



Being 'Queer': A Discourse Of The 'Other' In The One-Act Plays Of Tennessee Williams.

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Abstract: "I was lonely and frightened, I didn't know the next step. I was finally fully persuaded that I was "queer," but had no idea what to do about it."

With these words written by American playwright Tennessee Williams in his autobiography *Memoirs* (1975), I would like to take my audience to his phantasmagoric world of the 'Queer.' In such a realm, there is a continual interplay of conflict revolving around language, identity and belonging. Today, the lexical meaning of the term primarily caters to sexual orientation. However, it originally meant 'strange' or 'peculiar.' While reading the one-act plays of Williams, it doesn't seem that they strictly cater to the former meaning rather they contain elements of both the former and latter connotation of the term. In this regard, I shall introduce a string of characters from his one-act plays who might be categorized as 'queer.' Using this word, Williams perhaps tries to portray not only himself but also some of his beloved protagonists as the 'other.' The reason behind deciding to work on his short plays is that, these works have been long overshadowed by the popularity of his longer plays such as *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) or *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) or *Cat on a hot tin roof* (1955) and so forth. However, the short plays are equally significant and reveal fascinating perspectives on the quality of being different from what is conventional or usual. The texts often engage with an abiding concern for the individual's construction of an identity in relation to his or her society. From this viewpoint, my paper shall investigate issues of the depiction of individual struggles as they relate to identity within the contested terrain of social space. Interestingly, several philosophers have spoken about the notion of 'Othering.' However, my paper proposes a general understanding of Tennessee Williams' concept of 'Othering' from a philosophical point of view drawing on theories of the 'Other' and its representation propounded by French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). The primary reason behind choosing Levinas' concept of 'Othering' is that he seems to celebrate the 'other' and so does Williams in his works and of all philosophers, in the twentieth century Levinas spoke the most on the notion of 'othering.'

Index Terms – Queer, Other, Identity, Space.

“Queer theory and politics necessarily celebrate transgression in the form of visible difference from norms. These 'Norms' are then exposed to be norms, not natures or inevitabilities.”¹

While reading the one-act plays of Tennessee Williams, it seems that the protagonist aligns itself to the queer concept of the self. Today, the lexical meaning of the term ‘Queer’ primarily caters to sexual orientation. In the 1970s, gay rights activism began in America. Williams himself was a gay playwright. According to critic John M. Clum² his treatment of homosexuality in the early works was cited by a new generation of gay critics as an example of a primitive even homophobic representation of gayness. He mentions this in his book, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern drama (1995)*. In his autobiography *Memoirs (1975)* Williams writes,

“I know many in the gay world who accomplish this trick (acting straight) with apparent ease. However, I think it still requires a good deal of hypocrisy, even now that society in the Western world is presumed to have discarded its prejudices. My feeling is that the prejudices have simply gone underground and there is still a need to wear a mask.”(204)

However, homosexuality was not given much emphasis by critics and reviewers of his early plays. Williams himself was also not very vocal about it till the publication of an article entitled, ‘Why do homosexual playwrights hide their homosexuality’ in the *New York Times* on 23rd January, 1972. The homosexual represented as a fugitive, by transgressing society’s prescribed code of compulsory homosexuality, is said to be “queer.” The term was at best a negative word for homosexual, at worst a term of homophobic abuse. In recent years, “queer” has come to be used differently sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. However, it is intriguing to think over the notable words of American literary critic Michael David Warner (born 1958) – “The appeal of ‘queer theory’ has outstripped anyone’s sense of what exactly it means.” Theoretically, Queer theory is a field of post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of queer studies and women's studies. It is a way of thinking that dismantles traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities, challenges traditional academic approaches, and fights against social inequality. One wonders whether it would be appropriate to label the protagonists of Williams as ‘unconventional’ or ‘eccentric’ or simply the ‘Other.’ This question sounds like a conundrum since the central characters depict myriad personality traits. Perhaps they can be put under this umbrella term ‘Queer’ which Williams uses in *Memoirs (1975)*. He says, “I was lonely and frightened, I didn’t know the next step. I was finally fully persuaded that I was “queer,” but had no idea what to do about it.” (Williams 49)

