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Recasting Genre in Tennessee Williams's Apprentice Plays

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The University of Southern Mississippi

RECASTING GENRE IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S
APPRENTICE PLAYS

by

Christina Ilona Hunter

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2010

ABSTRACT

RECASTING GENRE IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S

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by Christina Iona Hunter

December 2010

This dissertation investigates Tennessee Williams's earliest full-length plays, also known as the apprentice plays—*Candles to the Sun*, *Fugitive Kind*, *Not About Nightingales*, *Spring Storm*, and *Stairs to the Roof*—by comparing, contrasting and contextualizing them in relation to Daniel Chandler's generic criteria of drama; namely, narrative, characterization, setting, topics, iconography, and staging techniques. The present study also draws upon an extensive body of scholarship pertaining to genre theory, Williams's cultural contemporaries, and the historical and psychological backdrop of Depression-era America. In these early plays, Williams diverged sharply from the dramatic generic conventions of his day, manipulating them in new and unique ways, to create plays that reflect and embody authentic generic innovations. Their immense impact, not only on his own subsequent works but also on other playwrights, is widely acknowledged. While the initial rediscovery of these plays in 1998 led to their widespread appreciation, publication, and/or production, no study to date has analyzed their distinctive generic innovations. This analysis demonstrates how Williams reworks and exploits the contemporary repertoire of dramatic narratives, while situating their generic locales—the coal mine, the prison, the urban gangster milieu, Southern Gothic, and science fiction—within the overarching genres of protest and fantasy. These generic

conventions often intertwine through both the major and minor narratives of a single play. Separate chapters introduce each play, discussing its specific formal organization and generic attributes, and noting its relation to contemporary dramatic and cinematic traditions. Williams's reinterpretation and revision of his personal artistic philosophy is examined in light of formal and stylistic concerns bearing on his ingenious handling of a broad mixture of borrowings and innovations, and the following scrutiny of genres always situates the plays' unconventionality within the cultural and theatrical context in which Williams was active.

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INTRODUCTION

Genre Theory and Tennessee Williams's Apprentice Plays

Between 1935 and 1940, while he was still a student, Tennessee Williams wrote his first cycle of five full-length plays. Critics have characterized these early plays in various ways. According to Gerald Weales (1965), they are “the lost plays”; for Philip Kolin (“Review of *Spring Storm*,” 2000), they are “the forgotten plays”; for Brian Parker (2006), “the rediscovered plays”; and for Robert Bray (2005), the “apprentice plays,” a term which will be applied for the purposes of this dissertation. Until 1998, none had been published and only one, *Stairs to the Roof*, had been professionally produced (in 1945). This dissertation will examine these apprentice plays, exploring the ways in which they significantly transformed many of the traditional theatrical genres that Williams had inherited but had dismissed as “exhausted” (*GM* 131).¹ While Williams perceived this legacy as outmoded and bankrupt, it enabled him, nonetheless, to create radically new genres of dramatic art to express more fully his unique personal, social, and political concerns (Holditch 217). Moreover, playing fast and loose with the narrative conventions available to him, Williams also often invoked minor forms, such as farce, tragicomedy, and slapstick—themselves transgressions against then-dominant theatrical modes—by way of reinvigorating the major forms of comedy and tragedy.

While some scholars—notably Jacqueline O'Connor (*Moving* 19) and Annette J. Saddik (*Blueprints* 67)—have recognized the importance of genre in Williams's full-

¹ *The Glass Menagerie* has been published in Williams, *Theater of Tennessee Williams*. I have used the short-form title *GM* throughout this dissertation.

length apprentice plays, only the dissertations of Elizabeth Hardaway and Nabeel Yaseen have applied genre theory as a broad analytical framework for interpreting Williams's works; neither of these makes reference to the five apprentice plays. Thus, given the limited academic attention that has been accorded to the selected plays, this dissertation has the potential to make a significant contribution to the existing critical literature.

Interestingly, it is Williams's unique reconfigurations of genres—his simultaneous “critique and embrace” of existing dramatic norms (Saddik, *Blueprints* 69)—that have brought him recent recognition as a “herald of the postmodern mentality” (70). By contrast, American dramatists who had either preceded Williams or were his contemporaries had generally been content to comply with existing dramatic conventions. They incorporated mainstream generic criteria while eschewing any tendency toward the kind of brutal reflections that characterize much of Williams's work. One possible explanation for Williams's continued relevance is that he ushered in a non-traditional, postmodern form of drama whose spirit was probing, ironic, and relentlessly self-reflexive. For some critics, this spirit was lacking in the works of such contemporaries of Williams as Thornton Wilder, in whose plays Jenny McCarter finds the “whiff of Norman Rockwell wholesomeness” (27) all too evident.

During the five-year period in which the apprentice plays were written, Williams, according to Allean Hale (*Early Williams* 16), was in a state of emotional, intellectual, and artistic transition and was deeply engaged in experimenting with the generic conventions of his time. In light of such experimentation, Daniel Chandler's detailed generic criteria (*Semiotics* 159) provide a highly relevant aesthetic and analytic

perspective from which to understand these apprentice plays. Further, Chandler's list of generic criteria enables us to identify, with considerable precision, important points of generic contrast and similarity across all five plays. In addition, the work of film theorists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (380)—not to mention the journals and criticism written by Williams himself throughout his apprentice period—provides still other valuable theoretical perspectives when applied to the plays.

During the 1930s, world events, in particular the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), tested the political allegiances of writers on an international scale. Some of them—Hemingway, Orwell, and Malraux—actively engaged in combat. During these years, which witnessed the post-General Strike in England and the stagnating Great Depression in the United States, many writers became intensely politicized. Some veered sharply toward the Left, by way of protesting the strongly conservative, if not indeed fascist, tendencies of writers such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W. B. Yeats. Other writers—John Dos Passos, for example—so keenly felt the implosive divisions of political pressure that, from an initially strong Leftist commitment, they veered abruptly toward the far Right.

Williams, on the other hand, at least at this early point, was overtly politicized but was disinclined, unlike Clifford Odets, to make ongoing proclamations about his political commitments. Nevertheless, at some level, Williams must have felt that his values and political commitments were on the line, and so he gave voice to the prevailing social conflicts by expressing his deep sense of chaos and disorientation. The plays may be seen as a testament to his sense of disorder, conflict, and dismay. Williams's mixture and

subversion of genres remains consistent with his sense that the meanings and values attached to traditional genres had become eroded and were therefore no longer relevant as vehicles for his expression. In short, by creating innovative generic conventions, Williams expressed the crisis and catastrophe manifested so vividly in the international political situation.

Notably, other recently rediscovered works of Williams's earliest dramatic period include not only the full-length apprentice plays but also thirteen one-act plays, written while he was a student. Collected under the title *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays*, most were written between 1938 and 1942 but published as recently as 2005. In a foreword to this collection, Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson describe them as "rich with explorations [and] stabs at impressionism and cubism. . . . Williams tried his hand with political satire, expressionism, social realism, and even drawing-room comedy" (vii). Wallach and Jackson also assert that Williams's early one-act plays served as the "training ground for his [later] well known full-length plays" (vii). Such similarities suggest an aesthetic coherence connecting Williams's plays to one another, regardless of whether they are "early" or "late," "full-length" or "one-act."

While the present study focuses on Williams's five full-length apprentice plays, this dissertation indicates where, in terms of their generic complexity, the earliest full-length plays are echoed by his rediscovered one-act plays from the same period. Similar echoes are found in the full-length plays from his final, experimental period (late 1970s to early 1980s), a period of such generic complexity and experimentation that one critic mistakenly dubbed these later plays "incoherent" (Brantley 18). A recent, comprehensive

search of international journal indexes and article databases dating back to 1935 reveals that no academic theses or dissertations have been written to date on any of the five selected apprentice plays.

In 1997, actor Vanessa Redgrave, along with Maria St. Just, a trustee of the Williams estate, found the final draft of *Not About Nightingales* in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC) archives at the University of Texas at Austin. Williams had written it more than sixty years earlier. Subsequent to this important discovery, under the direction of Trevor Nunn and starring Redgrave's brother, Corin, the play was finally performed in Cologne, in Houston, and on Broadway. Aside from recent critical attention and bibliographic studies of critical responses (Hunter, *Tennessee Williams* 84) to the relatively recent premieres of celebrated apprentice plays (such as *Not About Nightingales*), reviews and critiques of the other four full-length apprentice plays remain scant and somewhat brief. Be that as it may, the publication and performance in 1998 of *Nightingales* sparked renewed interest in Williams's other early full-length, but hitherto unpublished, apprentice plays.

Williams's earliest manuscripts had been deposited at the HRHRC archives in 1962. Bibliographer Andreas Brown had apparently asked Williams for his permission to collect material amassed both in a New York storage locker and in Williams's mother's basement. Permission was duly granted and Brown deposited the five apprentice plays at the HRHRC, along with various versions of other plays and some letters, diaries, poems, and stories. Following the publication in 1997 of *Not About Nightingales*, Williams scholars Daniel Isaac and Allean Hale, in conjunction with New Directions, "rescued" the

four remaining full-length apprentice plays from the HRHRC. Interestingly, since the deposit of *Spring Storm* at the HRHRC in 1962, and until the play's publication in 1999, no biographer or scholar had published a description, let alone an in-depth evaluation, of the play itself.

Stairs to the Roof was first performed on March 25, 1945 at the Little Pasadena Playbox. However, it too was largely ignored and continued to languish at the HRHRC, until the appearance of Isaac's edition of the play for New Directions in 2000. Williams's very first full-length play, *Candles to the Sun*, was produced in 1937 by the Mummies of St. Louis under the direction of Willard Holland but only published in 2004 by New Directions. Initially, Isaac had re-discovered *Candles to the Sun* in 1989, when Jane Garrett Carter called a dramaturge at the Goodman Theater in Chicago, Abbott Crissman, "claiming to have portrayed Williams's first heroine in his first produced play" (Isaac, *Introduction, Candles* xxix). Crissman referred Carter to Isaac, and she forwarded him a copy. It was a script he had previously "only glanced at" (Isaac xxix) during a visit in 1984 to the HRHRC. Isaac calls *Candles* an "archaeological find," adding, "[f]urthermore, its remarkable quality is almost as surprising as its neglect and disappearance from the American cultural scene for more than sixty years" (*Candles* vii). Remarkably, Willard Holland and the Mummies also produced *Fugitive Kind*, Williams's second full-length play, in March, 1937, although it underwent publication only in 2001. "Is it possible," Hale wonders in her introduction to the play, "that *Fugitive Kind* . . . will [now] take on a new life?" (*Introduction, Fugitive* xxi). The Marin Theater Company in

Mill Valley, California, answered Hale's question in the affirmative by giving *Fugitive Kind* its first professional production in February, 2003.

In a number of respects, and particularly in his mastery of melodrama, Williams's five full-length apprentice plays are especially cinematic and thus potentially adaptable to the big screen. According to Allean Hale, the fast-paced "episodic" (*Introduction, Nightingales*, xvi) structures of both *Candles to the Sun* and *Not about Nightingales* were "better suited to the screen than to the stage" (xvii). Also, within a few years of writing *Spring Storm* for the University of Iowa Theater Department in 1938, Williams adapted and submitted it as a screenplay to MGM Studios. MGM rejected it, however, most likely owing to its "strong sexual content" (Curley 234). Further, Williams admitted in his journal that *Fugitive* was "inspired" (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xii) by the film version of Maxwell Anderson's play, *Winterset*. Williams also declared that the manuscript of *Stairs to the Roof* was "written for the stage or screen" (*Stairs* xxi). Indeed, this play virtually cries out for a screen adaptation, given that the technological resources needed to realize its fantasy staging specifications would be more readily available through the medium of film than on stage. Moreover, Richard Gilman claims that Williams had a screenplay in mind when writing at least one of his one-act plays. For example, Williams had marked out *The Pink Bedroom*, written in about 1943, "[for] Greta Garbo" (Gilman viii).

Williams also developed special cinematic techniques that elaborated character development through the use of shifting scenic landscapes and telling dialogue (Hunter, *Stopped Rocking* 242). Despite Williams's equivocal statement that he was writing "for

stage or screen,” the sensational nature of his selected topics, including sexual delinquency, prostitution, and madness, were not consistent with the Hollywood mores of the 1930s, nor were the anarchistic messages evident in the five apprentice plays consistent with the requisite political conventions of that time (*Stopped Rocking* 242).

As indicated earlier, in analyzing the five full-length apprentice plays, this study primarily consults three theoretical sources. The first two, Chandler (*Semiotics* 159) and Bordwell and Thompson (69), are concerned with genre theory, particularly—but not exclusively—as it applies to film. The third theorist is Williams himself, especially in his production notes to *The Glass Menagerie* (*GM* 134). In these notes, Williams describes his own aesthetic strategy, outlining his approach to formal devices and unconventional “techniques” (131) as they relate both to staging and to certain cinematic aspects in performance. Bordwell and Thompson and Chandler also identify cinematic and staging “technique” (Bordwell and Thompson 244; Chandler, *Semiotics* 159) as a generic criterion. Williams’s aesthetic approach thus complements the theories both of Chandler and of Bordwell and Thompson with respect to genre. Also, Williams’s notes offer a hybrid or “plastic” (*GM* 131) theory, which asserts that formal devices and techniques are transferable from film to drama and vice versa.

In short, this study relies on the theoretical frameworks of Chandler, Bordwell and Thompson, and Williams, which, when taken collectively, inform the analysis of the selected plays in the following chapters. Having established the cinematic concerns expressed by these three theoretical sources, this dissertation argues that generic criteria as applied to film remain relevant as well to the adoption of filmic practice in the theater.

In addition, the “textual features” that Chandler characterizes as “typically listed by film theorists” (*Semiotics* 159) are also frequently invoked by scholars of drama (158).

Furthermore, Williams’s experimental aesthetic, in the case of these five plays, resonates with certain of his one-act plays on two counts: first, with respect to Chandler’s generic categories and, second, with respect to the aesthetic criteria implicit in Williams’s Production Notes. Certain aspects of the five full-length plays will be clarified, a) by considering the cinematic elements these plays share among themselves, and b) by undertaking generic comparisons with selected early one-act plays.

To reiterate, the five full-length apprentice plays provided Williams with vehicles for experimenting and reconfiguring traditional dramatic genres. Among these traditional genres, the *protest play*, and the *fantasy play* stand out in particular, while the *Southern Gothic play* stands out as the subgenre within which Williams most notably distinguished himself. Incidentally, Williams’s 1938 portrayal of Mississippi in *Spring Storm* also ranks him, for the first time, as a writer capable of working in a predominantly Southern Gothic narrative format. Williams’s deployment of traditional Gothic settings and elements, such as the supernatural, within the iconographic cultural context of the American South, transposes the political and racial agendas of the social protest genre into a fantasy setting, the result being a unique “microcosm for the treatment of universal issues” (Hart 625).

In most cases, the protest play, which achieved popularity in America in the 1930s, sought to present contemporary social problems “with a distinctly political orientation” (Carlson, *Theories* 376–377). Williams also used the fantasy play as a

creative vehicle of expression, a genre in which “thought is surpassed; causality is neutralized and the formulas of logic no longer apply” (Hasenclever 18). The fantasy play manifested significant conventions of the Expressionist movement that emerged in Germany during the early twentieth century and spread rapidly beyond German borders. In the United States, for example, Williams, Eugene O’Neill, and Elmer Rice displayed a marked interest in techniques of Expressionist “dramaturgy” (Valgemae 3). Through reshaping, combining, and transforming these and other genres, Williams succeeded in creating new generic forms.

