with you? How can you conceive? How can you? How can you!

**GOOPER:** MAE!

**BRICK:** Mae, Sister Woman, how d’you know that I don’t sleep with Maggie?

**MAE:** We occupy the next room an’ th’ wall between isn’t soundproof.

**BRICK:** Oh . . .

**MAE:** We hear the nightly pleadin’ and the nightly refusal. So don’t imagine you’re goin’ t’put a trick over on us, to fool a dyin’ man with—a—

**BRICK:** How d’y’know that we’re not silent lovers? Even if y’got a peep-hole drilled in the wall, how can y’tell if sometime when Gooper’s got business in Memphis an’ you’re playin’ scrabble at the country club with other ex-queens of cotton, Maggie and I don’t come to some temporary agreement? How do you know that—?
MAE: Brick, I never thought that you would stoop to her level, I just never dreamed that you would stoop to her level.

GOOPER: I don’t think Brick will stoop to her level.

BRICK: What is your level? Tell me your level so I can sink or rise to it.

(Williams, *Cat* 1003-04)

This discussion reveals Williams’ critique of the hypocrisy of capitalist class hierarchy. Though Mae has acted completely inappropriately, flagrantly violating the most intimate moments of Brick and Maggie’s relationship, she feels she has an inherent right since Maggie is not on her “level.” Though Maggie is perceived by Mae, an “ex-queen of cotton,” as poor white trash with no class or breeding, Brick exposes their aristocratic indignation, which they think justifies their actions, as the true “trashiness.”

The lack of privacy for both Blanche and Maggie take their toll. The constant threat of exposure leaves both characters nervous and anxious, causing many critics to describe them as hysterical or mad. However, such a position presumes a particular worldview—one that I would like to explore in light of feminist class theory.
Tennessee Williams admitted in numerous essays, interviews, and his autobiography that his greatest fear was being confined in a mental institution. Having seen his beloved sister, Rose, institutionalized and subsequently lobotomized, Williams “had a profound interest in exploring mental instability and its consequences” (O’Connor 132). To be sure, madness and hysteria are prevalent themes in all of his major plays. However, what precipitates this condition or the actual validity of the claim of “madness” depends on the critical approach taken to the work. For example, Blanche and Maggie have been characterized as mad at the extreme or neurotic and/or hysterical at a minimum. However, whether valid or false assessments, these depictions are almost all informed by patriarchal suppositions.

Therefore, I would like to analyze these characters based on recent feminist reexaminations of women’s “madness” then relocate and, perhaps, redefine this diagnosis within the context of female, rather than male, subjectivity. Specifically, rather than representing a weak, subservient woman, Williams’ portrayal of Blanche actually reflects Phyllis Chesler’s assertion that madness is “an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to overcome this state” (16). Furthermore, these feminist re-evaluations of madness also inform a reading of the plays through a working-class theory lens since I will argue for a repositioning of
these characters’ behavior not as “insane,” or the pejorative “hysterical,” but rather as a quite natural response to an oppressive power structure.

As Jane M. Ussher suggests, “Hysteria is being reinterpreted by feminists as an expression of women’s anger, women’s oppression, and of the power of a misogynistic discourse to define what ‘woman’ means, and to exert control over women’s lives—as ‘witchcraft’ may have been in the Middle Ages” (75). The allusion to witchcraft and its connection to attempts to label and control women is particularly apt within the historical context of Williams’ plays. Certainly, the notion of witch hunts and paranoia surfaces repeatedly in Cold War literature—most famously in Arthur Miller’s condemnation of McCarthyism in The Crucible but also in regard to the sexual witch hunt that takes place in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (Shackelford 151). Indeed, Blanche and Maggie are all overtly sexual women at a time when “WASP hegemony […] systematically repressed both sex and emotion as part of the Puritan bequest” (Paglia 30). As discussed in Chapter 2, the Southern belle construction exacerbates this repression. As George Hovis suggests, “Tennessee Williams recognized the psychic damage done to Southern women by this stereotype of the belle and its attendant demand of sexual purity” (13). It is interesting to note, for example, that the main reason for Rose Williams’ commitment to a mental institution was her mother’s condemnation of her sexual “rebelliousness” (Paller 301). It was expected that she behave like a Southern lady, which—for Edwina Williams—translated to the denial of her sexuality. Of course,
this was also an overall cultural edict of the Cold War, which “sought to confine
women’s sexuality to the sphere of marriage and motherhood” (Poiger 599).

