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## Hyperbolic Bodies for Sale: The Figurative Representations of Prostitutes in Tennessee Williams's Early Works

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**Abstract:** The article examines representations of prostitutes in the early works of Tennessee Williams. The characters of hustlers in two of his two short stories, “In Memory of an Aristocrat” (1940) and “One Arm” (1942-45) as well as one short drama, “Hello from Bertha” (1941), are discussed as representatives of Williams’s employment of the hyperbolic figuration. In the case of each of the three examined characters, Choiński discusses the excessive and contrastive elements of descriptions which allow Williams to investigate the grotesqueness of human physicality on sale.

**Keywords:** Tennessee Williams, literary hyperbole, figurative excess, Southern literature

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### Introduction

In her recent study of Tennessee Williams’s late dramas, Annette Saddik (2015) takes excess as a pivotal element of the playwright’s artistic design. She observes that “William’s excesses serve to highlight the ambiguities and inconsistencies of living in and experiencing the world—the excess that leaks out of closed systems of meaning, that seep through the cracks of the rational, the stable, the complete, and point toward the essence of the real” (Saddik 6). The creative employment of hyperbolic excess that allows Williams to break the Southern decorum and explore the lonesome, troubled world around him does not seem to be exclusive only to the plays he authored in the 1960s and the 1970s, when his well-documented struggles with addiction and depression coincided with his reputation as a playwright nosediving. Also, Williams’s early short plays and short stories demonstrate the hyperbolic design in which a “mixture of exaggeration, chaos, ambiguity and laughter” (Saddik 5) triggers a liberation from the oppression of Southern propriety. In this aesthetics, human physicality remains central to Williams, both as a symbol as well as a theme, and the characters of hustlers who trade with their bodies in the disreputable districts of New Orleans and St. Louis,<sup>1</sup> are essential for Williams’s artistic *idée fixe*—the confrontation

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1 These two cities are of particular importance for Williams. Kenneth Holditch in his essay studies the playwright’s relationship with New Orleans, the city he would sometimes call his “spiritual home” (193) and which “came to represent to him, if not the paradise

between the carnal and the spiritual.<sup>2</sup> In this article, three of Williams's early texts, two short stories, "In Memory of an Aristocrat" (1940), "One Arm" (1942-45) and one short drama, "Hello from Bertha" (1941), are studied to explore the tensions that surround Williams's hyperbolic representations of hustlers and their bodies.<sup>3</sup>

### Plastic Hyperbole

A large part of Williams's spectacular success as a playwright can be attributed to his "plastic" theatrical design. A good example of it is his "memory play," which incorporated the psychological realism of despondency and desire with an unrealistic space, in which music and lights signified the removal from the present moment, and Strindbergian expressionism coalesced with the symbolism and neo-romantic storylines of tragic love, allowed Williams to appeal to the sensitivity of his audience on a fundamentally new level. Williams's hallmark "plastic" plays, like *Glass Menagerie* (1944) or *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) combine this artistic design with a plotline characterized by a fundamental clash of opposites, one in which contrastive excess violates the decorum. For Williams, pushing things beyond proportions became a vital means of artistic engagement.

Excessive figuration, although discrepant and disruptive, essentially remains a manner of discovery. As a trope, hyperbole<sup>4</sup> constitutes a statement that is untruthful, and whose absurdity challenges what is deemed possible and acceptable. When the shock triggered by the discord between the excess and the decorum wears

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of his youth, an essential liberating element for the developing artist" (194). In contrast, as stressed by Lahr, Williams loathed St. Louis, which he would associate with his traumatising childhood as well as the decay of innocence, and refer notoriously as "St. Pollution" (Lahr 794).