The apprentice plays are the only full-length dramatic works that Williams wrote before he achieved his initial recognition as a talented playwright (largely as a result of the production, in 1945, of *The Glass Menagerie*). However, these lesser-known plays only came to be published much later, between 1998 and 2004, well over a decade after Williams’s death in 1983. In one instance, Williams wrote *Candles to the Sun* between 1935 and 1936; the play found publication in 2004. *Candles* depicts the struggles of two generations of the Pilcher family. Working as miners for the exploitative Gomstock Company, the Pilchers have struggled constantly merely to subsist. Two sons, John and Joel, have both lost their lives in the mines, while the daughter, Star, out of desperation, turns to prostitution. Socialist organizer Birmingham Red arrives at Gomstock to spur the miners on to strike against the unfair pay policies and exorbitant prices that workers must pay in company “scrip” (Williams, *Candles* 80). After a brief dalliance with Star, Birmingham Red dies after being shot by a band of Company terrorists (Williams, *Candles* 102).

By contrast, Williams sets *Fugitive Kind*, written in 1937 and published in 2001, in a St. Louis flophouse that shelters an eclectic array of transients. Williams portrays both the transients and the proprietors of the flophouse, the Gwendlebaum family, as victims of an unjust social system. Glory, Gwendlebaum's adopted daughter, initially acquiesces to a safe but loveless relationship while Leo, her brother, has been dismissed from college for circulating antiestablishment writings. Terry Meighan, a notorious gangster on the run for a crime that he did not commit, falls in love with Glory. The two conspire to flee together but one of the transients thwarts their plan by betraying Terry to the police. In a violent climax, the police kill Terry in a shootout.

Not About Nightingales, written in 1938 and published in 1998, dramatizes a historic 1938 scandal that took place in a Pennsylvania prison, in which four inmates on a hunger strike were locked in a cell with steam radiators operating at full blast, causing them, quite literally, to be cooked alive. In Williams's version of this event, a prison inmate, Jim Allison (Canary Jim), volunteers to work for the prison warden. Unbeknownst both to the warden and to the other prisoners, Canary Jim intends to expose the prison's deplorable conditions when he attains his scheduled release for good behavior. Yet his fellow prisoners, including aggressive Butch O'Fallon, come to despise Canary Jim for what appears to be his role as the warden's "boy," or flunky. In the meantime, a few of the prisoners have gone on a hunger strike to protest the deplorable conditions at the prison. The warden punishes them by assigning them to a grossly overheated room, where they subsequently die from exposure to steam from the radiators. Upon hearing the grisly news, the other prisoners turn to violence as a form of protest.

Led by Canary Jim and Butch, two characters suddenly united by a common cause, the prisoners beat the warden to death. Finally, although Canary Jim seems to make his escape by diving into the surrounding bay, his ultimate fate remains uncertain. Butch, however, intends to die in a firefight with state troopers (Williams, *Nightingales* 159).

Williams sets his first foray into the fantasy genre—*Spring Storm*, written in 1938 and published in 1999—in the fictional town of Port Tyler, Mississippi. The play includes two love triangles, the intersection of which results in a tragic suicide. Both Dick Miles, an impoverished young rebel, and Arthur Shannon, a poet and the son of a wealthy banker, express their love to Heavenly Critchfield, a young woman with strong aspirations for upward social mobility, instilled by her overbearing mother. Hertha Neilson, a young librarian, is in love with Arthur Shannon. Heavenly, in turn, loves not Arthur but Dick, while Dick, on his part, longs for freedom and escape. After Hertha confesses her love to Arthur, he rejects her. Devastated, Hertha kills herself, while Arthur, having fallen into disgrace, flees Port Tyler. Dick leaves as well, finally escaping the constraints of the young group's conservative town. With the two men who had loved her now gone, Heavenly waits alone on her porch, presumably for yet another suitor (one that, we are led to suspect, will never arrive). Through an examination of *Spring's* narrative structure, it becomes clear that the play isolates significant conventions specific to the developing Southern Gothic subgenre of the period.

Stairs to the Roof, written in 1939 and published in 2000, is possibly Williams's most experimental apprentice fantasy. Benjamin Murphy, a dissatisfied factory worker, rebels; not only does he covertly take to the factory roof on a regular basis to gaze at the

sky, but he also composes poetry in the factory washroom (both on company time).

Benjamin meets The Girl, a secretary, and she, like Benjamin, despises her job.

Benjamin, unable to return home to face the disapproval of his pregnant wife, embarks on a series of adventures with The Girl, which include a fantastic memory sequence, a nocturnal visit to a zoo, and a Dali-inspired surrealistic carnival. The play ends with an apparently omnipotent wizard, Mr. E, whisking the pair off to outer space where together they will reproduce on a distant star.

As we shall see, in both of these fantasy plays, Williams consistently shifts the audience's perspective between the worlds of fantasy and reality in which the characters, alternately, reside.

History of Western Genre Theory

The brief review of the history of Western genre theory that follows ranges from ancient to modern times. In it, we see that most modern literary genre critics, including Benedetto Croce, John Snyder, and Brian Caraher, argue that modern genre theory has virtually supplanted classical genre theory as presented in the works of Aristotle, Quintilian, and Horace, beginning when the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century started "rejecting generic norms or rules as tyrannical constraints upon individual feeling" (Bruyn 80). The classical genre theories, long described as essentialist and timeless, had since come to be viewed as ossified and redundant (82), and were gradually replaced by a more modern and flexible view of genres as artistic manifestations of social change.

Among modern critics of genre such as David Fishelov (*Metaphors of Genre*, 26), Mikhail Bakhtin (*Speech*, 95), Northrop Frye (*Anatomy*, 247), Hans Jauss (*Towards An Aesthetics of Reception*, 35), Bertolt Brecht (*Brecht on Theater*, 69), Fredric Jameson (“Towards,” 323), and Daniel Chandler (*Semiotics*, 103), Eric Hirsch (*Aims*, 193) argues most persuasively that the concept of genre functions to offer a “horizon of . . . meaning” beyond which more specific interpretations make themselves available:

By classifying the text as belonging to a particular genre, the interpreter automatically posits . . . its meaning. The genre provides a sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning components. Thus, before we interpret a text, we often classify it as . . . lyric poem, . . . scientific prose, occasional verse, . . . epic, and so on. . . . But these generic classifications are simply preliminary indications. They give only a rough notion of the horizon for a particular meaning. (193–94)

Thus, for Hirsch, specifying in advance the “horizon for a particular meaning” provides a context for interpretation by invoking assumptions and expectations concerning both style and content, based upon genres already familiar to the audience. This allows the so-called addressees of a play to participate more fully in the play’s meaning. Moreover, as David Fishelov notes, the rules of genre need not be explicit:

Sometimes generic rules are grasped intuitively rather than known consciously. Going to the theater to see a comedy involves having certain expectations but does not depend on having an articulated, theoretical understanding of a construction known as “Comedy.” These expectations

need not necessarily be fulfilled, but they do form an integral part of the communicative situation of watching that play. (14)

For Mikhail Bakhtin, however, what is important is that the playwright's conception of the audience influences the selection of genre in which the playwright writes and presents his or her work:

Both the composition and . . . the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines [the] addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance. Each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre. (*Speech Genres* 95)

Bakhtin argues that the dramatic codes which, in particular genres, govern style and content are shared, to a great extent, by both the playwright and the audience; additionally, that the playwright's awareness of the public's degree of familiarity with these dramatic codes influences the structure of a given genre. One can also add that these dramatic codes remain closely linked, not only to the playwright's and the audience's evolving personal concerns, but to the sociohistorical forces which impinge upon their lives.

According to this evolutionary framework of genre—namely, that generic codes (theatrical and cinematic) both respond and adapt to changing social codes (and vice versa)—we may interpret the emergence of newer genres not as signalling the disappearance of traditional genres but, instead, as signalling the transformation of older

genres into new forms. Instead of conceiving these codes, whether dramatic, cinematic, or social, as forever “fixed” and “instantiated” over time through discrete productions or manifestations, one can look upon them in a more dynamic way, seeing them as ongoing parallel processes which, both independently and interactively, manifest both “permanence” and “change” (Peirce 537). Bakhtin opposes overarching schemas of genres, such as fixed designations of tragedy and comedy, advising us instead to consider individual generic characteristics; namely, the stylistic markers, accentual systems, and specific flavors of a given genre. Bakhtin’s comments imply that he shares Jauss’s concern for the aesthetics of reception:

Literary language—both spoken and written—although it is unitary not only in its shared, abstract, linguistic markers but also in its forms for conceptualizing these abstract markers, is itself stratified and heteroglot in its aspect as an expressive system, that is, in the forms that carry its meanings. (*Dialogic Imagination* 288)

Bakhtin further contends that this “stratification” is “accomplished by specific genres”:

Certain features of language (lexicological, semantic, syntactic) will knit together with the intentional aim, and with the overall accentual system inherent in one or another genre: oratorical, publicistic, newspaper and journalistic genres, the genres of low literature . . . or, finally, the various genres of high literature. Certain features of language take on the specific flavor of a given genre: they knit together with specific points of view,

specific approaches, forms of thinking, nuances and accents characteristic of the given genre. (*Dialogic Imagination* 289)

By calling our attention to the distinctive aspects of language that assume the nuances and stylistic peculiarities of a specific genre, Bakhtin suggests that genre might best be considered in a precise and textually specific way (notably, by looking critically at the nuances, characteristics, and styles present within the specific texts under scrutiny). Guided by Chandler's criteria (in *Semiotics*), this dissertation adopts such a textually concrete approach to genre in its analyses of Tennessee Williams's apprentice plays.

In the first paragraph of his *Poetics*, Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) distinction between *genus* and *species* as it applies to literature remains significant in the history of Western genre theory. Such a distinction pertains to the present analysis, insofar as it discusses dramatic genre both in a very general way (according to *genus*) as well as in a very particular way (according to the various species or subgenera that a *genus* generates). In short, we shall examine the process whereby a new species or type of drama evolves from a pre-existing genre. Finally, it must be recognized that the number of subgenres (and, in turn, sub-subgenres) that a genre can generate is virtually infinite.

Aristotle arrived at his distinction between *genus* and *species* on the basis of observing and noting differences among a wide sample of existing literary works. Hence, for Aristotle, *genus*—or, more specifically, *class*—refers to literary works as a whole, whereas *species* denotes particular literary categories such as poetry or drama, which are instances of the *genus* (i.e., of literature). However, as noted above, the protest play, for example, often spawns its own generic subtypes, such as both proletarian and crime

drama, and so on. In discussing a secondary distinction among genres made by literary critics, namely, major/minor or, alternately, primary/secondary, we note that a minor genre does not instantiate a type of a major genre, but a different genre entirely (one, however, that is of less predominance or importance than the major genre). In other words, a designation of *minor* or *secondary* is not logically dependent on the major genre for its existence, as in the case of genus and species. Moreover, in any given full-length apprentice play, aspects of a major genre may be mixed with aspects of a minor genre. Despite such theoretical conundrums, various “interpretive communities” (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159) during specific historical periods function on the basis of a shared—albeit loose and fluid—consensus concerning those genres (acknowledged as primary during that period).

As in the case of film studies, six textual features typically listed by theorists provide the main criteria for this dissertation: narrative, characterization, subject matter, setting, iconography, and staging (or filmic) techniques (*Semiotics* 158). Superficially, genres initially may appear to be neutral, functioning to make the conventions of the genre—i.e., its form—more apparent to those already familiar with certain genres, thereby establishing specific, categorical conventions. By its very classificatory nature, a genre forms a set of rules for narrative construction based on narrative assumptions familiar to both playwrights or filmmakers and to audiences. While some genres may be distinguished by the treatment of certain topics, others are distinguished by diverse motifs or settings. Indeed, the ability of genres to crossbreed freely demonstrates the flexibility of generic definitions. Thus, instead of invoking an abstract definition, the best strategy

regarding genre identification involves the recognition of how audiences and writers, at different times and in different places, distinguish one type of play or film from another. However, even in the act of combining genres, the distinctiveness of the particular generic rules upon which filmmakers and film viewers agree, are not mitigated (Bordwell and Thompson 69).

According to Northrop Frye, “[t]he purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them” (*Anatomy* 247). Thus, “criticism by genre” provides a context for identifying relationships between and among plays which, by virtue of their particular properties of style and content, may be said to belong to the same genre. Frye also notes, with apparent dismay, the absence of any contemporary concern with the function of genre:

. . . nothing is more striking in [contemporary] . . . criticism than the absence of any consideration of genre: the . . . critic analyzes . . . without much regard to whether it is a play, a lyric, or a novel. [The critic] may in fact even assert that there are no genres in literature. That is because [the critic] is concerned with structure simply as a work of art, not as an artifact with a possible function. (95)

Frye’s deliberately provocative comment regarding “structure simply as a work of art, not as an artifact with a possible function” accords nonetheless with the contemporary tradition of reception theory (also known as reader-response theory), as well as harking

back to definitive functions, such as Aristotle's notion of catharsis, or Horace's advice that the writer must both instruct and delight, or even Brecht's distancing or *verfremdung*s effect, through which the playwright intends to provoke the audience to political mobilization. In any event, Frye notes the lack of attention accorded to the issue of genre on the part of modern critics. As previously stated, Jauss also makes a case for advancing an aesthetic of reception, arguing that genres can be actively displaced, transformed, or superseded when their constructive role, or functionality, comes into question, since the "historicity of a literary genre stands out against a process of the shaping of a structure, its variation, extension, and correction, which can lead to its ossification, or can also end with its suppression through a new genre" (89).

Brecht considers the ossification and suppression of genre that Jauss refers to above as one of the key challenges of modern theatre. Given that the main addressee of the dramatic tradition was the bourgeois audience, Brecht came to see genre as an imprisoning apparatus, one that merely reinforced the status quo desired by middle-class theatergoers and that resisted the transformation of genres. According to Brecht, traditional generic forms present an obstacle to original expression, transforming the subversive potentiality of drama into a form of bourgeois consumption rather than eliciting innovative, radical, and resistant forms of dramatic enquiry:

For by imagining that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact has got hold of them they are supporting an apparatus which is out of their control, which is no longer (as they believe) a means of furthering output but has become an obstacle to output, and specifically to their own output

as soon as it follows a new and original course which the apparatus finds awkward or opposed to its own aims. . . . And this leads to a general habit of judging works of art by their suitability for the apparatus without ever judging the apparatus by its suitability for the work. (*Brecht on Theater* 34)

Like Brecht, Fredric Jameson conflates *genre* and *apparatus* in evaluating the novel, the emergence of which he sees as signalling the obsolescence of a literary genre in light of the fact that the “novel is the end of genre . . . whose outer form, secreted like a shell or exoskeleton, continues to emit its ideological message long after the extinction of its host” (*Political Unconscious* 151). Jameson’s wish to strip a work of its ossified generic and ideological inheritance can thus be extended to drama.

As indicated above, the five selected plays will be analyzed from the triple perspective of genre theory (Chandler), film theory (Bordwell and Thompson, among others) and aesthetic theory (Williams). This dissertation devotes special attention to the contemporary genre theory of Daniel Chandler, not only because of its particular relevance to Williams’s work but also because of the clarity and refinement of the terminology Chandler assigns to his six distinctive properties (*Semiotics* 158).