Aspiring to be perceived as the archetypal Southern Belle, Blanche embodies
this type of Madonna-whore split. But, as Hovis notes, “Because she is both ‘whore’
and belle, she occupies a liminal space in which labels are less easily affixed” (19).
Her promiscuous seduction of young men belies her symbolic association with
purity—from her name, which means white; her white clothes, which she is
petrified of staining; and her association with the Virgin Mary, which she evokes as
she corrects Eunice and Stella about the color of her jacket, even as she is about to
be removed to the sanitarium: “You’re both mistaken. It’s Della Robbia blue. The
blue in the old Madonna pictures” (Williams, Streetcar 558). As a result, Blanche is
utterly divided between her natural desires and society’s demand that she deny those
desires in favor of respectability. Ultimately, Blanche is not able to reconcile this
“destructive polarity,” thus leading to her descent into insanity (Adler, A Streetcar
43). Similarly, Williams himself was “intimately familiar with the sexual
prohibitions and the obsession for labels that accompanied Southern society. Like
Blanche, he lived a life divided between the world of accepted society and that of
Bohemia” (Hovis 20). While he was angry at the inequality of the system, he was
petrified of being “ostracized and judged by mainstream America” (Hovis 20). As a
result, he suffered tremendous mental anguish that resulted in insomnia, nervous
breakdowns, alcoholism, and drug abuse.
Similarly, Blanche’s mental disintegration begins to accelerate in Scene Five in which she expresses the difficulty of striking the balance between the upper-class identity she performs and the reality of sexual desire and men’s expectations:

“People don’t see you—men don’t—even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you’ve got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you’re going to have someone’s protection. […] I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick” (Williams, Streetcar 515). In the same scene, however, she tells Stella how she has kept Mitch at bay to maintain the necessary air of propriety: “He hasn’t gotten a thing but a goodnight kiss, that’s all I have given him, Stella. I want his respect. And men don’t want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly. Especially when the girl is over—thirty. They think a girl over thirty ought to—the vulgar term is—‘put out.’ . . .And I—I’m not “putting out” (Williams, Streetcar 517). In both cases—whether she is performing the whore or performing the virgin—Blanche denies her own subjectivity.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that Stanley is completely free to exhibit his sexuality. Though the overt expression of sexuality certainly serves as a class marker for both working-class men and women, men garner labels such as “uncouth” or “coarse” whereas women are classified as “whores.” Furthermore, while Blanche is seen as neurotic and hysterical because of her emotional outbursts,
Stanley is labeled the arguably less pejorative “violent” when he shatters dishes and throws the radio out the window.

Still, Blanche represents the classic case of the woman who, though she is aware of the injustices of the patriarchal system, fails to see her role in perpetuating her own victimization. Because she cannot bear to acknowledge the reality of her past or the persistence of her sexual desire, her attempts to gain agency through her upper-class performance fail. It is here where the connection to class also becomes clear. Ironically, Blanche continues to model the ideology of the very class that insists on her subjugation. Desperate, shamed, and fatigued, Blanche must make the illusion of the performance become reality, lest she face the truth that she is in the same class as Stanley, “the brute.” Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s analysis of bourgeois constructions of the lower-class Other—particularly in regard to markers of the working-class body—helps to clarify this psychological conflict. Though she shudders at Stanley’s “contaminating touch” (Stallybrass and White 125), she herself is permanently “stained” by her past. As a result, even the slight overflow of cola on her white skirt causes her to emit a “piercing cry”:

BLANCHE: Right on my pretty white skirt!

STELLA: Oh … Use my hanky. Blot gently.

BLANCHE: (slowly recovering): I know—gently—gently…

STELLA: Did it stain?