- 2 Willams's duality between the body and the spirit has been the object of much critical attention. For instance, Falk pointed out that in some plays, Williams seeks to confront the Victorian repression and obsessive propriety in the South (70-71); in consequence, the carnal passion becomes "the only valid expression for life" and that the "opposite of passion is death" (76). Alice Griffin's study of *Summer and Smoke* (81-103) discusses how Alma awakens to her body, against the background of the antagonistic coupling of the spirit and the flesh. Most recently, Sigel, in his study of Williams's "metaphysics" moves away from the dichotomous uptake on the duality and suggests that the two elements should not be viewed as an exclusive duo, but as two sides of a "running dialogue" (111) which are not as segregated as they would seem.
- 3 This article presents some of the results of the research grant "Hyperbole in the Writings of American Southern Authors," carried out in the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University in the years 2017-2019, financed by the Polish National Science Center (OPUS 2016/23/B/HS2/01207).
- 4 There are surprisingly few larger studies dedicated to hyperbolic figuration. In recent years, hyperbole has most frequently been studied in the context of the grotesque aesthetics (e.g. Harpham), or Baroque literature (e.g. Johnson). Claudia Claridge's book is the only study of the hyperbole as a linguistic phenomenon.

off, a new meaning is generated. Thus, hyperbole does not aim to challenge what is deemed valid and true, nor does it seek to substitute it. A revelation through shock rather than deception remains the communicative goal of the hyperbolic mode, and the hyperbolic disruption and contrast is, ultimately, constructive. As pointed out by Johnson, "the hyperbolist uses the disruption of literal sense to communicate what could not have been otherwise communicated" (11). In this sense, Williams's artistic thought is fundamentally hyperbolic, and his artistic rules of engagement are conditioned by the hyperbolic mode and the clash of opposites pushed to the extreme.

Williams's management of the hyperbolic mode is notorious for the destruction of the characters who are subjected to the excessive, contrastive pressures. A number of his texts, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *A Portrait of a Madonna*, feature a Southern belle who withers away, unable to withstand the pressures generated by an oppressive reality. Williams's texts are littered with such fastidious ladies, arguably an infamous archetype in his drama, indispensable in the portrayal of the complexities of the South, blown up out of all proportions, repressed, unable to confront their own grotesqueness and adhering to a matrix of prescriptive social rules and conventions. Williams perceived similar conflicts in his own psyche, and the "combination of Puritan and Cavalier" strains in his blood, as he admitted, "may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in the people I write about" (*Where I Live* 65). Williams's Southern belles are hungry for affection and, having been deprived of love, they wither away, gradually collapsing under the force of the social and carnal pressures at play. Williams's employment of the hyperbolic mode leads to their gradual dissolution, symbolically culminating in their forceful removal to an asylum, an institution which objectifies them and violently contains their excess. This is exactly the ultimate fate of Blanche De Bois from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Bertha from "Hello from Bertha" or Mrs Collins from *A Portrait of a Madonna*.

Obviously, Williams's perception of the mental asylum was heavily informed by the incarceration of his sister Rose, who suffered from progressive schizophrenia and was placed in St Vincent's Sanitarium in 1937, and then in the State Asylum in Farmington, Missouri. According to Bak, Williams's sister remained simultaneously his artistic "muse" and "security blanket" (3). As a source of a painful sense of loss and guilt, she was also Williams's most important artistic inspiration.<sup>5</sup> When all pharmacological treatments brought no results, Rose was subjected to almost sixty electroshock treatments as well as one of the first prefrontal lobotomies performed in America. The invasive procedure was to alleviate the illness and end the family

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5 In an article on Tennessee and Rose Williams, Michael Paller argues that the relationship between the two siblings is in fact more complex than mere artistic inspiration, and should be more likened to a "dialogue" (70). Paller suggests that upon closer scrutiny, Tennessee's relationship with his sister was much more conflicted and discordant than one would think.

ordeal of Rose's dementia, however, it only sedated Rose and rendered her artificially tranquil. Little wonder that, for Williams, the hospital would be associated with ominous oppression, danger and loss of identity.

In Williams's artistic formula, an oppressed Southern belle inevitably fades away over time. Her decay is caused by an inability to cope with the surmounting tensions, as well as an encounter with the male, carnal brute, who exposes the Southern belle's detachment and lack of balance. When exposed, the Southern belles flee, just as Blanche De Boise did before she came to her sister's doorstep—and in this way become central, fugitive figures in Williams's world. In the words of Boxill, "The faded belle and the wanderer, the has-been and the might-have-been, are elegiac characters of the 'the fugitive kind' and still-born poets whose muffled outcries are destined to oblivion the tyranny of time" (38).