Chandler elaborates each property in considerable detail as it pertains to the chosen medium. Under *narrative*, Chandler includes “(sometimes formulaic) plots and structures, predictable situations, sequences, episodes, obstacles, conflicts, and resolutions” (*Semiotics* 159). Under *characterization*, he specifies “similar types of characters (sometimes stereotypes), roles, personal qualities, motivations, goals,

behavior” (158). Under *topics*, he refers to “subject-matter (social, cultural, psychological, professional, political, sexual, moral) and values” (159). Under *setting*, he emphasizes the “geographical and historical,” and under *iconography*, he outlines the “familiar stock of images or motifs, the connotations of which have become fixed . . . including décor, costume and objects, certain ‘typecast’ performers . . . familiar patterns of dialogue and appropriate physical topography” (160). Finally, under *techniques* (applicable both to staging and filmic techniques), he includes “stylistic or formal conventions, lighting, sound-recording [and] use of color” (161).

Chandler’s precise and detailed elaboration of these properties allows his model to function as a rigorous analytic tool for understanding genre in Tennessee Williams’s plays. This investigation will discuss the extent to which Chandler’s distinctive properties have been textually instantiated in Williams’s plays. Moreover, a set of tables in the Appendix further identifies the ways in which Chandler’s properties are distributed across each of the five plays. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, both *iconography* and *setting* possess for Williams a “structural value” that also “point[s] to” or makes an “emotional appeal” on behalf of his *characterization* (*GM* 133). In addition, Williams meticulously defines his staging *techniques* in relation to “the thread of connection and allusion between the narrator with his separate point in time and the subject of his story” (133).

Throughout, this analysis will compare and contrast Chandler’s distinctive properties with the aesthetic criteria that Williams identifies in his “Production Notes” (first published, in 1945, as a preface to *The Glass Menagerie*). Esther Merle Jackson

maintains that the “Production Notes” represent nothing less than Williams’s “manifesto” regarding his art (91). According to Williams himself, the “Notes” articulate his “conception of a new, plastic theater which must take the place of the exhausted theater of realistic conventions” (*GM* 131). Furthermore, the “Notes” contain the most definitive aesthetic statement that Williams wrote throughout his entire career, and describe the principles of stagecraft that he had been refining long before the 1945 “breakthrough” performance of *The Glass Menagerie*. Hence, the “Notes” serve as a kind of symbolic milestone, one that separates Williams’s earlier plays from his later works. The “Notes” also reflect the successful outcome of the generic experimentations and transformations that Williams conducted in his five full-length apprentice plays. Additionally, this dissertation will compare and contrast Chandler’s generic properties not only with the specific techniques and “devices” that Williams, in his “Notes,” proposes for producing successful stage plays, but also with the classificatory cinematic properties that Bordwell and Thompson likewise make use of.

Also significant in analyzing genre are the historical, biographical, and critical contexts of the selected plays. Therefore, this study intends to demonstrate how Williams incorporates both biographical experiences and current events into the five plays (particularly the momentous events that occurred between the Great Depression and World War II). Regarding the plays’ critical context, this analysis takes into consideration the ways in which both the negative and positive criticism that William’s plays received—to which he responded in his journals and letters—may have played a role in influencing subsequent generic forms that appeared in his plays. In further discussion of

contemporary criticism of his early plays, both full-length and one-act, subsequent chapters pay special attention to the critiques and reviews of Christopher Bigsby, Allean Hale, Dan Isaac, Philip C. Kolin, Jacqueline O'Connor, Brian Parker, and Annette J. Saddik.

Dissertation Outline

Chapters I through IV include: a definition of the protest play genre; an application of Chandler's list of properties to selected three protest plays (*Candles to the Sun*, *Fugitive Kind*, and *Not About Nightingales*); and an account of how Williams later goes beyond the protest genre, drawing on other genres, such as fantasy, to transform and radicalize the protest genre, as well as to transfuse it with cinematic elements. Separate chapters on the three protest plays follow.

Chapters V through VIII include: an examination of Williams's transformation of the fantasy play, and the ways in which he takes fantasy beyond the more formulaic and typological caprices of German Expressionist drama; a definition of fantasy and its subtypes, such as the Southern Gothic and the science fiction narratives, accompanied by a study of Williams's own adaptation of these traditions and of his more contemporary recasting of typical formulas and devices; and a critical application of Chandler's list of properties to selected plays (once again, with a view to analyzing the significance of their cinematic elements). Separate chapters on *Spring Storm* and *Stairs to the Roof* follow.

The dissertation's Conclusion contains: a discussion of genre's historical transformation of form and its mediation of dramatic vision, including the de-familiarization of and mixing of genres in light of Williams's penchant for

experimentation; comments on the generic horizon of expectations; and a brief overview of Williams's apprenticeship and its impact upon the blurring of generic boundaries. An Appendix contains a set of tables that chart Chandler's properties and their distribution throughout the five full-length apprentice plays, and an account of the ways in which Williams's generic innovations are instantiated in each of these plays.

CHAPTER I
POLITICAL PROTEST AND BEYOND

Overview of the Protest Genre:

Candles to the Sun, Fugitive Kind, and Not About Nightingales

Over the centuries, a particular set of conventions has both substantially influenced, as well as generated the emergence of, new dramatic genres. These new genres, in turn, alter the expectations both of theater-going audiences and of the readers of scripts. In the present study, the dramatic genres under scrutiny include the political protest play (hereafter, simply *protest play*) and the fantasy drama. These two genres may be considered as “historical” insofar as they actually shape how contemporary writers produce, and how contemporary readers and theatregoers respond to, literary works (Fishelov 10).

A genre announces itself by its manifesting distinctive signs, ranging from bold to subtle. Chandler’s comprehensive list of generic criteria—*narrative, characterization, topic, setting, and iconography* (*Semiotics* 159)—provides a useful template for identifying the basic features that distinguish one genre from another. This dissertation applies the aforementioned criteria to the three selected protest plays in order to identify them as belonging to that particular dramatic genre. The critical works of three authors have served to elaborate upon Chandler’s approach: David C. Duke, with respect to *Candles to the Sun*; Jack Shadoian, with respect to *Fugitive Kind*; and Quentin D. Miller, with respect to *Not About Nightingales*².

² These plays are referred to throughout this dissertation as *Candles*, *Fugitive* or *Fugitive Kind*, and *Nightingales* respectively.

The dramatic genre of the protest play rose to popularity in America, circa 1930, during the early stages of the labor movement. This genre explored changing attitudes toward work-related issues, such as economic exploitation and unemployment, and the impacts of these issues upon sexuality, marriage, crime, and poverty. Along with the other art forms of that period inspired by political movements, protest plays provided models for, and reinforced a belief in, the efficacy of political protest.

The three selected plays reflect Williams's experiments with the protest genre. As a young and avid student playwright, Williams both drew upon and enriched a political movement that offered, paradoxically in some cases, a romantic return to idealized utopian solutions (Duffy, *American Labor* 137). And yet, some have seen Williams's treatment of protest topics as more "playful," "less assured of their political ideology," and "[seeming] to abandon concrete solutions" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 70), than other protest plays of the period. However, in the three plays considered in this chapter, Williams structures his narratives with a complexity notably lacking from the work of many of the poets, painters, and musicians of his time who also took up the call of protest. Furthermore, the idealism that informs Williams's protest plays tends to be far more insistent than that of his contemporaries.

Williams studied with various mentors during his apprenticeship: in 1935-37, director Willard Holland and his experimental theater group, the Mummers of St. Louis; 1936-73, with Clark Mills McBurney and Professor Otto Heller at Washington University in St. Louis; and in 1937-38, Professor Edward Charles Mabie at the University of Iowa, protagonist of the Iowa Renaissance movement and Midwestern director of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) (Molzahn 19).

Like many American playwrights beginning their careers in the 1930s, Williams began by “writing socially conscious plays with a strongly leftist political orientation” (Murphy, “Politics” 199). For example, *Candles* concerns striking coal miners; *Fugitive Kind* is set in the lobby of a Depression-era flophouse; and *Nightingales* deals with the plight of prisoners in a large penitentiary. In all three plays, Williams presents a seemingly irresolvable conflict between, on the one hand, a highly rational but essentially meaningless modern existence and, on the other, an existence in which passionate personal relationships prevail.

Williams’s manipulation of genre allows him to distance himself from traditional, naturalistic characterizations that formed part of his dramatic inheritance. He achieves this dramatic estrangement by incorporating elements of gothic fantasy, and, on occasion, even slapstick. Williams became familiar with Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater when he was at Washington University—and like Brecht’s “epic” theatre—his protest plays convey his concern with social consciousness, featuring both lyricism and an examination of the topic of alienation (Fleche 2). Moreover, and again like Brecht, Williams departs from the traditional dominance of a single character.

Left-wing dramatists of the 1930s attempted to evoke the public’s respect and sympathy for American workers by creating what they considered to be radical dramas. However, they rarely strayed from traditional expressions of a preindustrial—and, indeed, often puritanical—work ethic, particularly in plays depicting unemployment (Greenfield 73). We find a collective intention to change minds and thereby to motivate the audience to transform society through the “use of dramatic action revolving around specific [political] issues” (65) evident in their work. In fact, some of the more militant

labor plays feature highly melodramatic conclusions that involve violent confrontations between workers and capitalists (68). Williams himself opts for such a plot twist in *Candles*.

Political and Economic Backdrop

The stark economic conditions of the period meant that blue-collar characters were commonly portrayed as victimized by the Depression. The lot of the common laborer, both at home and on the job, was determined largely by the catastrophic economic conditions, experienced in factories, organized unions, farms, mines, and on farms (Greenfield 76–77). At first glance, both in its content and Impressionistic style, *Fugitive Kind* seems to reflect a narrower, more isolated response to social problems than either *Candles* or *Nightingales*. Upon closer examination, however, one recognizes in all three plays the thread of political militancy.

The three selected protest plays explore yet another social casualty: the disintegration of the family unit. Williams further emphasizes the tragedy of such disintegration in all three plays. In *Candles*, he shows the fathers and sons of the Pilcher family, generation after generation, sacrificing their lives to the mines; in *Fugitive Kind*, he demonstrates the relentless stress of grinding poverty within a family run “flophouse” (*Fugitive* 3); and in *Nightingales*, he highlights the maternal anguish of Mrs. Bristol, subsequent to her son Jack’s death behind bars. *Candles*, in particular, depicts the physical and emotional dissolution of individuals within families, forced to choose between the economic security afforded by the mine, and the lure of personal freedom in breaking from it (Duke 7).

Protest plays were not simply isolated artistic responses to political events but became an intrinsic and powerfully symbolic part of them. In the history of American labor, collective bargaining was achieved only at the cost to individuals and groups of dreadful discrimination, suffering, violence, and loss of life (Zinn 239). Protest plays artistically and powerfully conveyed these struggles between labor and management. Despite this, Williams's protest plays have been overlooked for decades, as were the works of other playwrights who took on the labor wars as their subject matter. In the three selected protest plays, the victims of ineluctable social and economic processes undergo harrowing technocratic and sacrificial rituals that determine their ultimate defeat. A historical study of protest genre since the 1930s demonstrates that the theatre has consistently served as a barometer, both of popular culture and unpopular politics. This was especially the case in the plays of the 1930s that attacked the hitherto "sacred cow" of American industry (Duffy, *American Labor* 8).

Literary Reactions to Social Ills of the 1930s

The protest plays of the Depression did nothing less than reflect the intense turmoil of a nation. The crash of the stock market in 1929, the subsequent decade of economic depression, and the outbreak of a war in Europe in which America would soon be implicated, shook the nation to its core. Academic and artistic responses to these crises were mirrored in various ways: an intensification of research in the social sciences, along with attempts to capture, in drama or other artistic media, the impact of historical events upon human psychology.

Moreover, in depicting the widespread intolerance of and callousness toward immigrants and ethnic groups that characterized American society in the 1930s, the three

selected plays highlight Williams's awareness and condemnation of class disparities. Furthermore, the three plays bear out Demastes's theory that American political theater of the 1930s was no longer reliant on European conventions; rather, that it was evolving its own distinctive dramatic genres (Demastes 12).

Williams's Expressionistic approach, informed by the representation of the intense emotions popularized by the German Expressionist filmmakers of the early 1920s, "functions to create stylized situations of horror and fantasy stories" (Bordwell and Thompson 380). The Expressionistic settings in these three plays reinforce such stylized situations. In *Candles*, for example, we hear, along with the characters, the threatening noises emitted by the mine, and share with them the experience of their pathetic camp surroundings (*Candles* 84). In *Fugitive Kind*, we also experience an oppressive and nightmarish city, while in *Nightingales* we witness the horror of the prison environment.

As in many of the other protest plays of that period, the would-be agitators tend to be depicted as ordinary men caught up in extraordinary circumstances; the responsibility of leadership have been thrust upon them and, all too often, they become martyred. However, in *Candles*, the younger female characters that succeed the females that preceded them carry on their selfless work. For example, Bram perceives his daughter-in-law, Fern, as virtually indistinguishable from his wife Hester in terms of both their work ethic and domestic capability. For example, after first comparing Fern to her mother-in-law (55), Bram finally addresses Fern as "Hester" (110).

Williams's protest plays appear to have drawn inspiration from the works of Elia Kazan and Elmer Rice, whose respective documentary techniques, having appeared in the

in the dramas of the 1920s, developed into the “Living Newspaper” techniques of the Federal Theater Project of the 1930s (a project in which Williams was involved between 1937 and 1938). Interestingly, the three plays examined in this chapter—*Candles* in particular—clearly show that documentary detail also makes for an important element of protest in Williams’s work, even before he used it for the Living Newspaper program at the University of Iowa (Hale, *Early Williams* 18). Other external influences upon Williams included not only documentary cinema in general, but also the documentary style of writers such as John Dos Passos. Through his intense preoccupation with accuracy of detail, whether in setting, in dialogue, or in characterization, Williams was undoubtedly a pioneer of American docudrama.

The documentary nature of the three plays discussed in this chapter draws upon an American tradition in its depiction of domestic detail, and in the use of journalistic accounts of both labor strikes and activism Williams explores the complexity of the protest movement’s affecting affirmation of the value of labor in combination with an acknowledgement of the inevitable loss of dignity suffered by those denied gainful employment. Williams selects as his subject matter a validation of the collective without, however, shying away from the “triumph of the individual” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 72). While these three plays may not be as skilfully accomplished as Williams’s later, so-called canonized works, they are nonetheless powerful in their use of characterization, as well as daringly experimental in iconography and technique (note, for example, the use of fireworks and orchestrated music in *Nightingales*). While *Fugitive Kind* might seem, initially, to be a more isolated and more individualistic response to such social problems

as homelessness and unemployment, upon closer reflection we also find the common thread of radical social consciousness that runs through the scripts of all three plays.

Documentary technique, common both to the theater and to film, aims to elicit the emotional reactions of an audience through often meticulous attention to everyday details, through which audience members learn whether the protagonists' struggle to survive will succeed or fail. In the three plays discussed in this chapter, the main protagonists occupy the lowest rung of the American industrial ladder. On that rung are represented various ethnic groups; while still clinging to their ethnicity, they aspire to achieve a collective identity as Americans by moving up the economic ladder through their labors. The notion that work provided economic and social freedom was embraced by tens of thousands of immigrants (Duffy, *American Labor* 16)—a prime example being the Gwendlebaums, the *Fugitive Kind* family that struggles to survive in urban America.

Another example of those who found themselves marginalized included rural miners—often former agrarian workers—for whom the “hillbilly” stigma could never fully be erased.³ To the protagonists of these labor plays, Williams assigns a folk-hero stature. Such heroes typically espouse agrarian values, just as do the protagonists in *Candles*. Williams expresses a stubborn resistance to industrial pressure—to become both homogenized and Americanized in the comely “hollow” near the mine (*Candles* 17)—through the evocation of idealized symbols connected with their agrarian setting: honeysuckle-sweet, blackberry- and ’possum-rich (17). In this vein, Bram Pilcher, the *Candles* patriarch, bemoans the fact that mining has become an increasingly

³ Miners often ranked even lower than people of color in the social hierarchy of that time (Duffy, *American Labor* 16).

technological industry: “it should be a lesson to these people that are always wanting new-fangled contraptions—what do they do?—they git killed on ’em that’s all” (19).