Today, although the lexical meaning of the term primarily caters to sexual orientation, it originally meant ‘strange’ or ‘peculiar.’ The one-act plays of Williams inherently depict such a quality especially in the portrayal of the central characters. Perhaps they can be called the ‘other.’ This concept was first introduced by the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel³. The term ‘Other’ is used to categorize individuals or groups as distinct from oneself. Otherness refers to the state of being different from and alien to a person's social identity and the Self. It encompasses characteristics that diverge from the symbolic order of things

¹ Stewart, Jay (2017). "Academic Theory". In Richards, Christina; Bouman, Walter Pierre; Barker, Meg-John (eds.). *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* (PDF). Critical and Applied Approaches in Sexuality, Gender and Identity. Palgrave Macmillan. p. 62. ISBN 978-1-137-51052-5. Archived (PDF) from the original on 26 September 2020. Retrieved 8 April 2021.

² John Clum is Professor Emeritus of Theater Studies and English at Duke University where he taught for over forty years. He founded the Duke University Drama Program, which has become the Department of Theater Studies. He was the Director of the Duke in London Drama Program and also ran London theater programs for the Graduate Program in Liberal Studies and the Alumni Association.

³ G. W. F. Hegel (1770 – 1831), German-In the late 18th century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) introduced the concept of the ‘Other’ as a constituent part of self-consciousness (preoccupation with the Self), which complemented the propositions about self-awareness (capacity for introspection) proffered by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, (Born: 19 May 1762, Died: 29 January 1814).

related to the real, aesthetic, political philosophical, social norms, and even personal identity. Otherness entails non-conformity to societal regulations and can lead to disenfranchisement, whether enforced by the State or by social institutions with socio-political power. Consequently, the imposition of 'Otherness' marginalizes individuals labelled as the 'Other,' removing them from the centre of society and relegating them to its fringes.

Many philosophers have spoken about the notion of 'othering.' However, drawing on theories of the 'Other' and its representation propounded by French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), this study proposes an understanding of 'Otherness' through an examination of how the so-called 'Othered' characters in Williams' one-act plays are constructed within the structures of their own social systems. The primary reason behind choosing Levinas' theory of 'othering' is that he seems to regard and celebrate the 'other' and so does Williams in his plays. Again in the twentieth century, Levinas spoke the most about the concept of 'othering.' It must be noted that the one-act plays of Williams have been long overshadowed by his longer plays. Despite being largely overshadowed by the success of his full length dramas, Williams' one-acts written between 1930 and 80, reveal tantalizing and fascinating perspectives. These plays were successively the work of a young writer, then of the successful Tennessee Williams, and finally of the troubled man of the 1970s. Although a great deal of research has been done on his full-length plays, comparatively little attention has been paid to his short plays. Based on and around the concept of 'Otherness' as propounded by Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995), the proposed paper will try to examine how otherness/ alterity is represented by Williams' in his one-act plays.

Levinas' notion of the 'Other'

The concept of the 'Other' is used to describe people who are considered strange or inferior in terms of knowledge, civilization, and abilities. In colonial literature, it is obvious that European colonizers see themselves as located in the centre of the world and regard all non-western people as the 'Other.' The term is sometimes written with a capital 'O' and means another human being who transcends one's own powers of apprehension. When the self tries to understand the other person his powers are thwarted because the other person is always more than any object one encounters in the world. The 'Other' in all its uniqueness is unlike any phenomenon and cannot be assimilated. Levinas describes the experience this way – "The strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the 'I,' to one's thoughts and one's possessions is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of one's spontaneity as ethics." In respecting the uniqueness of the 'Other' Levinas rejects thinking about any common ground we ourselves may share with the 'Other' person. He says, the same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in a relationship remain absolutely separated. He remarks that the alterity of the 'Other' does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from us, for a distinction of that nature would precisely imply that community of genus which already nullifies alterity.