For Williams, however, the fastidiousness and escapism of his fictional Southern belle is just a façade behind which repressed passions and desires are stored. Paradoxically, there is a short road from a Southern belle to a harlot, and artificial chastity can easily change into promiscuity when carnal impulses cease to be inhibited. As Williams writes of Tallulah Bankhead, an actress who famously played the role of Blanche DuBois in the 1956 revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire*: "There are certain kinds of Southern ladies who could be called tramps, if you want to use abusive language toward ladies. I suppose you could say Tallulah was a tramp, in the elegant sense. I remember she never wanted to interrupt a conversation for bodily functions" (*Memoirs* 47). The focus on the corporeal and the shattering of the rules of propriety, whether by engaging in promiscuity as a result of a lack of a proper occupation (like Blanche DuBois), or by "saying yes" to travelling salesmen to ease the aching soul (like Alma Winemiller from *Summer and Smoke*), allows Williams's characters to deconstruct the Southern decorum. The epitome of this subversion in Williams's drama are his depictions of characters who work as hustlers.

### Williams's Nightingale Encounters

In his notorious *Memoirs*, Williams wrote openly and extensively about his experiences with prostitutes. In New Orleans he visited a "delightfully scandalous night spot on Bourbon Street which features the topless and bottomless go-go boys—all of whom are hustlers and some of whom are very pretty indeed" (75). Williams sought to remain cautious, when possible, giving advice to his readers: on the Bourbon Street, "boys wear G-strings only—so you can be pretty sure what you're getting. I would recommend, however, that penetration be avoided, as they are most probably all infected with clap in the ass" (75). When in Rome, Williams likewise indulged in numerous "nightingale" encounters, as he dubbed them. A "cynical" colleague of his stressed to him that there are only "two Italian phrases" he has to know "to enjoy [himself] in Rome, "Dove vai?" and "Quanto costa?" (144). Williams was far from condemnatory of prostitution, and he continued to be fascinated by how the sexual

act is redefined by a transactional context. When the body becomes an object of financial exchange, and all flirtatious games are jettisoned as redundant, the issues of desire and its fulfillment and repression are reduced to fundamentals. The cold simplicity of monetary exchange which substitutes affection, precludes ambiguities and illusory pretenses. For Williams, the sexual act in such a context is a study of human nature.

At the same time, the corporal is placed to the fore. Furthermore, if the physical and the spiritual are in a binary relationship in Williams's world, and bound in perpetual competition, the absence of one element pushes the other into a state of overdrive. Thus, for the playwright, the act of prostitution inescapably hyperbolizes the body. This disruption of equilibrium and corporeal excess necessarily taints the characters of Williams's hustlers with an insatiable longing for the spiritual. If they are nothing but excessive flesh, engaged in objectifying acts of transactional love, deep emotionality is what they crave and, tragically, exactly because of their profession, they cannot become satisfied. This is especially true in the context of how the destructive passage of time deprives them of their attractiveness, leaving them with nothing but illusory, "plastic" memories. Such a disintegrative collapse befalls a plethora of Williams's characters, three of which are discussed below in detail.

### **Irene's Expanding Body**

The story told in "In Memory of an Aristocrat" by a budding writer-narrator is to a large extent modeled on Williams's experiences. In 1939, in New Orleans, Williams developed a keen interest in the fugitive lives of artists who struggled with the unforgiving nature of the Depression. He described them as the "most destructible element" of the society, as well as the "immature" and "rootless" people, subjected to the "worst lambasting" (*Where I Live* 13). Their raffish life in the French Quarter, dreams of creative fulfillment and their drive to paint, compose and write in spite of the dire financial situation had a particularly romantic appeal to him. Williams's *Vieux Carré*, an autobiographical play he started writing in New Orleans and finished only a few decades later, portrays the colourful human landscape of the Quarter, with the boarding house at 722 Toulouse Street populated by such individuals as the Nightingale, a predatory painter suffering from tuberculosis, or Jane, a sick society girl whose partner, Tye is a drug-addicted bouncer in a strip club.