Examining these three plays allows us to better understand the period in which they were written, as well as to identify the social forces that helped shape them. As mentioned earlier, protest plays were not merely isolated artistic statements of the Depression era but belonged to a broader aesthetic response to labor issues on the part of virtually all other media of that period. However, the transitory nature of dramatic performances, as compared to the more tangible products of other artistic media, with the possible exception of music, invites a search for certain dramatic constants. One such constant might be the rhetorical intent of the script. Thus, in examining how these three plays function both as didactic vehicles and as entertainment—“the two are not completely incompatible,” Williams wrote in 1939 in a letter to his agent, Audrey Wood⁴—we can intuit how playwrights, through dramatic rhetoric, succeed in imparting to the audience their own political and moral values (Williams, qtd. in Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xii). In *Candles*, *Fugitive Kind*, and *Nightingales*, Williams encourages audiences to keep in mind the historical incidents and socioeconomic upheavals that originally inspired such conflict and violence. The audience, once having witnessed the praise or blame that certain characters in the play assign to one another by play’s end—and possibly beyond its conclusion—either takes sides or comes to terms with the play’s essential irresolution.

⁴ Now part of the Tennessee Williams collection in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC) archives at the University of Texas at Austin.

Contemporary Relevance of Williams's Protest Plays

Why, we may ask, have the political plays of the 1930s not been subjected before now to more exhaustive critical inquiry? Harold Clurman contends that “there is a tendency to . . . downgrade the Thirties. . . . [The] reason for this is that the prevailing mood of the Thirties was what used to be called ‘left of center’” (1). For his part, Caspar Nannes suggests that the political plays conveyed a sense of immediacy to their original audiences, in such a way that they were able, quickly, to recognize the political conflicts of their own time. However, while such “immediacy may well have contributed to the success of the plays at the time, it lessened their appeal to later audiences” (x). Regardless, a convincing argument can now be made not only for the timeliness of Williams's three protest plays, but for their influence on social theater up to and including the present day. In short, given that the plays are both politically and morally didactic in their support of the worker, the underclass, and the exploited, they succeed both in transcending the historical movement that spawned them and in preserving their seemingly timeless relevance.

The universality of the three plays manifests itself most persuasively in the integrity of the characters and their struggles. The plays reflect an essentially American take on the traditional morality play, although, in contrast to the latter, distinctions between right and wrong appear far less distinct. Moral ambiguity, as expressed in the open-ended structures of the plays, plays out along political lines intended to generate commentary, discussion, and—it was often hoped—action, even long after the audience's departure from the theater. To this end, Brecht developed the epic form of drama in which ideas or didactic lessons play an important role. Saddik dismisses many of the

social protest plays of the 1930s as “misleading” in their “simplicity” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 70). But she rightly argues that the open endings of Williams’s early plays leave audiences with “a lot of questions, contradictions, and possibilities . . . [which bring us] quite close to Beckett’s vision, as echoed in his favorite repeated word—‘perhaps’” (*Blueprints* 78.) This “perhaps” remains consistent with the heuristic probing that accompanies Williams’s political vision. The plays’ iconography of violence, martyrdom, destruction, and suffering elicits the audience’s own moral positions, resulting at times in fervent emotional reactions that, on occasion, have even bordered on the spiritual. For example, the inclusion of the labor song, “Solidarity Forever,” included in an initial production of *Candles*, was perhaps meant to stir the audience’s emotions and heighten its commitment and resolve.

The three protest plays also speak for more than just a political philosophy; they also articulate and dramatize pride in American citizenship and national values. Duffy reminds us that these values encompass “a strong work ethic, regional and ethnic pride, and a belief in the inviolable rights” of individuals to resist any form of political or industrial coercion (*American Labor* 138). While some prefer the label *revolutionary* when describing protest plays, perhaps they are better characterized as *radical* artistic responses to an economic Depression and its profound effect upon the quality of life of the average American.

These three protest plays (*Candles* in particular) amount to an artistic response to labor problems. Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick contend that, unlike the “orthodox Marxists” of other movements, some culturally influential individuals supported “a revolution devoted as much to play and self-expression as to labor unionization and

redistribution of wealth” (11). Clearly, not all protest writers and artists were card-carrying members of the American Communist Party. Daniel Aaron points out that only a small faction were party members, whereas the “considerably larger number” of those involved in the movement were known as “fellow travelers” (ix). Aaron refers to the leftist leanings of playwrights such as Williams as a form of literary insurgency, casting these writers as courageous in their quality of resistance, characterizing them as rebel intellectuals and young radicals who carried the banner of political protest forward during a particularly volatile period in American history (5). Furthermore, since the protest movement in American theater was undergoing a rapid process of reconstitution and modernization, it had recourse to a wide range of genres (Parker, *Candles* 138). As such, these three plays represent a uniquely American perspective on industrialization, urbanization, and the striving for equality and justice through collective responsibility.

In *Candles*, *Fugitive Kind*, and *Nightingales*, Williams was also responding artistically to the regional and social problems of the 1930s, insofar as all three of these plays dramatized the dismal economic conditions of the period, made radical ideological arguments on behalf of the exploited, and sounded a call for national change. Although admittedly biased toward the plight of the oppressed and of the underclass, the plays construct a moral argument that orients the consciousness of the audience toward the possibility of protest and political action. As a protest playwright of the period, Williams gave dramatic form to the idealistic philosophies of socialist groups that sought to formulate progressive solutions in order to address social problems, to champion the rights of the poor, and to validate ethnic diversity. In short, protest plays, as indicated earlier, sought to instil in the audience not only faith in the common man and woman, but

also the notion that these common protagonists represent the very fortitude and mettle of American society (through an essentially didactic intention to educate the public).

These three protest plays manifest many of the features of the protest genre, including elements of social realism, labor drama, and documentary drama. In their treatment of indigenous topics of collective activism and institutional accountability, they are true exemplars of American protest drama. All three plays, in varying degrees, promote a militant if “melodramatic mythos” (Duffy, *American Labor* 143); namely, that of a victimized underclass struggling against the inhumane practices of an exploitative ruling class. Interestingly, both *Candles* and *Fugitive Kind* were produced by the Mummers, an amateur theater group in St. Louis that openly acknowledged its political motivations to the public (Roudané, *Cambridge Companion* 1–10).

Williams’s full-length apprentice plays remained overlooked for almost seventy years. Two of them—*Candles* and *Fugitive Kind*—had been performed soon after their composition, but they did not remain in the repertoire of modern production companies. Yet, even though their titles had become virtually lost to memory, they were notably successful when they were first produced in 1937: *Candles* drew “extravagant praise” (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xii), while *Fugitive* was also praised for its “first-rate theatrical craftsmanship” (xx). As we shall see, the two plays also elicited empathetic responses from communities that recognized their own lives in the dramatic re-enactment of social issues. Although *Nightingales* had never been performed until its world premiere in 1998 at the Cottesloe Theater in London, audiences were moved and critics encountering this material for the first time responded positively (Hunter, *Tennessee*

Williams, 84). The play has since garnered considerable acclaim and its New York production in 1999 earned six Tony Award Nominations.

The change in the social climate of early twentieth century America from prosperity to adversity marked the rapid development of the literature of protest, influencing the writers of that decade to adopt a more pragmatic approach to specific subject matter. The literature of the Depression, infused as it was with the subject of frustration and pity, essentially became a literature of political protest. The protesters of the period were the so-called “proletarian” or revolutionary writers—activists, including students such as *Williams*—who used literary means to present their political perspectives. They highlighted the injustices of capitalism and proclaimed the ultimate triumph of the proletariat, all in order to preach their revolutionary ideals to the oppressed and to thereby stimulate their political consciousness. Thus did art become a weapon in the class struggle (*Mishra* 17).

In the 1930s, American playwrights expressed their concern, not only for the socioeconomic and political issues raised by the Depression, but also with the rise of fascism. Reacting sharply to contemporary problems, dramatists demanded immediate action that would alleviate the sufferings of the people. To this end they offered strategies to ameliorate the conditions of the working classes. According to Malcolm Goldstein, “[y]oung writers of the 1930s, observing the economic distress on all sides, believed in their ability to create a milieu in which the spirit could flourish, unburdened by materialistic observations” (*Playwrights* 29).

Protest drama shared with the predominantly realistic, but less political, drama of the time roughly the same narrative structure: “[o]f particular interest to the realist

dramatists as well . . . was the theme and setting of the strike and its accompanying conflicts between capital and labor, between work and family loyalties, and between group and individual prosperity” (Greenfield 71). The strike, then, inevitably implied some form of warfare between the capitalist regime and the proletariat. Although this period marked the apex of Marxist influence on American theater, not all protest plays were Marxist by definition. In fact, the Left-Wing Theater Union, primarily a working class theater, was among the first—and one of the only—“self-proclaimed” Marxist theater groups to reach the American stage in the 1930s (Mishra 23).

Williams wrote *Candles to the Sun*, his very first full-length play, in partial collaboration with his friend, Joseph Phelan Hollifield, yet another young and aspiring playwright who, in 1936, “deeded” the play to Williams, with Hollifield advising Williams to do “what you want with it” (qtd. in Isaac, *Introduction, Candles* xxiii). The Mummers turned Williams’s version into a full-length play, to which he ultimately appended, in his own hand and on a draft of the play’s title page: “[t]his is just the first draft in very sketchy form—the main theme—sacrifice of individual to *social* ends—is brought out in the final scene” (qtd. in Isaac xxv).

Plays such as *Candles* examined the social dynamic of the Depression through the philosophy of dialectical materialism (Mishra 26). American dramatists working in this genre—including Clifford Odets, Eugene O’Neill, and John Howard Lawson—became “increasingly involved with the social issues which took precedence over personal issues,” no doubt owing to the fact that “economic distress was so widespread during the 30s” (13). Above all, the social concerns of the time found topical expression in a drama that called for radical reforms in American society. In addition, the protest plays of the

time addressed other kinds of conflict, such as that generated by social and racial prejudice, and made references both to slavery and to the need to challenge all forms of authority.

In these dramas, protagonists remain trapped in mechanized, chaotic settings in which so-called civilized values disappear in the face of economic collapse and the triumph of right-wing agendas. This new form of protest no longer took the dramatic form of a tragic vendetta or a corruption-related hysteria, features that were characteristic of earlier dramas—such as Elmer Rice's *According to the Evidence* (also known as *On Trial*) and Roi Cooper Megrue's *Under Cover*, both produced twenty years before *Candles*. Rather, they were forged by a cynicism born of grim experience. While the rebel protagonist often lends political authenticity to the playwright as protester, Williams for one also used the voiced observations of the other characters by way of submitting the protagonists' actions to scrutiny. The motifs of protest remain consistent in most of the plays of this genre and usually engender tension through iconographic images of suffering and relentless despair (present in all three of Williams's earliest, full-length protest plays).

Although critics, from the outset, have been aware of the presence of political overtones in Williams's drama, it has not been generally acknowledged that Williams began his career as a protest playwright. His place in the broader traditions of the American protest play has been somewhat neglected by literary historians in general and by Williams scholars in particular. The latter, typically, have compared and contrasted his work either with the European agitprop tradition (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67) or with a few American political playwrights with radical leanings, such as Elmer Rice and Clifford

Odets. Perhaps this was because his first three major, full-length plays supposedly had been lost (Weales 21). However, Williams's choices concerning narrative, subject matter, characterization, setting, iconography, and staging techniques establish that the plays discussed in this chapter make undeniably political statements of protest (Mishra vi).

Conspicuously, Williams's political sensibility in these plays serves as "a valuable reminder of Williams's left-wing sympathies, which prompted the FBI to keep a file on him" (Parker, *Candles* 160). Williams's connection to the protest tradition remains far from tenuous, and relates to the formative experiences recorded in his *Memoirs* (36–73). Importantly, when Williams cast his first ballot in the presidential election in 1932, he voted for a socialist candidate,⁵ demonstrating what he called, in his *Memoirs*, an "interest in the discovery of a new social system . . . an enlightened form of socialism" (7). Indeed, he explains that, by 1934, he had "already turned Socialist" and had done so for reasons that he makes clear in the following passage:

[working at International Shoe] I learned a lot about the comradeship between co-workers of minimal salary, and I made some very good friends. . . . [T]ruly, I would take nothing for those three years [1931–1934] because I learned, during them, just how disgraceful, to the corporations, is the fate of the white-collar worker. (*Memoirs* 36)

Williams's mother, Edwina, records in her memoirs the following summary of *Candles*, which illustrates these left-wing sympathies:

[O]f *Candles to the Sun*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* critic wrote that it was a drama of "poverty, degeneracy, accidents on the unsafe fifth level

⁵ The vote for socialist Norman Thomas during this apprentice period would be the final ballot that Williams would ever cast.

below ground, a strike and a brutal murder, ending with beans for everybody, hope and the singing of 'Solidarity Forever'." (E. Williams 84)

Williams's relation to the protest play can be found in his choice of subject matter, in his creation of radical narrative developments, and in his political characterizations. His use of protest conventions strikes us as most apparent in his characterizations, through which he encourages the audience to identify with the characters. Williams also adapts certain Brechtian conventions, often considered part of the protest tradition, to American drama. For example, Williams deliberately alienates audiences through suggestive stage design and photographic projections, as well as through other cinematic and musical effects (Molzahn 19).

For Williams, the protest play serves as a unique expression of the political through the personal (Fetterley 565). Undoubtedly, the three plays under consideration can only be placed as protest plays of the Depression era owing to the fact that Williams's politics are so rigorously construed as manifestations of the personal. His plays function as vehicles for enacting the dramatic transformations and tensions of the mundane, especially as exemplified in his choices of narrative schemas, often both drab and local, and in the way his plays remain rooted in domestic or personal subject matter. Likewise, Williams rarely depicts his characterizations as merely mythical or symbolic, for the settings are realized through concrete iconography that often depends upon experimental staging techniques. These singularly muted and personal generic criteria remain at a conspicuous remove from overtly historical, national, or mythical expressions of the "Political" (Soja 6). Accordingly, allusions to national political events, legendary

personalities, and the wider contexts of class combat are toned down or limited, and serve only to document the generic practices, lore, and traditions of everyday life.

Although Williams has more recently been treated as a political playwright—for example, by biographer Lyle Leverich and by critics such as Thomas P. Adler, C. W. E. Bigsby (*Modern American*), Allean Hale (*Early Williams*), and Philip C. Kolin (*Civil Rights*), among others—earlier critics had referred to him as “an apolitical playwright” (Murphy, “Politics” 199). However, Williams clearly takes a stand as a political writer, given that the political informs his use of generic conventions on many levels. Also, Brecht’s “epic theater conventions and politics influenced the young Tom Williams greatly” (Molzahn 19), while his proletarian focus on social problems in the 1930s and 1940s confirmed that he was a more than willing disciple of Brecht’s antifascist philosophy (a philosophy central to both *Candles* and to *Nightingales*).

After his more idealistic apprentice years, Williams would embrace a less “overt” (Bigsby, *Confrontation* 5) but nonetheless still powerful form of political message. In examining the “radicalism” (*Fugitive* 81) of Williams’s apprentice years, C.W.E. Bigsby notes that Williams’s earliest efforts included the creation of “a series of protest plays for a political theater group in St. Louis,” although Bigsby also allows that “after the 1930s, Williams rarely chose to formulate his sense of political oppression in overtly political ways” (*Confrontation* 5). Bigsby finds, from a sociopolitical perspective, that Williams’s apprentice works from the thirties contain a protest against the “political and economic system that encouraged corruption and broke the individual on the rack of private profit” (*Confrontation* 36–37).