Significantly, Levinas also speaks about the other person as one in need and for whom 'I' am responsible. At times he uses terms such as "nakedness" and "vulnerability" to describe the 'Other' and even employs Biblical language by saying the other is the "stranger", the "widow" and the "orphan" to whom 'I' am obligated. Ethics, his primary principle therefore begins in a face-to-face encounter with the 'Other' who is unique, vulnerable and for whom responsibility has to be taken. Levinas' ethical view on responsibility has inspired many. But it has also raised questions. What happens when multiple other persons are involved? To whom is the Self then responsible? Levinas thinks that reason and other ways of dispensing justice can be called upon to resolve these situations. In *Otherwise than Being* (1974), Levinas quotes Dostoyevsky, "Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone, and I more than the others." He meant that we cannot fix every problem, and it is not always good for the 'Other' that we fix her or his problems. But one's ethical duty is defined by the confrontation with the actual needs of those before us. We are the one with the resources (or not) to respond to the call. (Qtd in Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 146.) Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), Martin Buber⁴ (1878–1965) and Gabriel Marcel⁵ (1889–1973) opposed the disengagement of the individual.

⁴ Martin Buber was an Austrian-Jewish and Israeli philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism centered on the distinction between the 'I-Thou' relationship and the 'I-It' relationship.

Primary characteristic features of the 'Other' in Williams' one-act plays

Creation of characters of pulsating individuality- Tennessee Williams has created characters of pulsating individuality. Once he remarked that his chief aim in playwriting is the creation of character. He had always had a deep feeling for the mystery of life and essentially his plays have been an effort to explore the beauty and meaning in the confusion of living.

Alienation-The 'Other' in his plays is an alienated individual in relation to his society; he/she is a lost being in the sea of humanity; he/she is psychologically and emotionally alienated and generally has crumbling faith. From a theoretical perspective, the thought of German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) is significant. His view was that, the feeling of alienation in Man arises out of the birth of self-consciousness in him.⁶ When Man becomes self-conscious, he begins to differentiate between his idealized self and the objective world of harsh reality. This lacuna or gap results in tension and conflict in the mind of Man. In this regard it might be declared that tension and conflict are the constituting elements of alienation. This results in inner conflict, depicted in the characters.

Fugitive kind-Williams never fails to make his protagonist a fugitive. His lesser people accept the earth. A quick survey of the select one-act plays represent the fugitive image or variations of it. The characters are on a perennial journey of escape either in reality or in a metaphorical sense. Perhaps they can be classified under the umbrella term, 'fugitive.' This reminds us of a play he wrote, *Fugitive Kind*, in 1937 when he was only twenty-six years old. The play had its only production by the St. Louis Mummies on 30th November and 6th December of that year. The key influence on the play was the movies, a resource seldom used by American playwrights before Williams. This play has a similarity with the Maxwell Anderson film *Winterset* with its memorable shot of Brooklyn Bridge which highly inspired Williams. As in *Winterset*, *Fugitive Kind* involves a gangster shootout. This play particularly depicts the condition of the 'other' in his one-acts. The 'other' is an outsider and of a fugitive kind. In this regard, it would be appropriate to quote from *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia* (2004), edited by Philip C. Colin-

"*Fugitive Kind* is significant as a veritable index to Williams's later work, in its basic character of the outsider, victim of an unjust society, its theme of escape, its revelation of Williams' gift for dialogue, its introduction of the 'aria,'⁷ which would become typical of his dramas, its use of music as motif, and especially in using himself and his sister as characters." (Colin 70)