Irene, one of the Quarter "rats," a painter forced to sustain herself with prostitution, must have had a particularly strong impact on Williams, considering how firmly her presence remains visible in his texts. In 1943, during his stay in Santa Monica, Williams wrote the poem "Mornings On Bourbon Street," in which the speaker celebrates the memory of his "companions" from the disreputable part of the French Quarter. Processing the pain of their loss, he asks rhetorically if he can still believe in love. In the long, sentimental enumeration of the images from the Bourbon street, among "pigeons and drunks," the "tall iron horseman before the Cabildo,

tipping his hat so gallantly towards old wharves” and the “rotten-sweet order the Old Quarter had,” Irene appears:

He thought of Irene whose body was offered at night  
behind the cathedral, whose outspoken pictures were hung  
outdoors, in the public square,  
as brutal as knuckles smashed into grinning faces[.] (*The Collected Poems* 72)

Likewise, in his essays, Williams writes of Irene “who painted the most powerful primitive canvases I’ve ever seen and whispered through shutters to men who passed on the street because she had a body that had to live” (*Where I Live* 5). Here, the playwright manages to catch the crux of the dramatic paradox of Irene’s life. Her body, which she needed to maintain, became the very means she used to uphold herself. Caught in this vicious circle, Irene remains bound to her physicality, unable to realize her artistic potential. Also, the very same Irene remains a direct inspiration for Edith Jelkes in the short story *The Night of the Iguana*, which later metamorphosed into the play of the same title. The echoes of her conflicted situation are likewise discernable in the dark, promiscuous past Blanche De Boise seeks to escape from, and which Stanley reveals to Mitch, to her detriment.

The narrator of “In Memory of an Aristocrat” develops an anecdotal narrative of how together with Carl, a mediocre fiddler and occasional robber, he would occasionally visit Irene, a painter who in her “crib-like” (89) room, deep in the French Quarter, resorted to prostitution to support herself. Irene is a Willamesque paradox, an artist-harlot, combining two opposing drives: the corporeal and the spiritual. In her, they permeate each other on a fundamental level, and even during sex, she would become inspired and envision artistic designs, interrupting the intercourse to set them down. With this convolution, Irene’s body is physically out of balance. She seems asymmetrical and especially the lower part of her body is disproportionately spacious—in the words of the narrator, “everything about her was on a monumental scale” (91). In spite of this irregularity, she was in no way “unpleasant to look at” (91) and exuded a sense of nobility, indicating that she had confronted the adversities of her life with bravery. With her past upon her, it seemed that her potential for fulfillment was curtailed: “There was nearly always an air of quiet laughter about her, together with something that was deeply, incurably hurt” (91). As with all of Williams’s lonesome characters, she lived accompanied by auguries of the disaster which would befall her.

For the narrator, Irene’s deep artistic intensity would be more connotative of florid poetry than of prolix prose. She painted with “force and precision” (95) that only comes with the “fury of first-rate talent” (95) and the accurate strokes of her brush connoted the potent expressive power of figurative speech. This deep sensitivity and fractious ingenuity generated an insoluble paradox in Irene—“the more I feel” she confessed “the more I am capable of feeling” (95). She was caught in the self-

perpetuating vortex of affection, which gradually escalated, pushing her to the point of overdrive. So, her fear was that she would eventually turn into an emotional excess and become consumed by the uncontrollable surplus—what actually happens at the end of the story. Her uncontrollability, as if she was “possessed of a demon” (96), was ultimately of destructive nature. For Irene, this drive was also economically perilous in so far as, if she were to lose herself in her emotions, it could render her unable to objectify her body and maintain the profession that enabled her to earn her daily bread.

In his *Memoirs*, Williams used a similar image of emotional surplus that cannot be contained to talk about Blanche: “She was a demonic creature, the size of her feeling was too great for her to contain without the escape of madness” (55). The striking correspondence of these two characteristics, and even the use of the same words, not only points to Irene as a trial run for Blanche, but also exemplifies how Williams's thought was governed by a similar figurative conceptualization of excess. Both women remain in an essential conflict with themselves, as their bodies cannot figuratively contain the convoluted emotional content of their hearts and their “demonic” uncontrollability. Thus, as is the case with Irene, the body has to expand or, as is the case with Blanche, it has to become the object of dominative violence and be exiled into an asylum.