BLANCHE: Not a bit. Ha-ha! Isn’t that luck? (Williams, Streetcar 516-17).
Though such a reaction may seem “hysterical,” it is important to note the role of dominant culture in Blanche’s breakdown. As Stallybrass and White point out, the bourgeoisie insisted that “new forms of propriety must penetrate and subjugate the recalcitrant body: hence the insistence upon ‘regularity of diet’, ‘clean or respectable clothes’, even drill-masters to restrain ‘bodily irritability, and thence uncontrollable mental irritability’” (126). Having already “contaminated” herself through prostitution (even though she felt she had no other alternative), Blanche knows she can never truly be perceived as the genteel feminine woman. As a result, “[d]irt and sexuality become conflated, negating the working-class female’s femininity” (Fox 102). Misunderstanding the motivations for Blanche’s pretensions, Stanley sets out on a campaign to unmask Blanche—a crusade that culminates in her rape. Since she refuses to give up her upper-class airs despite being psychologically battered by her exposure and Mitch’s rejection of her, Stanley is determined to “pull [her] down off them columns” just as he did Stella (Williams, Streetcar 540). Indeed, he knows the effect his physical violation of her will have. After Stanley demands to see the letters from her husband in Scene Two, she declares: “The touch of your hands insults them! […] Now that you’ve touched them I’ll burn them!” (Williams, Streetcar 490). The touch of Stanley’s hands on her body, therefore, is too much for her to endure, thus shattering all illusions she might have tried to maintain that she is “uncontaminated.” Blanche has specifically constructed an image for herself that is meant to align with patriarchal constructions of femininity. Stanley’s violation of her renders her utterly
powerless—even within the construct of her imagination\textsuperscript{13}, since she has already separated herself from him in her performance. She has no choice but to escape, finally and completely, into madness.

Maggie offers a decidedly more successful model of agency through the vehicle of class performance. Unlike Blanche who remains ashamed of her past and unable to define herself as a member of the working-class, Maggie openly embraces her impoverished upbringing while still voicing her desire for upward mobility:

I’m not tryin’ to whitewash my behavior, Christ, no! Brick, I’m not good. I don’t know why people have to pretend to be good, nobody’s good. The rich or the well-to-do can afford to respect moral patterns, conventional moral patterns, but I could never afford to, yeah, but—I’m honest! Give me credit for just that, will you please?—Born poor, raised poor, expect to die poor unless I manage to get us something out of what Big Daddy leaves when he dies of cancer! But Brick?!—\textit{Skipper is dead! I’m alive!} Maggie the cat is—\textit{alive! I am alive, alive! I am … alive!}

From the beginning of the play, Maggie unabashedly acknowledges her humble beginnings and what she is willing to do to ensure that she does not return to that poverty. She will dress up. She will fawn over Big Daddy. She will tolerate Mae’s insults. All the while, however, she will maintain her dignity.

\textsuperscript{13} Critics’ attempts to attribute Blanche’s insanity to her inability to discern between reality and imagination can also be repositioned in light of feminist theory. Blanche does see herself as an artist; but as a female artist during this particular historical period, she reflects “a common female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (Gilbert and Gubar xii). Her inability, ultimately, to redefine herself results in her destruction.
Given the tenuousness of her position, if Maggie appears anxious, it is warranted. Treated as chattel, her financial security threatened, and her marriage failing, she is constantly on edge. Though she is aware of the power of her beauty since it has helped raise her escape from poverty, she begins to feel desperation when that beauty—even when dressed up—no longer has an effect on her husband, thus making her tense and frantic:

Well, now I’m dressed, I’m all dressed, there’s nothing else for me to do.

(*Forlornly, almost fearfully.*)

I’m dressed, all dressed, nothing else for me to do. . . .

(*She moves about restlessly, aimlessly, and speaks as if to herself.*)

I know when I made my mistake.—What am I—? Oh!—my bracelets. . . .

(Williams, *Cat* 908)

Maggie’s anxious pacing and repetition results from Brick’s nonchalant reaction to her appearance even though her body hasn’t “fallen […] not a fraction” (Williams, *Cat* 904). Though she understands the formula for feminine success, and she has worked to maintain her body and adorn herself in the right way, Brick remains disinterested. As a result, she becomes even more desperate as the play continues since she understands that her financial security depends on her ability to bear a child. As Michael P. Bibler suggests, “In addition to showing her need to negotiate the economic effects of patriarchy, Maggie’s strategic behavior throughout the play also shows the extent to which she is forced to negotiate the limited deployment of
her own sexuality” (391). Since Brick is unwilling to indulge her sexually, she ultimately lies to convince the dying Big Daddy that she is pregnant in her attempt to ensure her financial security.