Anti-hero-Williams' use of an anti-heroic protagonist as an image of Man is one of the most controversial aspects of his drama. He seems to reject the Aristotelian concept of the protagonist and to replace it with an anti-hero, the personification of a self neither good, knowledgeable nor courageous. Aristotle's *Poetics* (c.335BC) being the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory and first extant philosophical treatise to focus on literary theory, is often considered as a benchmark to analyze the portrayal of protagonists especially in the works of major playwrights. Williams' anti-hero on the other hand, is the symbol of a widely recognized condition, a "sickness unto death" (Jackson, "The Anti-Hero in the plays of Tennessee Williams." *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams*. Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1965. 90). Unlike the classic protagonist, the anti-hero fails to find a mode of healing. Again the anti-hero is possessed of a profound fault, not merely of a single flaw, but of a comprehensive condition of evil, an inner

⁵ Gabriel Honoré Marcel was a French philosopher, playwright, music critic and leading Christian existentialist. The author of over a dozen books and at least thirty plays, Marcel's work focused on the modern individual's struggle in a technologically dehumanizing society.

⁶ It is an interpretation of Hegel's theory of the dialectic; his theory of self-realization and the theory of historical development on this as discussed in *A Dictionary of Political Thought*, ed. Roger Scruton (London: The Pan Books Ltd.) p. 198-200

⁷ A self-contained piece for solo voice usually accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting on their emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition.

impurity far greater than the Greek *hamartia* which Alberes⁸ describes as “original sin” (Jackson 90). Jackson highlights the substitution of the “inner-oriented” (Jackson 88) ethic of the Christian protagonist for the “outer-directed” (Jackson 88) heroism of the Greek hero and this is one of the significant adjustments in Williams’ drama. Jackson calls Williams’ anti-hero the “negative saint” (Jackson 89) who is founded upon a radical perception of new dangers for mankind and on the recognition of new modes of courage.

Identity crisis–“We’re all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life!” *Orpheus Descending* (1958) Act 2, sc. 1. This is one of Williams’ favourite quotations which sums up the condition of modern Man in his eyes. The creatures who peopled his imaginings were desperate women, men nursing troublesome secrets, untouchables, society’s derelict rag dolls and so forth. Such people appear to be Williams’ best-loved characters and they are all in some way “trapped.” In his plays the ‘other’ engages himself to suffer the agony of conscience to confront hidden truth and to accept the heavy burden of metaphysical guilt and they have the fear of extinction.

The characters who may be identified as the ‘Other’ and a brief description of the theme in the select plays.

***27 Wagons full of Cotton* – Flora Meighan (infantile adult)**

This play features Jake Meighan, a Southern cotton gin owner, in conflict with Silva Vicarro, the Italian immigrant who serves as the superintendent of the Syndicate Plantation. Published in 1956, this work is an earlier version of *Baby Doll*, which stands out as one of Tennessee Williams’ most controversial plays. Jake treats his wife, Flora, like a child, and despite being married for several months, their relationship remains unconsummated, with Flora still sleeping in a baby crib. Silva Vicarro, the Sicilian outsider, operates the competing gin, which ultimately gets set on fire. When Jake indirectly reveals to Flora that he was responsible for the destruction of the rival gin, he compels her to keep it a secret. However, Vicarro seduces the naive Flora, who is captivated by the charm of the Sicilian—echoing early depictions of Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Rosario in *The Rose Tattoo* (1950-51). This allows Vicarro to take revenge for the arson and demonstrate that his masculinity is superior to Jake’s, the local insider. Ultimately, the outsider successfully outsmarts the insider, overcoming Jake’s arrogance and destructive tendencies. This play highlights key themes in Williams’ work, such as the Old South versus the New South, the dynamics between men and women, and the conflict between the flesh and the spirit.

