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November 26th, 2015

The Homosexual Economy of (A Streetcar Named) Desire

On a surface level, homosexuality in American Drama fails to present gay characters as actively attempting to make change, or as Francisco Costa outlines in “*There was Something Different About the Boy*”: *Queer Subversion in Tennessee Williams’s “A Streetcar Named Desire”*, “[American Drama] has been offering numerous examinations of gay individuals as continuously victimized and passive and consequently, it has been lacking a focused examination of gay individuals as active and victor” (Costa). I agree that, particularly in American Drama before the late 1960s, homosexuality was presented in a stereotypical, victimized fashion, however, where Costa simply describes these scripts as texts that confront heteronormativity, I propose that the goal was to plant the early seeds of stepping past heteronormative ideology in a culture where homosexuality was violently punished. Essentially, homosexuality as presented in American Drama before the late 1960s was not a confrontation, but a subversion to a distinct set of rules that quieted the homosexual community and gave voice to heteronormativity. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, an economy of homosexuality is looming over the entire text; the employment of dramatic techniques such as cryptic forwards, and ultimately the explicit and cruel, metatheatrical nature of Blanche’s final exposition of the death of her husband in Scene Six allows Williams to affiliate the surface, heterosexual economy of desire with the violently hidden homosexual one. Although the homosexual characters are presented in a problematic, stereotypical way, the homophobic reader may find fulfillment in Allen’s fate, where the more accepting

reader can find just as much gratification in the way these characters are able to rebel from their oppressive society and in Blanche's remorse, subsequently allowing Williams to critique the violent, victimizing nature of a tyrannically heteronormative culture. Thus, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not simply a text that confronts heteronormativity, but it is a text that, through the employment of dramaturgical techniques, subverts the oppressive, homophobic culture in American Drama in the mid 1900s.

In *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*, David Ball states that "a forward is any of a myriad of devices, techniques, tricks, maneuvers, manipulations, appetizers, tantalizers, teasers, that make an audience eager for what's coming up next" (Ball 46). Furthermore, Ball believes that "forwards also focus attention where the playwright wants it" (Ball 47). Thus, a forward is used to make the audience long to find out what is going to happen in a manner that directs the audience's attention where the writer intends it to be. Throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams employs the use of forwards to direct the audience's attention to the moment in Scene Six where Blanche finally reveals what happened to her deceased husband. This is a way for Williams to discreetly put more weight on the homosexual economy that is looming over the text without explicitly disobeying the heteronormative ideology fundamentally embedded in American Drama and American culture at the time. Blanche's guilt for her cruel and homophobic actions toward her husband is first clearly expressed when she states: "these are love-letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy [...] poems a dead boy wrote. I hurt him the way you would like to hurt me, but you can't! I'm not young and vulnerable any more. But my young husband was" (Williams 42 - 43). Here Blanche compares Stanley's desire to destroy her to the way she destroyed

her husband, Allen. This not only shows that Blanche is slowly coming to terms with the brutal crime she committed against Allen, but it shows that she is almost being punished for it, as Stanley not only attempts, but succeeds in doing the same to her. As the play progresses further, the repetition of “The Varsouviana” not only foreshadows Allen’s death, as the song was playing when Blanche made the cruel and violent remark that triggered him to commit suicide, but it increasingly drives Blanche to disturbance. At first, the tune, to the audience, seems to be insignificant, but as it becomes increasingly apparent, the audience becomes more and more aware of the weight of the song. As that happens it makes the reader keen to find out what will happen next in order to decipher what the purpose of the polka music is, particularly because the more this song occurs, the less mental stability Blanche has. Once the audience finally reaches and understands the meaning of “The Varsouviana” in the play when Blanche articulates the story of Allen’s death, it is clear that the guilt she feels for prompting her gay husband to commit suicide drives her to madness. As a result of her remorse, Blanche spirals out of control and into lunacy. This is a way for Williams to critique the violent nature of homophobia and to take a step past heteronormativity in a critical but subtle way in order to abide by the strict rules against homosexuality in American Drama.