Protest plays, marked as such by their generic indicators, treat certain topics, in compliance with Chandler's designation (*Semiotics* 159), as more than merely plot-related vehicles for structuring plays, since protest playwrights select their subject matter with a mind to expressing the concerns of the protagonists. Politically charged topics provide "a primary structuring device in the protest plays, as well as infus[ing] each play with a subtle 'atmosphere'" (Williams, qtd. in Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xx). Specific topics also influence how the political events, occurring between the play's beginning and its end, will eventually unfold.

Williams develops such topics by creating a site of intimacy in which his characters—typically dysfunctional—can somehow survive, as well as by providing overwhelming evidence of their lack of fit with the society that surrounds them (Wandor 88). Thus he maintains a focus upon our shared human experience; always, however, as perceived through a political lens. To this end, Williams borrows Brecht's anti-illusionistic distancing devices and applies them to *Candles*, *Fugitive*, and *Nightingales*. These include the chorus, cinematic projections of iconographic motifs (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive Kind* xviii), montage, flashbacks, and symbolic settings (Molzahn 20). For example, such settings as the sordid, dreary cabin in *Candles* (54), the dingy flophouse in *Fugitive*, and the prison in *Nightingales*—in which individual jail cells come to symbolize a microcosm of society for each inmate—imply both the limitations imposed by the surrounding social system (*Fugitive* 78) and the bondage that such limitations often impose on human relationships.

Through the use of such unnatural landscapes—which provide a suitable backdrop to the equally unnatural patterns of the protagonists' experiences—Williams

succeeds in foregrounding (Jacobson 66) the gross economic inequities that govern the lives of his characters. Take, for example, Williams's stage directions at the beginning of scene 5 of *Candles*: "[t]he action at the beginning of this scene should follow as closely as possible that of the first scene, to suggest the sordid monotony of the coal miners [sic] lives" (*Candles* 54). Here, Williams's directive would seem to apply not only to the narrative but to the settings as well. In such typically claustrophobic atmospheres, the characters remain trapped, both literally and figuratively, in a bleak, "dawg eat dawg" (8) existence, despite Star's attempts to overcome the bleakness by means of the "garish drapes" and other accoutrements with which she has decorated her cabin (36).

In his protest plays, Williams draws upon the medium of film, which enables him, poetically, to enhance his use of techniques for dramatic effect. Moreover, the versatility of his staging techniques also stands out in striking detail; for example, in *Candles*, the play's tone shifts from the scene set in "Bram Pilcher's cabin, early morning" to that of "Star's cabin, five years later" (1, 36). In these plays, he also creates plots that appeal universally to human understanding, combining and transforming his raw materials in evocative ways that allow audiences to recognize patterns that they otherwise would notice only superficially (if at all).

CHAPTER II

CANDLES TO THE SUN

Candles to the Sun contains certain intriguing domestic elements, elements commonly found in earlier “domestic” or problem plays (Jones-Davies 303). Note for example, “Williams’s obsession with dysfunctional family life, with a brutish patriarch, helplessly stressed-out mother, and children desperately trying to escape” (Parker, *Candles* 139). Yet, despite its domestic elements, *Candles* rests squarely within the genre of Depression-era protest, in promoting the rights of the working class, espousing Marxist ideals through the Bolshevik (*Candles* 50) voice of Birmingham Red, and actively calling for social resistance and revolution.

In this, his first full-length effort, Williams displays a surprising aptitude for guiding his audience through a succession of radically different takes on a situation, and for encouraging the audience to observe the action through changing visual perspectives, much as does the camera in the realization of a film. In all ten scenes of *Candles*, Williams showcases each character, front and center, through a combination of voice, gesture, and movement, in accordance with his stage directions for that scene. In these well-defined stage directions, Williams applies Brecht’s *gestus* technique (i.e., his kinesic approach to characterization) with its attendant “call to political action” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67), as it relates to each character, from the protagonists (the Pilcher family) to the secondary characters (Mrs. Abbey and Sean O’Connor, for example). Such “specific highly theatrical bits (or bytes)” demonstrate what Brecht calls *gests*, generating both a

ritual effect and an alienation effect (*verfremdungs* effect; Schechner 104). Williams's characters also invite comparison with Brecht's epic figures.¹

The Coal Mining Narrative

The coal mining narrative in *Candles* is traditional, in many respects, in relation to the overarching genre of the protest play. Williams, like other writers of coal mining narratives, fascinates us with the dramatic impact of mine-related disasters, and the play provides us with its fair share of grim accounts of industrial accidents and underground collapses. Yet, unlike other many other writers, Williams avoids a stereotyped view of mining life, instead imbuing his characters with genuine human understanding and sympathy. In his willingness to confront the complex issues affecting the lives of mining families, Williams goes beyond professional and class determinism to confront the human condition in chaotic inconsistency and its "ambiguity" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 288). Williams knows well how to portray the miners and their families from a dialogical perspective; within the protest genre, he explores gender differences, class conflicts, parent-child relationships, and tensions between rural and industrial values, but always does so through his creation of characters whose concerns, inconsistencies, and emotions invite the audience's engagement. In this dialogic portrayal, Williams neither attacks nor defends the coal mining culture. He neither romanticizes coal miners nor relegates them to the limbo of creative "otherness." Instead, he illustrates the "unfinalized" nature of the human question, a question that arises regardless of how his characters work and live (289).

¹ Incidentally, Williams bases the character of Birmingham Red in *Candles* on the charismatic persona of Jack Conroy, the Marxist "American Gorky" (Molzahn 20), who was a novelist and member of the St. Louis League of Artists and Writers whom Williams met when he attended their weekly meetings in 1936 (Hale, *Fugitive Kind* xvii).

Given the significant and often controversial place of mining in American life, it is not surprising that artists co-opted this subject for use in the protest genre. Acts of violence play a prominent role in the protest plays of the thirties, and the same holds true for coal mining narratives in general (Duke 83). In *Candles*, the body of young Joel on a plank with his head covered by a white sheet (*Candles* 70) makes an implicitly violent dramatic impact; once again, Williams relies on the audience to imagine the broken body under the sheet. In coal mining narratives, violent scenes “usually emerge from management-labor confrontations” (Duke 83) and in this respect *Candles* is no different. However, Williams envisions the violence between the “terrorists” (*Candles* 70) and the strikers as part of a larger conflict: namely, that of the brutal treatment of the miners and their families at the whim of Gomstock Incorporated.

Many of the works written during the second half of the 1930s also emphasize the numerous dangers associated with the coal mining industry (Duke 68). However, in their portrayal of miners and their families, most authors of that time tended to revert to social stereotypes (68). In truth, in the later period of contemporary narratives featuring mining as subject matter—i.e., between the 1940s and the 1970s (68)—management comes under critical scrutiny far more than it does in the fiction and drama of the earlier period. Furthermore, in that earlier drama and fiction, unions are but rarely represented. Both in his critique of industrial management and his examination of workers’ grievances, Williams anticipates later works belonging to the same genre (68), including works of his own such as *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975), in which the military-industrial complex also comes under attack.

In such plays, the threat of violence looms large. For example, in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945),² Williams acknowledges the “disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent,” by having Tom Wingfield set the stage of his memory play in “the thirties,” thereby establishing for it a concrete historical context (*GM* 14). Moreover, traces of the typical “playwright of the 1930s” are evident in Tom’s poetic references to the hopelessness engendered by the Great Depression (Murphy, “Politics” 199). While violence continued to play a significant role in mining life in later narratives, and as writers—such as Theodore Dreiser—working in other literary formats increasingly located their narratives within a fictional context, examples of criminal mayhem became yet more substantiated (Duke 68). In *Candles*, the extent to which terrorism may be seen as analogous to warfare remains a matter of dispute. Nonetheless, many of the same intrinsic symbols of war dominate the play, whether expressed through technique, ideology, or as a traditional manifestation of political violence (Greenhalgh 160).

Sensational violence arises from the family’s economic struggles and the tragedies it endures, tragedies that include both the death of miner Joel Pilcher, “laid on a plank, the head covered,” and the deadly attack of the “terrorist” Rover Boys (*Candles* 70, 102). However, Williams also documents the less intense day-to-day struggles of the miners and their families, in keeping with a more documentary type of protest drama. In addition, the iconography that he selects focuses squarely on the everyday; for example, the mundane symbolism of the lamp and purportedly missing purple “pyjammers” belonging to Mrs. Abbey, the petty wife of the mine superintendent (26). Also, in a

² *The Glass Menagerie* is collected in Williams, *The Theater of Tennessee Williams, Volume One*. I have used the short-form title *GM* for it throughout this dissertation.

powerful dialectic, Williams tempers the dangers of coal mining by contrasting the “natural” scenery with the “unnatural” mine.

From the outset, Williams presents a meticulously detailed portrait of the Pilcher family, and of the various people with whom they interact, capturing even their dialects and linguistic idiosyncrasies, such as Bram’s mumbling mispronunciations (2), and the town spinster’s laughable attempts at genteel speech; she unknowingly substitutes “preferment” for “interment” (37), for example. In fact, most of *Candles*’ iconography involves “local color,” as critic Colvin McPherson notes in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, in which he praises Williams’s “sound knowledge of locale” in depicting the Alabama mining town. Unlike other writers of the period who used coal mining to frame the romance of such middle-class characters as the Haggertys, the “rich, coal-mine operators” (Dreiser 360) of Dreiser’s *The Titan*, the mines in which Williams’s characters labor are not merely “stepping stones for something better” (Duke 69). Also, unlike other American writers who characterized miners as essentially passive victims, Williams demonstrates that they are fully capable, as Birmingham Red is especially, of taking the initiative for themselves. Williams further emphasizes that labor must unite if they hope to challenge the economic forces that would otherwise control their lives; ultimately, by underlining the importance of a shared sense of purpose for the men on the march. Williams’s call for unity led the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (McPherson) to reiterate what was—to one critic at least—the play’s ultimate meaning: “solidarity forever” (E. Williams 84).

In *Candles*, Williams also underscores how the physical, psychological, and economic constraints within mining families reveal the systematic constraints of

American culture. In addition, while offering us harsh images of inhospitable social spaces so characteristic of protest narratives, he demonstrates the way in which time intersects these spaces through the changes the characters undergo, changes we are led to infer from the sequence of distinct moments in time, each captured as in a snapshot. Through his development of dramatic tension and selection of iconography, Williams highlights particularly poignant moments, not only reconstructing the forces that converge upon and oppress his victims, but documenting the terrifying moments in which their world, which at best retains only a relative semblance of order, suddenly degenerates into chaos. Williams varies the temporal structure of *Candles* to emphasize that the terror propagated by the Rover Boys (*Candles* 103), a menacing gang hired by the mine owners, operates freely as the logical by-product of a violent, materialistic social structure (Greenhalgh 171). As Thomas Adler maintains, Williams shares his powerful “observations” about “the coexistence of culture with evil” and the fact that highly civilized societies not only countenance but actually become complicit in inhuman acts, “with other twentieth-century writers who explore the fate of culture and art as it is threatened by commerce and power” (647).

Ultimately and somewhat ironically, the ambiguous endings of the plays are themselves escapes from the constraints imposed by the traditional plot structure of the protest play. In the hands of lesser playwrights, such propagandistic narratives might merely channel and express then-current ideas regarding gendered roles and economic options. The iconography of labor—especially when a threat arises to its continuity—along with the topics of lost potential or outright failure, is renowned in many narratives commonly found in Western industrialized societies. However, to critique the inequities

of such societies, Williams adopts alternative narrative strategies, as exemplified by his experimental use of theatrical techniques that comprise both Impressionist and Expressionist styles, mining the extremes of the protagonist's unique, even Surreal, perception. Perhaps by way of echoing the seemingly endless litany of such barbaric social inequities, Williams's three full-length protest plays offer no true sense of closure. Rather, Williams advances the action only so far as the limited moments of epiphany arrive to edify his protagonists. In this way, he displays a unique political imagination by acknowledging openly that the economic constraints surrounding his symbolic victims are merely the flipside of the economic opportunities available to his symbolic victors. Moreover, while Williams, throughout his entire oeuvre, mines the codes and conventions of multiple genres, he uses the dramatic genre of protest in the three plays under consideration here to express the personal and political liberation of his protagonists (or the failure thereof). Later dramatic expressions of his "aestheticization of the political" (Case 9) owe much to his refusal to separate the inner psychological qualities of his protagonists from the broader political forces that oppress them.

In Williams's hands, such plot patterns mirror one element or strand which appears to spiral outward chaotically, but then comes to reflect the initial, more stable narrative element, after which the another strand or plotline spirals out once again. Thus, the two narrative thrusts—one dynamic and one stable—seem not only to parallel one another in a static way, but also to engage in an active dialectic within the main narrative. Following Gallais and Pollina, we may assume that the audience witnesses the chaotic forces bearing down upon the characters at the beginning of the protest plays, and comes to interpret the eventual consequences of such forces in the light of just such a spiral

pattern. Expanding toward an often still-chaotic ending, the narrative structures of Williams's protest plays remain unresolved. In turn, they evoke carefully calculated responses from the audience, which are based on shared cultural codes, including "genres [that] persist [as does] any codification of cultural behavior" (Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* viii-ix). In short, pre-established genres, such as the protest and the fantasy play—as well as selected fragments thereof—were known both to the playwright and to the audience. With respect to Williams's eclectic mixture of genres in *Battle of Angels* (1940; *Theater*),³ critic Alexander Williams, in *The Boston Herald*, described the play as "one of the strangest mixtures of poetry, realism, melodrama, comedy, whimsy and eroticism that it has ever been our privilege to see upon the boards."

The conventional narrative structure of the protest play unfolds in a complex and unpredictable setting that revolves around a given center of conflict. The minimalist staging of its symbolic wasteland heightens the exposed nature of the characters trapped in it. In this respect, *Candles* is no different from any other protest play. However, in *Candles*, the characters often refer to their surrounding rural environs as pastoral and idyllic, in contrast to the dingy camp itself (in keeping with the conventions of the protest genre, which typically evoke anxiety, dread, and the fear that escape may not be possible). Williams's protest plays function as explicit responses to clearly delineated social problems, insofar as the narratives of all three plays focus on repression, segregation, and divisiveness, rather than on wholeness. He exposes the lives of the protagonists as formless and chaotic. Williams also recruits traditional iconographic

³ In this 1940 play, Williams enlarged upon the characters he had created in 1937 for *Fugitive Kind* (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xxi). *Battle* is collected in Williams, *The Theater of Tennessee Williams, Volume One*. I have shortened the title to *Battle* throughout this dissertation.

images to represent the culture of the underclass, the oppressed, and those engaged in grim forms of labor. While his concerns include the physical, spatial, psychic, and symbolic constraints of the underclass, constraints that are likely to be played out in marriage, in family life, or in social relationships, his narratives remain strongly informed by the political thrust of the protest genre.⁴ Thus, what may be called the “rhetoric of place” (Harvey 1)—namely, the richly detailed verisimilitude that Williams achieves in the settings of all three plays—helps to ground any overly antirealist tendency that may result from his use of iconography or symbolism. As we shall see, both in *Fugitive Kind* and *Nightingales*, Williams also surveys political protest as it concerns the criminal element (a characteristic feature of both the gangster and prison subtypes). Williams’s melding of protest and thriller elements accounts for the cacophony of terror and desolation. However, these two plays remain well within the domain of the protest genre, as Brian Parker acknowledges by stating that *Candles* is a “lively, viable example of the social-protest play of the period” (Parker, *Candles* 138).