The manner in which Carl and Irene make up after an argument, with loud sex, full of “gasping, moans, smothered darlings” and “hoarse, rapid breathing” (93-94), is reminiscent of how satisfying intercourse became a bridge of understanding between Stella and Stanley and allowed them to make up after a fight. Irene's sexuality is as unrestrained as Stella's, while her emotional malady is as pervasive as Blanche's. And, so, the metaphorical container of the body cannot accommodate the emotional excess of the two drives which pushes upon it from within. When Irene wanted to “embrace the whole world” (97), she wanted her body to follow the excessive growth of her inner, spiritual side, which was suppressed by financial limitations as well as her confinement to the small cell-like apartment in the French Quarter. Thus her body is unruly in the sense of its limitlessness, but at the same time, she is aware of how her profession restrains her socially. Irene admits she is “fed up with being a whore” (98) and would like to put “scatological sketches” on other people's walls (98). However, when she submits her paintings for an exhibition, they are rejected because of her notorious reputation and the fact that she supports herself by means of prostitution.

So, when her artistic vision is rejected and the “aristocratic” privilege of a Bohemian painter is lost, she eventually collapses into violent excess and throws a tantrum, hitting one of her critics with her painting. She rebels against her status as a pariah, and against the condemnation and downfall that she knew would await her, in contrast to the naïve foretelling of the African-American woman at the beginning of the story. Her face becomes “livid” (101), when the suppressed, demonic energy erupts and the club ladies fruitlessly seek to contain her, even though “nothing on earth could stop her, not even the Maginot line” (101). In the

midst of a fight, she seems to expand again, her dress is torn and one of her breasts is revealed, symbolically expressing her bolstering physicality, hidden by the temporary entourage of propriety. The unmanageable violence of her ire overpowers all those who try to oppose her: “Millions of voices seemed to shout together, but over them was always her voice” (101). Thus Irene is blown up beyond all proportions, turned into excess, changed into uncontrollable, hyperbolic force that towers over everyone else and seeks to rebel violently against the constraints that curtail her.

### **Bertha’s Body in Decay**

Bertha, from the short drama “Hello from Bertha,” is another hustler with a disorderly, excessive body. Unlike Irene or Oliver, her physicality neither expands, nor is imprisoned in an imperfect perfection—in this text, the “body for sale” is subjected to atrophy and forcefully exiled. Also, contrary to previous plays, “Hello from Bertha” is not set in New Orleans’s French Quarter, but in the “valley,” the red-light district of St Louis, the town the playwright moved to with his parents at the age of nine, following Cornelius Williams’s promotion at the International Shoe Company.

The play opens with a powerful image of inertia. In a brothel located in the “valley,” Bertha, a despondent, middle-aged, blonde prostitute is lying prostrate in her bed, unable to move. She is suffering from an ailment that is not named, but there is little doubt she will soon pass away. The very first line of the play, the question Goldie, the manager of the brothel, directs at her: “Bertha, what are you going to do?” (171) is not actually a question but an attempt at forcing the sick hustler to realize that she has no future. Its fatalistic undertone is reminiscent of the question that plagues Amanda in *Glass Menagerie*: “So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by?” (18). Like a number of Williams’s Southern belles and harlots, Bertha is doomed, and what the playwright documents in the drama is her harrowing swansong.

Goldie’s business suffers from Bertha’s inertia and her unproductive occupation of one of the rooms—as she explains, the “girls” need the space she is staying in for their clients. Prior to her intervention, she allowed Bertha to stay bed-ridden for two weeks, waiting for her to recover, but the wait has turned into a wake. Bertha’s sickness immobilised her and drained her of energy, as her body is dissolving under the pressure of heartache and advancing depression. She cannot move or undertake any constructive action and in response to Goldie’s questions and reassurances, she moans and tosses around in bed, like a wounded animal trapped in a snare. Bertha deflects her manager’s questions, repeats her obscure, laconic retorts and zones out, moving back and forth in a diseased delirium.

The mournful inertia she suffers from is both fatal and debilitating, and it adumbrates no recovery, meliorism or control. Goldie proposes summoning a priest and a doctor for Bertha, but the dying prostitute refuses to see either. Neither her body nor her soul can be remedied, since the source of her excessive, feverish atrophy



is very deeply rooted—she is haunted by the memory of her former love, Charlie, a hardware seller from Memphis, with whom she had a passionate affair at the “back room” of his store. Bertha keeps slapping the bed and her voice transforms into a “sobbing mumble,” whenever she desperately calls out for her “Sweet Charlie” (173). The memory of her former lover is a source of pain to her, but also, the only anchor for her mind, which becomes focused solely on his image.