Exposition, as Ball describes, is: “a technique which does two things: first, it conveys information the audience needs, and second, it launches action” (Ball 42). Additionally, there are two different kinds of exposition: that which is known by everyone on stage and that which is known by only some or one of the characters. In the latter case, Ball says that the most effective way to employ exposition is to have “an important character reveal information to get another character to *do* something” (Ball 42). Thus, in Scene 6 of *A*

Streetcar Named Desire, where Blanche is finally revealing the death of her homosexual husband, she is first and foremost revealing necessary information to both the audience and to Mitch, but the true purpose of this speech is to ‘launch action’ in order to drive the plot forward. But we must ask ourselves, what exactly is the intended action? What is Blanche aiming to achieve through her exposition and, moreover, what is Williams aiming to say about American Drama through this underlying action? On a surface level, it might appear as though Blanche is appealing to Mitch’s sympathy, attempting to win back his affection by informing him about her “degenerate” husband. Under that logic, Blanche sees her husband’s suicide as a reason for others to feel sympathy toward her and thus, at that level, Blanche’s exposition is fortifying the heteronormative culture of the mid 1900s, and reinforcing homophobia in American Drama at the time. Reading the play from that perspective shows how Blanche’s exposition is able to satisfy the homophobic or heteronormative reader, as they find comfort in Allen’s death and Blanche’s quest for compassion from Mitch. In particular, the heteronormative reader would find contentment when Blanche reveals that, upon finding out about her husband’s older lover, she says to him on the dance floor “‘I saw! I know! You disgust me...’” (Williams 115). This evokes a sense of satisfaction and gratification in the homophobic reader, as Blanche is not only emulating and reinforcing their prejudice toward homosexuals, but also vocalizing that prejudice. Therefore, on a surface level it appears as though Blanche is speaking as a representative of the heteronormative community as it opposes gay culture.

As Ball highlights, it is important for the reader to tread carefully, as you must “understand the need to pay extra attention to exposition when a playwright uses

powerful techniques to make us listen. Such techniques have to be used sparingly and selectively; so when one is used (by a writer you trust), assume it is for an especially important reason” (Ball 43). Thus, since Blanche’s extremely long monologue employs intense emotion through her heart breaking exposition, failure to read this speech carefully is a failure to understand Blanche’s true action and purpose at this point in the play. Consider the environment in which Tennessee Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire*; as Costa outlines, “Surveillance, arrest, police harassment, gay men imprisoned in violent wards, a government-sanctioned, organized drive to single out homosexuals in the workplace: this was the atmosphere in which Williams wrote *Streetcar*” (Costa). Hence, if Williams wanted to oppose any form of heteronormative culture, he had to do so in the most crafty and cunning of ways. American theatre outlawed certain forms of homosexuality until the late 1950s, which is why *A Streetcar Named Desire* is what one might call, as Costa defines, a “closet drama”. One might argue that if American theatre outlawed homosexuality until the late 1950s, Williams would not have been able to include Allen’s character if it was written in 1947. I argue that Williams was able to include this character because he was not technically a character in the play, his story was simply mentioned, and it ultimately led to his death; thus, this play was accepted under the umbrella of American Drama at the time because on the surface it perpetuates homophobia and gay stereotypes. This means that Williams, in order to critique the violent nature of the tyrannically heteronormative American culture at the time, had to give the homosexual characters life solely through the exposition of other characters and had to present them in a stereotypical way in order to make them easily identifiable by the audience members; it was a way to vocalize homosexuality without being explicit.

So, Allen and his lover's stereotypes did not stem from Williams himself, nor was it a way for Williams to reinforce homophobia. The presentation of Allen and his lover through Blanche's exposition was a way to present homosexuality in a discreet manner. Costa argues that: "even though in *Streetcar* homosexuality remains 'unsaid', the visibly marked 'persona' and 'sensitivity' that characterized cultural understanding and stereotypes of the homosexual are glaringly abundant. Thus, in this particular play, homosexuality is conveyed through 'the eyes of the beholder' and, therefore, opens to audience interpretation" (Costa). However, where Costa might say that in *Streetcar* homosexuality remains 'unsaid', I argue that Allen is forced to be silent, and thus was given a voice, given life through the exposition of the heterosexual characters. Upon delving deeper into Blanche's exposition in Scene 6, Blanche is not seeking sympathy from Mitch, but seeking the forgiveness that she could not be given by Allen. This is clearly seen when she states: "He came to me for help. I didn't know that [...] all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands clutching at me" (Williams 114). Throughout the play it is clear that what happened between Blanche and her deceased husband deeply troubles her, as investigated in the previous discussion of Williams' employment of forwards. Thus, as with any point of trauma, she continuously returns to the event in her mind in an attempt to understand it; hence, she is seeking approval from Mitch because she knows what she did was wrong, and she is hoping that Mitch can somehow mitigate that crime since Allen will never be able to. So, since she cannot acquire any form of forgiveness from her deceased lover, she seeks it from her present one by describing the details of the event in her exposition. Furthermore, as articulated in