The greater psychological travesty exists in the fact that though she is an incredibly sexual woman, she finds herself in a sexless marriage—a condition that not only excludes her from love but also, potentially, from livelihood. She utterly “resents her exclusion from the economic and cultural power given to white men, and she also hates the gender-exclusive continuum of male homosocial relations that can thwart a woman’s desire to become a truly equal partner, as it were, to her husband” (Bibler 392). And Maggie is not timid about speaking out against it. She is angry and frustrated. Unlike Stanley, however, who can express his anger and indignation with impunity, Maggie’s gender garners her the label of “irrational” or “neurotic.”

Still, she pounces on every opportunity to turn the tables on her detractors. As symbols of the status quo, Mae and even Big Mama act as protectors of “their society’s sexual norms” (Hovis 20). Mae’s attempt to insult her by calling her “catty” only results in her proud appropriation of the epithet “Maggie the cat.” Furthermore, she does not back down when Big Mama suggests that she is failing as a wife:

**BIG MAMA:** Fair or not fair I want to ask you a question, one question: D’you make Brick happy in bed?
MARGARET: Why don’t you ask if he makes me happy in bed?

BIG MAMA: Because I know that—

MARGARET: *It works both ways!*

Unlike Blanche who tries to hang on to the pristine, bourgeois image of the belle, Maggie refuses the mantle of failure that the patriarchal power structure—and the women who blindly adhere to it—would ascribe to her. She fights back and asserts her own subjectivity. It is Brick who possesses the problem, not she, and she will not take the fall for the deterioration of the marriage.

Ultimately, Maggie is not the neurotic “cat on a hot tin roof.” She suffers from no mental aberration. Rather, she is the cat because, as she freely admits, she is “consumed with envy and an’ eaten up with longing!” (Williams, *Cat* 897). Not only is she a woman in love with a man who does not reciprocate her feelings, she may be put on the street at any moment. Therefore, she performs as well as she can to ensure her own livelihood, if nothing else. As Big Daddy admits, “There’s life in that girl’s body.” Rather than surrender to madness or death, Maggie intends to keep it that way.
CONCLUSION

Though his Pulitzer-Prize-winning work still remains a seminal achievement in American theater, Tennessee Williams’ plays are under-theorized and underappreciated for their rich feminist perspective—particularly given their historical context. In addition, the fact that he imbues such psychological complexity and sympathy in female characters who fall most decidedly outside dominant culture deserves attention within the emerging milieu of working-class studies.

Alternately (and to different degrees) ashamed, indignant, performative, prideful, and bellicose, these characters reflect the distress in which all working-class people found themselves in Cold War America. However, the particular predicaments of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* both reflect the tragedy of societal injustices as well as challenge them. Williams exposes the double-standard of patriarchal, capitalist hegemony, which seeks to exploit those outside normative culture while simultaneously dismissing their value.

The characters of Blanche and Maggie underscore the extent to which our own investment in the American dream myth prevents us from acknowledging the labor and humanity of those who are the most desperate in our society. In addition, through them we see the way in which gender multiplies this blindness. Williams exposes the double-standard and injustice of a culture that demands that women be “feminine” while simultaneously undercutting and demeaning the effort that goes into the
construction that ideal. Furthermore, though men use women’s bodies both for sexual 
gratification and reproduction, they are excused from providing proper compensation 
for these services. Conveniently, in the laissez-faire culture of American capitalism, to 
pay for such services would be “uncouth.” As a result, prostitution—despite the 
demand, which is created by men—must remain a hidden, shameful labor. On the other 
hand, laboring mothers should be satisfied with the reward such honorable work 
engenders.

Indeed, Williams’ plays point to the invisibility of the working class and the 
need to provide a voice to those who wish and deserve to be recognized for their 
contributions and human dignity. Though Williams himself may have perpetuated this 
patriarchal, capitalist model through his obsession with monetary success, he—as a 
man marginalized because of his homosexuality—struggled with the liminal position 
in which he found himself and the pain and “catastrophe of success” (Williams, “On a 
Streetcar”). He understood all too well the psychic damage that blind adherence to 
such a paradigm could inflict. As a result, he used his art both to stave off the madness 
that resulted from the fragmentation of his own identity and to proselytize for 
compassion and empathy in a world in which no one—not even Blanche—can depend 
on the kindness of strangers.
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