Characterization of the Oppressed Female

In the protest tradition, scenes of mayhem, chaos, and violence occur in sharp contrast to domestic scenes of (albeit dysfunctional) familial interaction, which nonetheless includes an affection apparently strong enough to survive the family’s economic hardships and marginalized social status.

Many plays of the 1930s considered implicitly radical and revolutionary in tone often featured such popular traditions as the grotesque and/or transgressive woman

⁴ Devlin and Tischler underscore Williams’s didactic tendencies in an editorial response to a journal entry in Williams’s *Selected Letters 1933–1938*: “[t]he play dealt ‘with group welfare as opposed to individual welfare’” (93).

(Castle 540). Such purportedly female characteristics not only dramatized the tragic exploitation of the underclass but, in many cases, projected the fantasy of an ideal solution (as one finds in the role of Star in *Candles*, when the character severs her ties with sexual conventions). Through this and other female personae, Williams presents a complex social issue for his audience to ponder in Brechtian fashion. For example, Hester briefly entertains the notion that, as the Pilcher family matriarch, she has the right to defy Mrs. Abbey, the wife of the mine superintendent, declaring, “[w]e eat dirt because we haven’t the guts to throw it back in their faces” (*Candles* 31). This notion, however, implodes when her son Joel, fired from his job at the company store and now forced to work in the mine, subsequently dies in a mine collapse. Soon afterwards, Hester also dies, succumbing to pellagra after having denied her own needs for many years in an effort to feed and care for her family. As Star surmises: “I guess she’s been scrimping herself so’s the others would have enough” (48).

As in the majority of protest plays of the period, self-sacrifice and the avoidance of violent protest seem to be linked to the feminine, as evinced by Star’s demands that Birmingham Red leave the camp with her. Also, within the context of the camp setting, Williams calls attention to women’s maternal responsibilities (Greenhalgh 168), embodied in Fern’s adamant stance regarding her son’s education. As Birmingham Red makes clear, Fern’s sacrifice does not go unnoticed. To be sure, the significance of matriarchal power in this economically and spiritually depressed community cannot be exaggerated: “Luke, your mother’s won this fight for us! . . . It will be her sacrifice that done it!” (*Candles* 90). Ultimately, Fern, like her mother-in-law before her, must make a sacrifice (in this case, of the tuition money she has scrupulously saved for her son for

over a decade). Instead of continuing to save for her son's tuition, she donates her savings to the mining community so that, during the strike, enough food can be purchased for the miners to sustain themselves and their families. Thus, Marxist-inspired martyrdom gives strength to the poignantly idealistic prospect of a woman's hope for change. Williams dramatizes such sacrifice, however, through an almost carnivalesque performance, particularly as witnessed in Star's "gaudy" cabin (*Candles* 36). We shall encounter more of this feature later on, when we discuss Williams's interpretation of the classic "cinematic gaze" (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 2).⁵ Incidentally, the mortal physicality of sacrifice and its carnivalesque display were common among the female characters in protest plays of the period (Greenhalgh 171). Thomas P. Adler points out that

. . . [f]rom his early years, when his father taunted him as a sissified Miss Nancy, Williams must have gradually come to see himself as excluded by the patriarchy, until later because of sexual difference he chose to live free from and in rebellion against that patriarchy's repressive and exclusionary mores, rejecting the flawed patriarchy . . . in favor of what might be seen as a more androgynous political and moral order. (650)

This "more androgynous"—or, as Saddik suggests, all-embracing "postmodern" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67)—approach characterizes Williams's contribution to the protest genre of the 1930s. Nonetheless, Williams adheres to the genre's dominant political economic topics, according to which each woman is supported or otherwise accounted for by a man within the mining community. Williams also implies, through a familial connection established during the play's funeral episode, that spinster Ethel Sunter is supported by

⁵ See "Cinematic Iconography," as follows.

Whitey, her brother. Alternately, some women appear as transgressive, prostitute figures, social outcasts to be shunned and derided both by the underclass (including, in Star's case, by her own father, Bram) and by the ruling classes (as represented by Mrs. Abbey).

Although Star's departure for a whorehouse in Birmingham can be seen as an escape, one wonders, as she departs, whether her supposed escape will turn into yet another form of entrapment. The movement of the narrative toward an open conclusion becomes apparent even prior to the play's final moments, when Star offers up the possibility of liberation and independence (an offer, however, that ultimately rings hollow). As previously noted, Williams's penchant for ambiguity denotes this possibility, in keeping with the complex conclusion that he sought to create with director Willard Holland: an ending of "mingled sadness and exaltation" (Devlin and Tischler 93). In stressing the personal outcome of the family members' lives in terms of their economic hardship and unrelieved suffering, Williams's underscores the ways in which political violence is both gendered and engendered.

Additionally, as Williams introduces the protagonists, we see that their physical actions foreshadow their later decisions, just as their introductory gestures, often greatly exaggerated, echo the more intimate events that heavily influence the outcome of the plot. Bram, for example, enters the play in the first scene in the same way as he leaves it in the final scene: stumbling blindly (*Candles* 1, 111). His lack of foresight contributes directly both to his family's suffering, and to the death of his son Joel. For her part, Hester appears constantly to be preparing food while never actually consuming it: she "comes swishing in with a steaming bowl of mush which she claps down on the bare table" (2); she "seats herself with her own tin cup, but does not drink . . . [she has] a tense

brooding look on her face” (6); she “places her hands on a large bunch of turnips and carrots, raises a knife to cut them, then lowers it slowly to the table and stands motionless, apparently forgetting what she had started to do” (16). We learn later that Hester has died of malnutrition. Moreover, her daughter Star remains as “sullenly defiant” at the play’s end as she does at her first appearance (12). Star even makes a final, pointed reference to the red silk kimono in which she was initially clad (a gift from her lover and, as such, a gift reviled by her father as the garb of a “cheap floozie” [12]).

When the whistle from the mine indicates trouble, Fern, having fallen into a trance-like state (69), re-enacts the moment that she learned about the death of her husband, John, an encore that severely traumatizes her. As Fern limns John’s passing (although Joel has died in this case), her flashback allows the audience to participate in the passings of the two Pilcher men. Star also makes a “pitying gesture” at the end of scene 8, in response to Fern’s “bewildered gesture” to Luke as Fern makes her way, “halting and stiff,” toward the door of Star’s cabin (96). As previously mentioned, Fern has just agreed, under intense pressure from Birmingham Red, to give the money she had been saving for Luke’s education to the miners to buy food with which to feed themselves during the strike (96). Her body language communicates her extreme difficulty in dealing with the tragic turn of events at the camp. Ultimately, just prior to her son Luke entering the mine in which he dies, the same mine in which his uncle Joel also dies, she loses control of her actions and, in a state of acute anxiety, pours the family’s coffee onto the floor (57), “staggers against a wall” (58), “gasps” (61), and, finally, “collapses moaning into the chair” (62). When the mine whistle blows three

times, signalling trouble, she, like Hester before her—another character that “froze” while cleaning vegetables—remains at first still, but then drops the knife (68).

In accordance with Williams’s expressive staging techniques, the secondary characters are also distinguished by their adornment, behavior, gestures, and diction. Mrs. Abbey, wife of the mine superintendent, betrays an obsession with clothing. A “scrawny affectatious gossip dressed in what she considers the height of style,” Mrs. Abbey appears with a bundle of clothing and immediately accuses the camp launderers, Fern and Hester, of stealing her husband’s nightclothes (26). She ends by “choking with rage” and “drop[ping] some clothes as she flies out the door,” after Hester defiantly protests against her insinuations concerning Star’s activity as a prostitute (30). In another example, Williams initially describes miner Sean O’Connor as “showing off” at Joel’s funeral, as he “rises and makes emphatic gestures, passing along the wall, talking to the men. . . . Bram remains stolidly indifferent [while] Luke looks on with intense interest” (79). The drunken O’Connor enjoys the attention garnered by his politically motivated rabble-rousing, which precedes his rant against “niggers” and “lousy furriners”; following this rant, Bram “pushes him violently in the face,” knocking O’Connor onto the floor (82). True to his opportunistic nature, O’Connor exploits the emotional impact of Joel’s death in order to bolster support for the proposed strike (76).

Here O’Connor seems to foreshadow Stanley Kowalski, a key protagonist in the 1947 play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Robert Bray argues that Kowalski exhibits “immigrant arriviste ambitions” (*Streetcar* 12). In this way, he shares O’Connor’s “claims on American identity [that] come with a brutal disregard for competing claims” so that “the myth of national unity is questioned” (12). Furthermore, even in such an

intimate and sensitive setting such as a funeral, O'Connor—not unlike Kowalski, whom Bray describes as an “extraneous . . . intruder” and a would-be “exploiter” (12)—covets, without a trace of self-reproach, the dead man’s hunting dog and rifle. Utter self-absorption and insensitivity toward the true value of others, expressed in O'Connor’s rant, is writ large in America’s policy, at that time, of isolationism. Lillian Hellman, Robert Sherwood, and other dramatists “were also questioning [this policy] by the early 1940s” (Adler 650).

Each of the three plays discussed in this chapter concerns itself both with women’s involvement in the political struggle and in the relationship between politics and violence, particularly with respect to gender roles. Williams recognizes that even the supreme value of motherhood—a value often passionately embraced by society’s disenfranchised—neither neutralizes nor stabilizes a world dominated by masculine violence. However, Fern’s act of generosity in redirecting the money she had saved for her son’s education ultimately saves the camp. Interestingly, although Fern at first resists the idea, her son ultimately persuades her to make the sacrifice (the very son that she mistakes, in her state of confusion and despair, for her long-dead husband).

Williams’s portrayal of life in the coal mines was groundbreaking for, in *Candles*, women, rather than men, take center stage. According to David C. Duke, “[a]part from brief hints about the restricted lives of young women in mining communities, the female characters are . . . undefined” in the majority of coal mining narratives of the period (73). In contrast to other Depression-era portrayals of women linked to mining, the women in *Candles* do not remain exclusively in the shadows. Through inverting the paradigm that governed other narratives of the modern period (for example, Will W. Whalen’s

novel *Lily of the Coal Fields*), Williams ensures that the “empty” lives of “upper-class women” do not “dominate” the narrative (Duke 76). He focuses instead on the lives of two generations of poverty-stricken Pilcher women: Hester, Star, and (by marriage) Fern. Indeed, the only so-called upper-class woman in the play, Mrs. Abbey, makes her sole appearance in one scene (and then only briefly). Williams characterizes her in his stage directions as a loquacious meddler “who obviously lords it over all whom she considers beneath her” (*Candles* 25). Although Williams dramatizes his narrative by including the explosive strike and the violence it provokes, he generally avoids employing many stereotypes of rural Alabama in particular and of the South in general, likewise maintaining an authorial distance from stereotypically derogative portrayals of miners as well.

Williams’s willingness to examine how the members of a mining family, especially the female characters, react both to life’s uncertainties and to one another, sets *Candles* apart from other works of the same period, on the same topic, and within the same genre. In this respect, *Candles* is a rarity among coal-related narratives published between the 1870s and the 1940s (*Candles* 68). For example, the exchange between Bram and Star in the first scene, which puts a moralistic father in conflict with his teenage daughter, transcends the world of work and adds both an intimate and a tragic dimension to these characters. Here Williams presents us with a relationship between a rebellious daughter and her concerned father, a paternal character that also happens to be a coal miner, as distinct from a coal miner who also happens to have a daughter.⁶ Star’s

⁶Their familial conflict resembles that between the mother and daughter in Williams’s one-act play *Why Do You Smoke So Much, Lily?* Like *Candles*, it was written between 1935 and 1936. (The play is collected in *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays*, the title of which is shortened in these pages to

initiation into the harsh realities of the mining economy, through witnessing its effects on her father and on the rest of her family, ultimately softens her attitude toward him, so much so that she cannot leave without asking Fern to “tell Bram goodbye . . .” (*Candles* 107). She loathes the company officials who have deprived her family of their dignity but, what devastates her even more, she must sacrifice her relationship with Birmingham Red to the cause. Although she complains of her frustration to Red regarding their sacrifice of love in the name of social duty, she refrains from expressing her grief after the Rover Boys execute her lover before her eyes. Like so many other characters in protest plays and narratives that depict the mining subculture (Duke 89), terror and suffering drive Star from the only home she knows; she departs for the city of Birmingham (*Candles* 84).

Terrorism and Violence

In examining *Candles* more closely, and by paying particular attention to the political theatricality of the terrorist activity characteristic of the protest genre, it becomes apparent that, through the use of extensive verbal banter on behalf of his characters, Williams succeeds in indicating the coping mechanisms that prevent violence from interfering with the normal, everyday conventions of life on the lowest rung of the social ladder (Orr and Klaić 56). With a deadpan humor that evokes Bram’s laughter in the opening scene, Hester suggests to Bram that, given his intention to continue drinking so much milk, he buy her “a cow” (*Candles* 3). In a particularly poignant example, Star expresses her defiant sense of humor most notably in her parting shot to her father, as “with a harsh laugh . . . she runs out the door”: “[y]ou can tell him,” she says to Fern,

Mister.) Both Star and Lily are rebellious daughters struggling with the effects of some form of prostitution, and both self-consciously smoke cigarettes (*Mister* 49).

“I’m gone to town to buy me a new silk kimona!” (107). Fern’s laughter ends the play on a positive note, although Williams, in his stage directions, indicates Fern’s “emotional exhaustion” as she collapses into the rocker (112).

As compared to other protest plays of the period, Williams’s innovative use of humorous and satiric elements generates its own unique kind of Brechtian “distanciation” (Duke 83), despite the fact that coal mining communities—settings for widespread desperation—served, even more convincingly, as the backdrop for violent events. Saddik, however, makes the point that Williams’s open-endedness is “different from Brecht’s,” arguing that, whereas Williams focuses on the plight of “the mechanized individual,” Brecht addresses the broader forces at work in the context of industrial capitalism (*Blueprints* 71).

While the sources of Williams’s dramatic constructs are ultimately American, they make evident, nonetheless, a wider choice available to any contemporary playwright, American or otherwise, who aims to address the issue of politically-inspired violence. When the “band of terrorists” (*Candles* 102) otherwise known as the Rover Boys fails to gain the outcome it seeks through threats and intimidation, it resorts to violence, and one of the band’s members humiliates, “pinions and gags” (103) Star while Birmingham Red is shot and killed (103). The terrorists create a menacing impact, both through the relentless “torch glare” and through their breaking down of the iconic cabin door, demonstrating that Birmingham Red’s pursuers will stop at nothing (102).

However, what terrorism ultimately signifies can rarely be conclusively determined, due to its overwhelmingly dubious reputation as a form of political leverage. In fact, at the end of the play, Williams leaves the audience to wonder whether the strike

will succeed or not. With characteristically inconclusive open-endedness (Hale, *Fugitive Kind* 70), Williams presents political terrorism as a highly complex phenomenon that conveys different messages to different groups of people. Michael Patterson distinguishes three significant aspects of terrorism relevant to the interference of the Rover Boys as corporate assassins:

First, terrorism must involve violent activity, at least the destruction of property and, more likely, the killing of people. . . . Second, this violent activity must be informed by a political ideology, however perverted that ideology might appear to an outsider. . . . [Third,] terrorism originally referred to government by the use of terror, conceived of as being directed toward a change in the status quo and is therefore targeted on the authorities of a state and is aimed at those who support existing regimes, even at “ordinary citizens” who may only offer tacit consent to the continuing rule of the authorities. (82–83)

In short, the topic of terrorism lends itself ideally to protest drama since such dramatic forms readily embrace spectator action, political debate, and personal conflict, and offer the members of the audience insight into an area of contemporary society often both hidden from them, and yet at least potentially relevant to their lives (83).