the quotation above, she attempts to rectify the fact that her husband was silenced by heteronormativity by giving him a voice through her exposition and telling Mitch his story. This echoes the way homosexuality was 'unsaid', and thus was given a voice, given life through the exposition of the heterosexual characters. This perspective satisfies the more accepting and compassionate reader, as her desperate exposition engages feelings of sympathy in those who are able to see that Blanche is extremely remorseful. So, although on a surface level it might seem as though Blanche is seeking sympathy from Mitch because her husband was homosexual, which satisfies the heteronormative reader, in reality Blanche is seeking forgiveness for the cruel and violent way she acted toward her homosexual husband, which satisfies the more accepting and sympathetic reader. As a result, Tennessee Williams is able to ally the economy of heteronormativity with that of heterosexuality in order to critique and even allow certain readers to take a step past the destructive nature of a tyrannically heteronormative culture.

In fact, Blanche's exposition when retelling the tragic end to her husband not only allies homosexuality and heteronormativity through the two different interpretations highlighted above, but its metatheatricality exposes Blanche's cruelty toward her homosexual husband as an obligatory form of acting because of the homophobic culture embedded in American Drama in the mid 1900s. In Marie Lovrod's *The Rise of the Metadrama and the Fall of the Omniscient Observer*, she defines metatheatre or metadrama as theatre that is "self-reflexive". Blanche's recitation of the death of her husband is a form of metadrama because she employs the dramaturgical techniques that produce a play as outlined by David Ball. In fact, it is a series of actions that are composed of triggers and heaps in which she provides a stasis (when she describes the

early stages of falling in love), an intrusion (walking in on her husband with his male lover), obstacles (Blanche's obstacle is that she wants her marriage to work out, as she claims to be in love with her husband, but he does not reciprocate the feelings because he is homosexual; Allen's obstacle is that he has an older gay lover, but must hide it by using Blanche, as he lives in an oppressively heteronormative society), and dramatic conflict that stems from these obstacles. In reciting lines from her life story, Blanche becomes a sort of actor navigating through American Drama and the heteronormative culture around it. According to Lovrod, "Metadrama, then, works to break through the boundaries of human consciousness, freeing the political imagination to promote human attempts at personal and global salvation" (Lovrod 507). Thus, the metatheatrical nature of Blanche's exposition is some sort of break through aimed at a form of political justice. One might argue that there is not enough support to Blanche's metatheatrical exposition as a form of political justice, however, I am not arguing that it is aimed at saving the world, I am merely arguing that her metatheatricality is aimed at critiquing heteronormativity in American Drama in order to take but one step toward identifying the ideology in order to step past it. In the context of Blanche as an actor, Williams seems to be making a statement about the violent forces of heteronormative ideology; Blanche is forced to be disgusted with her husband because, as an actor in American Drama, she has no choice but to do so as a result of the homophobic culture surrounding it. If Blanche were to accept Allen for who he was, she would certainly be punished because homosexuality was outlawed in American Drama at the time. Thus, although Blanche is perpetuating homosexual stereotypes and homophobia, as an actor in American Drama she is being forced to do so. Therefore, Williams is highlighting the oppression of the

playwright who writes homosexuality in the mid 1900s and ultimately critiquing and subverting the oppressive, homophobic culture in American Drama at the time through the employment of metatheatrical exposition.

Overall, Williams utilizes forwards about Blanche's husband to entice and excite the audience into hearing more about what happened between them. As a result, Williams places a lot of weight on the moment where Blanche finally reveals her cruel actions that prompted Allen to suicide. Through Blanche's exposition, he is able to ally the heteronormative economy of desire with the underlying homosexual one, and by employing metatheatricality to portray Blanche as an actress, he plants the early seeds of stepping past heteronormative ideology in a culture where homosexuality was violently punished. Williams was able to step past and subvert the strict and unjust rules of American Drama at the time in order to give his homosexual characters life through the other characters' exposition. Therefore, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams employs dramaturgical techniques in order to critique the violent nature of the oppressively heteronormative culture of America and American Drama in the mid 1900s.

Works Cited

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