But for all her grief and anguish, Bertha remains proud, clinging to the dignity of dying and the nobility of love. While her profession entailed her sleeping with numberless men, and the objectification of her body, her heart remains sentimentally dedicated to Charlie. Williams seems respectful of that devotion. Bertha's painful exclamation, “I love you so much it makes my guts ache to look at your blessed face in the picture!” (178) stresses his absence and the aridness of her love. The only thing she is left with is a picture of Charlie, which she worships like an icon—other than that, she is bankrupt, diseased and forlorn. Devoid of any kind of leverage, the sole resource she possessed, her body which she was selling away in the brothel can no longer support her, both figuratively and literally. Bertha's physical inertia translates into how barren and useless her body has become. When she shouts out hysterically to the non-present Charlie, lying in bed in a “catatonic state” (177), it is an outburst of desperation, an exorbitant spasm prophesies her impending departure.

Bertha dissolves and fades away in the eyes of the audience. At the end of the play, Goldie summons an ambulance which takes her dying colleague to a hospital, where she would be put into a “nice, clean ward” (179). This removal is symptomatic of Williams's representation of the loss of identity and the mental malady he once observed in his sister. The heartbroken prostitute is objectified and exiled from the brothel as an unfitting element which cannot be put to any use, and which disturbs the decorum. The hyperbolic pressures have rendered Bertha unseemly and out of place, and as an excessive, awkward pariah she has to be evicted, and her dissolution as a person becomes tantamount to her death. Just like Miss Collins in *Portrait of Madonna*, Bertha plans to leave a farewell letter to her old lover. In her final words, she dictates the note to Lena, another fellow prostitute, who only pretends to set it down. This goodbye note, a sad testament to her life is never to actually be written down, let alone delivered to the addressee. In the letter, Bertha declares that she is sane, calls for Charlie to come over and bail her out for “old time's sake” and signs the message as “old sweetheart, Bertha” (180).

The removal to the asylum and the unwritten letter are the final markers of Bertha's entropy. She dissolves under the hyperbolic pressure of her sentimental love for Charlie, contrasted with her profession, in which, instead of romantic involvement, there was a pecuniary exchange of the body for money. This pressure is further aggravated by the sense of loss, for Bertha realizes that, given her condition, she has no hope of being reunited with Charlie, or even making him remember her. Thus, she breaks and the collapse of her body and her physical removal from her room in the brothel augurs her complete dissolution and death.

### Oliver's Statuesque Body

While Irene's physicality expands into a boundless excess, the body of Oliver Winemiller from "One Arm" remains fixed in a state of serene stasis. In the story, he was one of three male hustlers who could be found in the winter of 1939 on a certain corner of Canal Street in New Orleans. This "unforgettable youth" (196), a former light heavyweight champion boxer of the Pacific fleet who had lost an arm in a car accident, looked like a "broken statue of Apollo" and percolated the "coolness and impassivity of a stone figure" (196). While other two male prostitutes would energetically seek to solicit clients, Oliver remained motionless and speechless, waiting to be spoken to. His statuesque impassivity remained undisturbed, regardless of the weather, and in rain his drenched clothes "held to his body as smooth as the clothes of sculpture" (197). Visibly, Williams designs the narrative to stress the narrator's infatuation with Oliver. The text is permeated with delicate, but visibly obsessive references to his body, and the density of the description iconically represents the extent to which Oliver's physicality remains an aesthetic object of compulsive fascination. Just as it is stressed by Michael Hooper, in the 1940s Williams employed the short story to encapsulate the powerful impact the newly discovered "gay underworld" exerted on him and "made them compelling material upon which to draw" (Hooper 97).