The Purification - ‘Elena of the Spring’ and The Desert Elena’[two visions of the same character – the lost girl] (Incest/Supernaturalism)

The Purification draws inspiration from esteemed American classics such as Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Herman Melville’s *Pierre*, centering on an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister. This verse drama, which is the only one written by Williams, takes place in a classroom where the brother, who is referred to only as the ‘Son’, is on trial for his forbidden actions and thus seeks purification. Although the sister is deceased, her spirit manifests several times throughout the play. A Chorus comments on the unfolding events, while another character defends himself for intervening in the couple’s relationship. Critics have likened this play to Williams’ other one-act works, including *Auto-Da-Fe*, as well as *The Two-Character Play* (1959) and *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Heavily influenced by the works of Federico Garcia Lorca, *The Purification* delves into the challenge of reconciling taboo desires, such as incest and homosexuality, with societal and spiritual expectations, presenting an early instance of the recurring Williams theme of the brother/sister dynamic.

***The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* – Mrs. Hardwick Moore (Obsessive compulsive disorder)**

Originally created in New York in 1947, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* is a comedy set within a boarding house in the French Quarter, a location that Tennessee Williams would later incorporate into his work *Vieux Carré*. The title of this one-act play alludes to a common remedy for body lice, which the pretentious yet vulnerable character Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore claims to use as nail polish remover when speaking to her

⁸Alberes-René Marill Albérès, or R. M. Albérès, was the pseudonym of René Marill (10 March 1921 – 25 May 1982), a French writer and literary critic.

landlady, Mrs. Wire. Following Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore's complaints about cockroaches in her room, the landlady accuses her of being a prostitute and insists on receiving overdue rent. Another resident, simply referred to as "The Writer" and a vagrant, comes to Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore's defense. This play foreshadows the outcasts and artists featured in Williams' more extensive works, particularly *Vieux Carré* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*. The humor underlying the title illustrates the struggle Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore faces in confronting the harsh realities of her own decadent profession and lifestyle.

The Last of my solid gold watches-Charlie Colton (Haunting obsession with the past)

The Last of My Solid Gold Watches narrates the final days of the old drummer Mr. Charlie, who finds that selling shoes is no longer as easy as it used to be. The title alludes to Mr. Charlie's pocket watch, which symbolizes his past business success and the optimism he once held. He meets a younger salesman named Harper and an African American porter, whom Philip C. Kolin describes as the kind, heavenly doorkeeper Eliakim. Mr. Charlie, a robust character who enjoys sharing stories, embodies both Williams' father Cornelius and Big Daddy from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. This Delta play is dedicated to actor Sidney Greenstreet and merits comparison with Eudora Welty's short story *The Death of the Traveling Salesman*.

Portrait of a Madonna-Mrs. Lucretia Collins (Inflicted with delusions)

In *Portrait of a Madonna*, the spinster Lucretia Collins envisions being impregnated by a ghost, foreshadowing the mad characters typical of Tennessee Williams' plays. The narrative highlights the frailty of the Old South and the unavoidable changes that threaten its existence. Ultimately, the withdrawn Miss Collins is sent to a mental institution, with hotel workers reflecting on the Southern ideals she adhered to. Her mental deterioration is prompted by her sexual repression and strict Christian upbringing. Miss Collins can be seen as an earlier incarnation of Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Alma from *Summer and Smoke* (1947), while comparisons to Laura from *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and the female characters in Williams' short story *Completed* are also valid.

Auto-Da-Fe-Eloi (Sexually repression/religious conflict)

The play *Auto-Da-Fe* is noted for its meticulous structure. The title, which translates to "act of faith," explores themes of sexual repression and religious conflict, motifs that recur throughout Tennessee Williams' writing. The narrative centers on a young unmarried man named Eloi, who lives with his mother, Madame Duvenet, and a tenant whom he suspects is spying on him. Eloi's paranoia intensifies when his mother discovers that he is upset over a "pornographic" photograph featuring both a younger and an older man, which he received in his capacity as a postal worker. Upon confronting the young man in the photograph, Eloi accuses him of perversion, to which the young man subtly suggests that Eloi himself is concealing something significant. Through a series of biblical references, Williams illustrates Eloi's internal struggle with his homosexuality. Similar to Amanda Wingfield's concerns regarding her son Tom, Madame Duvenet senses that her son is keeping secrets—even from himself. In a bid to escape confronting his true identity, Eloi resorts to burning down the house. Thus, the play's title becomes ironic; rather than representing a sincere act of spiritual cleansing, the fire symbolizes an attempt to obscure the truth from himself, his mother, and the tenant.