Historians have noted the inherently theatrical nature of terrorism in the contemporary world (Zinn 579). Bombings, hijackings, kidnappings, and assassinations all involve the planned staging of events, turning unwary citizens into an involuntary audience of bloody spectacle. Acts of violence against property or people are staged to terrorize and intimidate, or to at least ensure that they cannot be ignored (Orr and Klaić

2). Evidently, according to John Orr and Dragan Klaić, terrorism as the production of a theater of cruelty has maintained a historical role in the development of the modern state (3).

Strikes play an especially significant role in many of the coal mining protest narratives of the 1930s. This comes as no surprise, given that decade's heightened sense of class consciousness and economic frustration. Williams employs the subject of strikes in this narrative not simply as a device for bringing together characters from different backgrounds, nor even for describing the dynamics of a specific economic structure. Instead, as a frequently used motif of conflict, the strike virtually dominates the narrative. Most Depression-era dramas feature a negative view of management (Duke 77). By contrast, however, Williams explores both sides of the management issue. For example, Tim Adams, the storeowner of Gomstock Incorporated, hires young Joel Pilcher all the while warning Joel that, as the company storeowner, Tim will "get thrown out on [his] ear" (*Candles* 59) if he does not collect on the Pilchers' credit because the "coal business is all shot to pieces" (56). Somewhat surprisingly, Williams never directly depicts the mine's owners. Instead, he makes the mine owner's wife the target of his critical attack; he characterizes her and the other "elites" as insensitive, petty, and bored (25). He also witnesses Fern's transformation from an observer's perspective, preoccupied with her son's well-being, to a woman defeated by the company's callous reign of terror. However, she eventually appears to take quiet comfort in her role as a character willing to sacrifice her entire savings for the benefit of the strikers.

While many writers of the period accorded their coal mining characters little opportunity to speak for themselves (Duke 78), Williams allows their voices to be heard.

Moreover, in Williams's work, the larger issues of the working community and the subclasses affiliated with them both play key roles in his theater. One might go so far as to say that Williams even fetishizes the underclass origins of these characters. His use of such iconography as the silk kimono, gaudy jewellery, and tasteless décor, for example, to depict the young and seductive Star, combine to intensify the mystique of an authentic underclass hero.

Furthermore, Williams refrains from idealizing mining life. John Pilcher, the son of Bram and Hester, dies after being crushed by an "engine" carrying coal out of a mine "up North in the anthracite fields" after he becomes "caught in the tracks" (*Candles* 19): "[s]eems like they made the entry too narrow 'long there for a man and a car to pass the same time an' he got smashed up against the rim and tore all to pieces" (77). Williams portrays the dangers and risks of coal mining in numerous ways, ranging from Bram's fading eyesight (which prevents him, metaphorically, from "seeing" his diminished role as part of a degraded workforce), to the actual death of a Pilcher son in a mine "up North" (19) (ironically, one considered more technologically advanced). To reiterate, Bram maintains that John's death could have been avoided if the industry had not become so mechanized: ". . . these people that are always wantin' new fangled contraptions . . . they git killed on 'em, that's all" (19). However, such dangers are typically attributed to the greed of the mine owners who, in their desire for profit, insist on forcing the men in Alabama to mine the unsafe "fifth level" (61).

Sordid Monotony in the Rural Setting

Since, at least on the surface, *Candles* plays out the exploitation of coal miners in the 1930s in "a mining camp in the Red Hill section of Alabama" (Isaac, *Introduction*,

Candles xxxi), one might expect the play to reassert the dominant structures and cultural conventions traditionally associated with patriarchal power. However, Williams instead insists upon a certain measure of matriarchal economy and interaction, with the action being propelled almost solely by the constructive acts of the three Pilcher women. Williams also subverts audience expectations by his lack of respect for established institutions, such as the medical and legal systems: the Pilchers dismiss the company doctor as “no good” (*Candles* 39) when the camp’s authority is usurped by a gang of terrorists. Even the Sunter siblings, characters that live in the camp and that insistently espouse questionable religious and political beliefs, are treated satirically as holier-than-thou hypocrites.

Williams takes pains to demonstrate, in his version of the American dystopia, that faith in the possibility of a return to a viable, Edenic innocence faces destruction by “an ethic of material success and cultural domination constructed upon an . . . exploitation of the weaker” (Adler 658). Furthermore, Adler’s assertion that “[v]iolence has invaded the garden” (658) seems most appropriate in regard to the end of scene 3 of *Candles*, in which Hester mourns her eldest son’s violent death in the anthracite fields. Indeed, she reminds us of his youth and innocence through invocation of the affecting beauty of their rural surroundings:

HESTER [as if to herself]: John used to run down that same hill on bright summer mornings. It hit me all of a sudden. The warm sweet smell of the grass . . . (*Candles* 35)

Additionally, in *Candles*, the names of the Pilcher’s trinity of sons—John, Joel, and grandson Luke—underscore Williams’s message concerning the interconnectedness of

the human community: “the play’s message very clearly is that personal ends must make way for a greater communal good, as the title’s comparison *Candles to the Sun* implies” (Parker, *Candles* 139). It is within just such a “notion of community” (Adler 665) that Williams deploys his political message in this protest play, and it is from such a notion that any political discussion arises.

Respected critics and scholars such as Bigsby (*Confrontation, View*) and Parker (*Candles*) agree that *Candles* constitutes Williams’s most explicitly political foray into social drama which, it could be argued, culminated in 1975 in the experimental *Red Devil Battery Sign*. In *Candles* and *Red Devil*, Williams lays bare the ways in which social conventions and economic dependency constrain individual freedom and personal growth. In both plays, Williams exposes the bigotry directed at racial and ethnic minorities, denigrated in epithets such those used in *Candles* by O’Connor. In addition, Williams reminds us in both plays that people with so-called left-wing, “red,” or socialist political commitments often endure ostracism and persecution for their resistance to the status quo. For example, in *Candles*, Birmingham Red dies for his beliefs.

On the surface, *Candles* borrows from traditional coal mining narratives both in terms of the topics it presents, and in its forthright dramatic approach. However, Williams’s use of largely marginalized milieus and concerns, which have the effect of drawing our attention to the socially stratified realities associated with digging coal, adds a dialogic dimension to the play. We observe the way in which Star deals with the mining camp’s changing mores in light of her “perfection” (*Candles* 28) through the eyes of Mrs. Abbey, Tim Adams, Sean O’Connor, and others, as the camp seemingly offers no economic prospects for women and Star flagrantly competes with another prostitute for

her economic survival. Likewise, the hostile vigilante-style takeovers—“what we’re spoiling for’s a good fight” (89)—and the struggling coal market economy, as Tim Adams makes clear, serve to set Star’s difficulties in relief. Certainly, her family’s personal hardships account for but a microcosm of the acute injustices that pervade life in the coal mines of Gomstock Incorporated.

Nonetheless, Williams’s portrayal does not come off as relentlessly bleak and monotonous. For example, Williams surrounds the isolated hollow in which the family lives, although close to the mine, by natural rural beauty and, perhaps more importantly, the family members demonstrate genuine affection for one another. After Joel Pilcher’s tragic death, Williams tells us that it is the miners’ collective indignation and grief, based partially on a dislike of strangers (the xenophobic O’Connor being a prime example), that largely motivates the strike. This collective resistance, with which the audience strongly identifies, creates a tense atmosphere of essentially owner-driven terrorism, as, for example, when the paid band of strike breakers arrives at the camp (102).

Iconography of Darkness

The “three Ds” of coal mining—dirt, darkness and danger (Duke 75)—generate a number of negative connotations, and Williams treats this alliterative trio in a muted and yet effective way. For example, Fern and Hester regularly launder for the encampment to keep the dirt the at bay; the darkness of the mine mirrors the darkness of the Pilcher home (the latter related to the cost of lamp oil); finally, the threat of danger, ever present, culminates in the sound of three whistles that emanate from the mine, indicating that an accident has occurred. Interestingly, by locating the three Ds outside, rather than inside the mine, Williams makes the mine all the more menacing in his audience’s imagination.

Williams also makes use of the “slave analogy” (Duke 75) prevalent in much of the fiction depicting miners of the period. For example, Hester repeatedly refers to Bram—in her typical dialect—as a “natcheral born slave” (*Candles* 7). Furthermore, Williams’s stage directions describe Bram as a “clockwork figure” with a pronounced “air of inevitability” about him (2). As did the other writers of the period who selected life in the coal mines as their subject, Williams includes in his depiction not only the preoccupations of American society at large, but also his country’s “widespread uneasiness about any national dependence” on foreign workers (Duke 75), through the character of O’Connor, the Irishman who, ironically, calls for the miners to “keep the lousy furriners out, [and] we’ll have a free country some day” (*Candles* 82).

Cinematic Influences and Techniques

As noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, Williams’s aesthetic approach complements both Chandler’s (*Semiotics*) and Bordwell and Thompson’s theories regarding genre. Certain generic criteria concerning cinematic conventions, proposed respectively by Chandler and Bordwell and Thompson, pertain to the classification of specific cinematic aspects of Williams’s dramas. The “textual features” of genre to which Chandler refers are both “typically listed by film theorists” (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159), and commonly evoked by scholars of drama (158).

In relation to protest plays, for an excellent example of a female character with “carnavalesque performative aspects” (Greenhalgh 171), we need look no further than that of Star. Consistent both with the protest genre’s characterizations of a marginalized woman (Greenhalgh 171), and with the “organizational structure of the classic cinema” (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 2) in which women such as Star are objectified by the male

gaze, Williams continuously stresses the performative nature of Star's behavior, physically charged as it characteristically is. She contrives to dominate and thus "star" in every scene in which she appears. For example, in the stage directions for scene 8, Williams describes Star as wearing "a loud black-and-white checked skirt with a red blouse and gold bracelets that jangle on her wrists like manacles" (*Candles* 83), prompting Red to ask: "[w]hat makes that jangling noise every time you move?" (85). In fact, Red tears the bracelets off, breaking them in the process. For him, they represent bondage, and the absence of true freedom. He demands that she "take the damn things off [because they] sound like chains rattling" (86).

Like a tried and true performer, this character plays out a sensational spectacle at the forefront of her tiny cabin for all passersby to see. This performance, accompanied by the music which wafts in from the miners' hall and through her two large cabin windows that are adjacent to the hall, demonstrates that, while she clearly chooses her attention-seeking role—she is after all, a "Star"—she subverts the usual conventions that link feminine display to shame. Instead, she succeeds in influencing an audience to identify with her. Throughout, however, she maintains her distance and control, positioning herself on the inner—and somewhat safer—side of the windowpane, secure in her own environment, an environment that she, alone, has completely transformed (36). The stage directions for scene 4 note that Star's cabin expresses "in every detail Star's own personality" (36): "[a]rchitecturally, it is practically the same as Bram's, but garish drapes, calendar pictures, photos of movie stars, kewpie dolls, fancy silk pillows, work a complete transformation [while] one or two large windows open on the dusky street" (36). In his stage directions, Williams provides us with even subtler details:

In the right wall—or wherever it will best suit the action—is the front door, opening on another street, the cabin standing at the intersection. Both windows are wide open as the scene begins and Star, gaily dressed for the evening, moves about the room as though flaunting herself to the public view. Crowds are passing around the corner on their way to the Saturday night dance or frolic at the miners' meeting houses. Drunken men shout ribaldries and give catcalls as they pass by the two roads. Shriill-voiced women make caustic commentaries. Star smiles with nervous defiance as she overhears these voices. She lights a cigarette. Sometimes she hums to herself. She has a tense, anticipatory air as though she were definitely waiting for something to happen—or someone to arrive. (36)

Crandell maintains that while other scholars have highlighted the significance of Williams's cinematic imagination (Murray 52), many have overlooked the "special, cinematic role" that informs each character's point of view (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye 2*). In *Candles*, any given protagonist's "distinctive gaze" reveals how Williams "replicates the organizational structures of the classic cinema, which in turn, reflect the ideology of a patriarchal society" (*Cinematic Eye 2*). This dissertation argues, however, that although Williams adopts the patriarchal look or "gaze" (i.e., a man gazing at a woman) that characterizes many of Hollywood's classic films—thereby "replicating the cinematic technique" in order to establish a subjective point of view—he also, to use a cinematic term, "sutures" (3) his audience's point of view to the female perspective, insofar as he

frames the narrative through the eyes of three different women: Hester, Star, and Fern (the only characters to appear completely alone onstage for significant periods of time).

Moreover, through the eyes of Hester and Fern Williams interprets the action for the audience, both initially and at the conclusion. He continually manipulates both the audience's and the characters' levels of knowledge and awareness, which mimics, once again, a "cinematic" narrative effect within the context of the play. For example, Williams makes us aware of Hester's initial animosity toward Fern, although the latter character remains unsuspecting of this fact; Mrs. Abbey makes a joke to Fern and Hester concerning the camp's awareness of Star's prostitution, although Mrs. Abbey herself feigns ignorance; also, Fern initially remains ignorant of the fact—known, however, to the audience—that her son has taken his tuition money to feed the starving miners in the camp. Fern's emotional collapses, outbursts, and flashbacks to earlier traumatic events which she compulsively re-enacts before those around her not only increase our sympathetic identification with her but also cue us as to what to expect of her later in the play. At periodic intervals throughout *Candles*, Hester, Fern, and Star appear by turns alone onstage, in order to share their subjective experiences and to establish a rapport with the audience (the source of their psychological and emotional appeal).

Such interpretations and narrative frames of the action (Bordwell and Thompson 178) also cue the audience, through Williams's use of female characters, to the narrative's subjectivity. The audience's exposure to a single character's range of knowledge or to only one particular point of view emphasizes the turning points in the narrative. Thus, while using objective narration and employing a cast of different characters as a baseline (67), Williams periodically departs from that baseline by

introducing Hester, Star, and Fern, each appearing solo. Through this contrast, Williams achieves a considerable degree of subjective depth and pathos.

Furthermore, the female characters, by sharing details of their inner lives with the audience, also take on a degree of subjectivity in the narrative sense. For example, Star confesses her love to Birmingham Red; by contrast, the male characters' dialogue remains objective. To further illustrate, Bram's face remains "stony with the hard repressed grief of his kind" (*Candles* 72), even while at the funeral of his youngest son. In addition, Bram confines his responses strictly to externals, such as where his son will be buried: "in the Baptist cimiterary like all his folks was before him," thus adhering to an established tradition (75). Even during the play's denouement, we note the differing viewpoints that two characters hold of the same situation. Williams contrasts Bram's blind, misguided rush to join his fellow workers on parade with Fern's acceptance of her situation. The scene's mature tone derives principally from the vast gap between Bram's myopic view, which symbolizes his economic obsolescence in the job market, and Fern's far broader perspective, a product of her apparent contentment.

Despite the fact that the personal is tied so intricately to the political in Star's view, she, much like her father, does not consider the ways in which the past continues both to influence her present and to haunt her future. Williams, comfortable with such contradictions, manages to create complex "personalities" rather than stereotypical characters and, in so doing, allows them a greater degree of unqualified freedom than many other writers of "coal-related fiction" (Duke 92). Unlike her brothers—characters that escape only in death—Star exercises her (albeit limited) capacity for personal choice in order to escape her family, the social responsibilities, and the expectations associated

with this mining community. For the most part, however, Williams employs traditional “protest” methods relating to plot, staging, and characterization. As previously noted, he treats the miner’s cabin as a peculiarly suggestive setting, given both its dark ambience—established at the outset of the play with the lamp consistently turned low—and its dirtiness, provoking the metaphor of the relentlessly predictable cycles of laundry with which the Pilcher women are involved (nonetheless, we learn that through laundering, Fern amasses enough money to break the company terrorists’ hold on the camp).