Olivier's body is defined by its brokenness, and the eponymous synecdochical arm. Much as he resembles a Greek sculpture, and much as his physique exudes aesthetic perfection, the form of his body was effectively ruined by the car accident. The mutilation corrupted carnal perfection, turning it into imperfection, deconstructing the classical decorum of his body, obstructing its balance and proportion. Thus, the hyperbolic paradox of Oliver's body is that the potency for perfection is encased in an imperfect form, setting the contrastive ideas of aesthetic wholeness and deficiency against each other.<sup>6</sup>

As with other mutilated characters of Williams's fiction, the brokenness of Oliver's body also represents the scars in his mind. In another text, *The Mutilated*, Trinket distances herself from love and passion to hide the fact that she has had a mastectomy, and she remains starved of a love which she denies herself. A similar self-revulsion drives Oliver to objectify his body, drain it out of passion and sell it in Canal Street. He seeks to escape from his broken form and his incompleteness. In this sense, the accident turns Oliver into a fugitive grotesque, both on the inside and the outside and his passive and statuesque exterior hides the extent of his post-traumatic malady. The tragic loss of an arm reached deep, right into the "center of his being," spawning a new "speechless self" within him, faster "than it took new skin to cover the stump of the arm he had lost" (197). This second, newborn identity briskly began

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6 Brian M. Peter attaches vital significance to the figurative framework of "One Arm" (as well as "Desire and the Black Masseur"), and its paradoxes. To him, Williams's language "reflects the impact of society's often limiting approach to non-conventional romantic options" (109).

to "look about for destruction" (197), pushing him to take on prostitution, to become restless and emotionally detached, and ultimately, to murder a wealthy client who wanted him to take part in a blue movie.

The metaphor of a motionless and emotionless statue is central to Williams's representation of Oliver's body. Similarly, the transactions he engages in are formal, repetitive and devoid of passion, as if his clients were buying a ticket to see a piece at an art gallery. This excessive lack of emotionality and hyperbolic reduction of the body to a soulless, artistic object generates an emotional void which becomes filled when, in the death ward, Oliver receives an avalanche of love letters from his old clients. Not only is the content of these letters deeply emotional, but also, as they are written on fine, white paper and faintly scented, their material form connotes sensuality. The messages expressed their distress upon the news of Oliver's pending execution, and stressed that the time they spent together haunted their minds, due to the a mixture of the charm of the defeated combined with youth and physical charm. As a person awaiting the death penalty, Oliver "had for these correspondents the curtailed and abstract quality of the priest who listens without being visible to confessions of guilt" (200). He is a perfect object of reverence for his former clients—he knows their dark, promiscuous secrets, and they feel they have the obscure right to confide in him. At the same time, he remains inaccessible, first as an incarcerated inmate, second, a man with a pending death sentence, and, in a sense, remains a safe emotional investment, a phantom partner who cannot hurt them. In this sense, Oliver will take his clients' confessional expressions of love to his grave.

The transactions that took place on the corner of Canal Street, in which Oliver's clients paid him for his body, are fundamentally subversive in so far as they received almost the opposite of what they paid for. Oliver's clients gave him money for intercourse without passion, aimed solely at carnal gratification. What they received in return for their payment, however, was a life-changing event that divulged for them a haunting passion and love. In this sense, Olivier's excessive emotional detachment, brokenness and self-loathing created a space in which his clients could fill themselves completely and in which, paradoxically, his statuesque indifference was a catalyst for romantic love and sensual longing.

## Conclusions

The three images of "bodies for sale" discussed in the article, Irene's corporal expanse, Oliver's statuesque brokenness and Bertha's inert atrophy, share a common figurative denominator. They are ostensibly hyperbolic due to the overwhelming compulsion for the corporeal they entail, and the persistent focus on the body that is positioned and typified in different excessive manners. In fact, the overall representation of prostitutes one finds in Williams's plays, short stories and poems steadily revolves around figurative excess. Such an aesthetic mode, which consisted of blowing things out of all proportion, disturbing the decorum and juxtaposing the opposites, was

more than fitting for Williams to represent the discordant nature of trading with sex, in which the carnal seeks to suppress the spiritual.

At the same time, ostensibly, prostitution was not immoral for Williams. In his portrayal of Irene, Oliver and Bertha, one can sense a great deal of positive sentiment or even deference for their struggle. This cannot be interpreted merely as the author's nostalgia of his promiscuous adventures—in his writings, Williams had acknowledged the complexity of the harlots' emotional and physical predicament. And, as a true artist, he used it to study human behavior, to understand the impulses that govern the heart and to peek into the carnal side of human nature, as well as the deep longing for love and passion that all people share. In fact this is the very thing which became William's artistic signature.

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