The strangest kind of romance-The Little Man (strange and abnormal obsession with a cat, Nitchivo/plight of the proletariat)

The most unusual type of romance is found in a boarding house play, which takes place in a subtly altered version of St. Louis. It focuses on the peculiar yet comforting bond between the lonely, fragile character known as Little Man and his cat. Little Man seems to prioritize the maternal care of his landlady over her sexual advances. The protagonist can be interpreted as a closeted gay man, with his relationship with the cat serving as a metaphor for Williams' depiction of gay subjectivity. The play also tackles the struggles of the working class, a theme present in both *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *Not about Nightingales* (written in 1938). Little Man is employed in a factory but finds it increasingly difficult to survive until his landlady eventually evicts him. Her father-in-law, the Old Man, who embodies the spirit of Walt Whitman, reprimands her for her mistreatment of both Little Man and the other lonely individuals in the boarding house. Another resident, known as the Boxer, bullies Little Man, foreshadowing Stanley Kowalski's later

abuse of Blanche. Despite the cat, Nitchewo—named by a former Russian tenant—running away, the play concludes on a positive note with Little Man and his cat being reunited.

Hello from Bertha-Bertha (failing spirit and plight of a destitute whore)

The play centers on the despairing spirit of Bertha, a destitute woman living in a boarding house in East St. Louis, who faces eviction to a mental institution. Goldie, a fellow worker, is unable to persuade Bertha to leave her bed so that the other girls can utilize the room. Bertha is trapped by her past romantic involvement with Charlie and struggles to accept that her days as a sex worker are behind her. In her yearning to be saved from her desperate circumstances, Bertha bears resemblance to Blanche DuBois, as noted by Philip C. Kolin, who similarly longs to be rescued by her ideal partner. Additionally, many of Tennessee Williams' recurring themes emerge in *Hello from Bertha*, including the symbolic St. Louis backdrop that Williams despised, the tragic disillusionment of a worn-out woman (as seen in *The Mutilated*), and the boarding house serving as a metaphor for a harsh and unforgiving world.

Steps must be gentle-Hart Crane (Mental agony/homosexuality)

First published in 1982, Williams envisions a conversation between the deceased Hart Crane and his mother, Grace. In this work, he reflects on his own struggles with his mother, Edwina, highlighting the conflict between familial expectations and reality in communication. Grace cannot come to terms with the "rightness" of Crane's homosexuality, while Hart finds it difficult to accept his mother's unyielding nature. The expressionistic title, *Steps Must Be Gentle*, revisits Hart Crane's tragic suicide at sea, serving as yet another commentary on the fate of artists within society. Grace urges her son to understand her struggles, as she endeavored to uphold his artistic reputation by ensuring his work was taken seriously and protecting his name. However, neither Grace nor Hart can step outside of their ego, both harboring a martyr complex, which prevents them from comprehending one another's perspective. Like her son, Grace ultimately ends her days in obscurity, working as a scrubwoman.

Conclusion

Thus it can be concluded that if we understand Levinas' desire of the 'Other' as a gift, we can consider it as a joyful and celebratory experience. After all it is quite a challenging task to stay absolutely isolated. Similarly Williams seems to celebrate his 'othered' characters in his one-act plays. Here lies the true essence of the eternal lines of the notable metaphysical poem "No man is an island" where John Donne depicts the interconnectedness of humanity and the impact of loss. The speaker here asserts that no individual is isolated, but rather an integral part of the broader human collective.

"No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main."

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