However, the ways in which Williams portrays his characters—for example, through the cinematic technique of multiple points of view, especially in his portrayal of the female characters—breathes new life into the protest genre and, more specifically, into the subcategory of the coal mining narrative. The plot appears to fold back upon itself, as Williams makes use of the same settings and sequences (so much so that Bram repeatedly mistakes his exceedingly capable daughter-in-law for his equally hardworking wife as he prepares for work, even after Hester’s death). Moreover, Williams adopts this “doubling” technique for political ends and to emphasize, in his words, “the sordid monotony of coal miners [sic] lives” (*Candles* 54). Also, Williams radically overhauls the traditional concept of terrorism, branding the authorities (Gomstock Incorporated) themselves as “terrorists” (102) in their employing strikebreaking goons to terrorize miners who refuse to re-enter the mine. Although, as earlier observed, terrorism has for the most part been defined as a means by which governments seem to establish and exert control, it is more generally conceived as an act or series of acts that are directed toward bringing about change in the status quo. Terrorism is therefore usually associated with

those who target state authority (Patterson 82), while the term “terrorist” is here aimed at those who support existing regimes.

Williams repeatedly associates the Pilcher women with certain typically cinematic motifs, such as the contrasting play of light and shadow. Such motifs, associated here with the female characters’ oppressed point of view, serve to highlight certain details that an audience might otherwise ignore or miss. The audience’s gaze identifies familiar light-bearing objects and effects, such as the lamp, the sunlight, or the moonlight streaming through the cabin windows in the presence of Hester, Fern, or Star. When Hester, in the first scene, asserts her authority over how much lamp oil will be consumed, she establishes herself as the keeper of the lamp. In contrast, the play ends with “strange” sunlight as “pale as lemon-water” falling upon a “weak” but relaxed Fern as the final curtain falls (*Candles* 106). Despite their bleak circumstances, when “a square of moonlight” falls through Star’s cabin-window, glowing radiantly against the “intensely dark” stage, she breaks the silence with a soft, “teasing purr” and exits into the night with Birmingham Red (53). Here the moonlit window invites the audience to share Star’s point of view.

In a way consistent with the cinematic aspect of Williams’s technique, Rudolph Arnheim contextualizes the iconographic effect of framing and its motifs as they are associated with various characters and their points of view: “the artist forces the spectator to take a keener interest which goes beyond mere noticing or acceptance” (44). Williams, however, can only suggest the camera’s function, sharpening the audience’s visual perceptions both through his use of cinematic techniques and his highly visual approach to staging. In honing his “plastic” approach to theater, Williams’s emergent

“psychosocial ‘Plastic Theater’ exhibits many Brechtian techniques” (Molzahn 20). For example, in *Candles*, *Fugitive*, and *Nightingales*, he further adapts a blend of Brechtian, cinematic, and antimimetic distancing devices.

By associating characters with motifs and iconographic objects, Williams further reinforces an “eyeline-match” (Bordwell and Thompson 228) or point-of-view technique, which is central to the play’s cinematic effect. Because we associate ourselves subjectively with the character, we tend to adopt the character’s perspective. Williams applies this technique to almost every major character. For example, we immediately identify with the perspective of Hester, the first character to appear on the stage. She watches as Bram stumbles into the room, and it is through her eyes that we first see him, for she “stares at Bram with a critical frown as he approaches the lamplight,” thus encouraging us to observe him critically as well: “[l]ook at yer Bram. Yer pants ain’t buttoned. When was the last time you had a good shave? Yer a holy sight. It’s a good thing you don’t work out where folks kin see yuh” (*Candles* 3). In fact, we are further discouraged from identifying with Bram’s perspective since we learn that he is “blind as a bat” (5); Williams soon reveals Bram’s moral blindness as well. This example, in which an “optical point of view” (Bordwell and Thompson 312) is provided, directly communicates Hester’s experience to us. Williams’s often restricts his use of the point-of-view technique not only to what Hester can see, but also to what she knows. For example, the scene in which Miss Wallace reads a letter from Hester’s daughter-in-law, Fern—of whom neither Bram nor Hester have heard before, since the Pilchers are illiterate—remains confined wholly to Hester’s possible range of knowledge. Miss Wallace, having read the letter, finally reveals that Hester’s son John has married but that

he is now dead. This revelation startles us all the more when Miss Wallace opens the door of the cabin to leave, and discovers that Hester's daughter-in-law, Fern, has already arrived with her son Luke (Hester and Bram's grandson).

Williams's cinematic technique of shifting between different points of view allows him to highlight the effects of company exploitation upon the mining community. Through this technique, the audience circumvents any sense of the miners' "otherness" found in the works of writers other than Williams writing within the same protest genre (Duke 83). In the calculated restrictions that Williams places on a character's range of knowledge and awareness, he further reveals his facility in using the cinematic techniques that he has adapted to the stage. Sometimes the effect of surprise arises from such restrictions, providing us with information that the character does not yet possess. For example, when the whistles from the mine indicate trouble, the audience learns even before Fern does that it is not her son Luke who has died but, instead, Hester's son Joel. Fern, beside herself with anguish upon hearing the alarm, convinces herself that it is once again her husband, John, who has been killed. Here, the device of restricting the range of a character's knowledge—or, in some cases, what a character is willing to accept—places the audience "a notch higher [in this case, higher than Fern] in the hierarchy of knowledge" (Bordwell and Thompson 312).

Mainly through the female protagonists, Williams leads his audience to identify with an "orienting point of view" (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 3), a technique that Williams uses both at the beginning and at the end of *Candles*; Hester, after all, first "orients" the spectators, while the character of Fern offers a final interpretation. Unable to adequately reproduce the effect of the "camera-as-character" (Bordwell and Thompson 203),

Williams nevertheless “envisions a cinematic solution to a theatrical problem” (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 3) by substituting for the camera a character that then “frames” (Bordwell and Thompson 167) or “organizes and orchestrates” what occurs onstage (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 3). As a matter of fact, at significant intervals throughout the script, the action in all ten scenes is interpreted and “framed” by—or “sutured” to (Graham 93)—the three main female protagonists.

By subsuming all other points of view to the single gaze of each woman as she appears alone onstage, Williams “approximates the camera’s singular and authoritative point of view” (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 4), especially through exploiting “classic cinematic organization,” which “depends upon the subject’s willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to ‘stand in’ for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees” (Silverman, *Subject of Semiotics* 205). Silverman also observes that classic Hollywood cinema makes overwhelming use of “the gaze” and, in particular, of “shot formations in which men look at women” (225). However, although Williams uses the point-of-view technique, he stops short of organizing *Candles* entirely “around a demonstration of the female’s castrated condition” (223), a condition which, to Crandell, means “that the female protagonist is often employed as a signifier of castration or of lack—most importantly, their lack of a husband” (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 7). This is the case with Star, as Williams makes clear. While on display, she faces ridicule for her lack (*Candles* 45) although Williams also takes pains to show that Star’s castrated condition is noted by both women and by men. Indeed, women themselves initiate the male-identified gaze when a “small crowd of townspeople appear at the rear of the stage, observing Star at her window”:

WOMAN: Look at 'er.

ANOTHER WOMAN: Brave as brass, ain't she?

A THIRD WOMAN: Ought to be ashamed to show her face!

MAN: Hi, there, Star. Better come down to the dance.

ANOTHER MAN: Yeah, come along Star. You ain't gonna be a widow
all yer life.

STAR: I ain't a widow.

MAN: Yer a common-law widder, ain'tcha? [Loud guffaws]

WOMAN: Didja ever see the likes of that? Come on, Sarah! YOU Sam!
What're you lookin' in that window for?

ANOTHER WOMAN: Fixin' to catch herself a new man already! (45–6)

Star maintains that she makes a clear-cut choice in “flaunting herself to the public view” (36), and exists not merely as the passive, objectified signifier associated with classic gender assignments. While she clearly puts herself on display, one also wonders whether it is the public that views Star, or Star that views the public.

Whatever the case, this study owes a debt to Crandell's insightful study of “the woman's role as recipient of the male gaze” (*Cinematic Eye* 7) and its relevance to *Candles*, in which Star offers surprisingly different responses to being the object of the male gaze, responses that conflict with the conventional view of “passive” women submitting to the gaze of “active” men (Berger 52). Intriguingly, Crandell provides the following pertinent quotation: “voyeurism is the active or ‘masculine’ form of the scopophilic drive, while exhibitionism is the passive or ‘feminine’ form of the same drive” (Mulvey 222–23).

Be that as it may, Star appears to exhibit both drives for, at her window, she longs both to see others and to exhibit herself. As the spectators conclude from her exchange with the crowd that gathers outside her cabin window, Star actively protests not only “the role that society prescribes for women” (Crandell, *Cinematic Eye* 9), but also the admonishment of the local women who demand that she conform to it, as illustrated by the remarks of the three nameless female onlookers (*Candles* 45–6). More importantly, from the outset, Bram’s near-blindness reverses the roles of the observer and the observed, thereby establishing, for the female characters, the model of objective observer, a radical reversal that Williams maintains throughout the play.

These techniques, which Williams appropriates from the cinema—i.e., assigning points of view (Bordwell and Thompson 66) and establishing the roles of the observer/object—not only influence the audience’s perceptions of the characters but, ultimately, how spectators interpret the events onstage.

If, as Crandell suggests in *Cinematic Eye*, the structure of *Candles* mirrors an organizational pattern typical of the “classic cinema,” it also reflects the kinds of perceptions characteristic of a patriarchal system in which roles are assigned according to an “active/passive heterosexual division of labor” (Mulvey 12). However, Williams portrays a more complex division of labor than used in many other protest plays of the period: the women of the camp claim for themselves more of a measure of autonomy than the men do. Star states explicitly that she can “take care of [her]self” (*Candles* 44), while Bram depends completely upon Hester, who makes all of the important household decisions (for example, that Fern and her young son will live with the Pilchers). Through Fern’s earnings as a result of her longstanding work doing the camp’s laundry, she has

single-handedly “won the fight” (90) with the mine’s management, according to Birmingham Red. Furthermore, over the course of a decade, Fern has managed to save more money than all of the miners combined. Even Mrs. Abbey, the aforementioned wife of the “mine superintendent,” obviously has the final say about the character of the storeowner, Tim Adams, will hire or fire (31). Through these strategies, Williams subverts traditional Hollywood narratives in which “the man’s [characterization is] the active one of forwarding the story [or] making things happen” (Mulvey 12).

Critics agree about the formative influence of the cinema upon Williams’s artistic process. George Brandt writes that Williams, “of all American playwrights . . . has most effectively learnt the lessons in freedom that the cinema has to teach” (165). Allean Hale maintains that Williams acquired his knowledge of film during the formative years of his adolescence and in a place that afforded him ample opportunity to do so: “St. Louis . . . had more motion picture theaters per capita than New York City [and] he spent twenty years at the movies [learning] cinematic techniques” before becoming a professional playwright (*TW’s St. Louis Blues* 610). Williams was undoubtedly influenced by the political or “social protest” (Cook 307) Hollywood films of the period, given that during the 1930s, Warner Brothers Studios specialized in movies about the violence and poverty of slum life, an existence from which the embattled hoodlum-type protagonists yearn to escape. Warner’s willingness to address such gritty subject matter resulted in a number of important, socially-conscious productions, most notably, William Wellman’s *Wild Boys of The Road* (1933), Mervyn LeRoy’s *They Won’t Forget* (1937), and Michael Curtiz’s *Black Fury* (1935). Thus did Warner Brothers earn their well-warranted reputation for being a studio with a marked social conscience. As David A.

Cook remarks, in the “cultural hierarchy of American studios in the 1930s,” Warner Brothers was “the studio of the working class, specializing in low-life melodramas and musicals with a Depression setting throughout the decade” (307).

Interestingly, just as Williams’s practical philosophy of “plastic theater” dictates his plays’ techniques of lighting, music, and other staging devices, so did Warner’s practical production philosophy, as “conditioned by its origins as a minor studio,” which thereby exerted a stylistic influence upon its social protest films (Cook 307). For example, “Warner’s cinematographers . . . were required to adopt a style of flat, low-key lighting in order to obscure the sparseness of the studios’ economical sets” (Cook 307). Williams’s stage directions likewise call for the relatively sparse arrangement of the miners’ cabins, and his direct use of filmic technique and point of view in *Candles* show how he could turn the necessities of plot construction to his own dramatic advantage.

As we shall see, in *Fugitive Kind*, Williams explores three particular topics within the context of the protest play: the plight of the ethnic other within American society, the abuse of patriarchal power, and the engendering of a matriarchal community. Certainly, Fern’s sacrifice in *Candles* can also be seen as a matriarchal step toward overthrowing individualistic patriarchal values. Hester’s decision to “throw the dirt” back in the faces of those forcing the Pilchers to “eat dirt” also represents a step in that direction (*Candles* 31). Thus, while it may only be a candle held to the blinding light of the sun, the spirit of resilience, and especially that of the resistance displayed by the women characters, along with the intransigent stance of characters such as Birmingham Red, ensure that this flame is not about to go out.

CHAPTER III
FUGITIVE KIND

As noted in the preceding chapters, the five full-length apprentice plays that Williams wrote between 1935 and 1939 selectively combine aspects common to two distinct genres in ways that provide alternatives to then-dominant conventions and formal features of mainstream theater. In examining three of these plays in this section—*Candles to the Sun*, *Fugitive Kind*, and *Not About Nightingales*—we see that Williams becomes increasingly engaged in addressing the social issues of his time. In *Fugitive Kind*, Williams blends aspects of the gangster narrative—alternately known as the thriller subgenre (Harper 1)—with the protest genre, integrating such features as topics and iconography. Atypically, however, he locates the antisocial characters common to both of these within a locus of communal deprivation and abandonment; namely, “the lobby of a flophouse in a large Middle Western city” (*Fugitive* 3). With respect to its gangster or thriller antecedents, *Fugitive* bears a strong kinship to then-popular American gangster films such as *Little Caesar* (1930) and *G-Men* (1935).

Frye cautions us that genre should always “be examined in terms of the conventions [the author] chose” (*Anatomy* 305). Jack Shadoian classifies genre in a way that corresponds closely to Chandler’s properties (Shadoian x). For example, in an effort to classify the gangster narrative as a distinctive subtype of the protest genre, among other taxonomies, Shadoian identifies the following criteria: (a) the predominantly tragic aspect of the subgenre and the effect of that on the narrative; (b) the pattern of domination and submission as it pertains to characterization; (c) the archetypal transformations, characteristic of exile; (d) the chosen topic—chaos—and its relation to

the play's setting and iconography; and (e) the use of Expressionistic effects and techniques (x). All are borne out in both the cinematic form and the underworld content of *Fugitive*.

The Gangster Narrative

By the late 1930s, aside from writing full-length plays—including *Spring Storm* and *Nightingales*—for his theater workshop at the University of Iowa, Williams was also involved in a number of other initiatives, such as working with the Mummers, acting in the University of Iowa's theater workshop, and participating in the Living Newspaper program. Williams's collection of five full-length apprentice plays thus reflects a developmental period of composition, a period that extends into the early 1940s and culminates in *Stairs to the Roof*, in which he develops an increasingly avant-garde approach both to stagecraft and to content. Since some incarnations of the gangster narrative in the late 1930s embraced the politics of both the left and the right, certain topics of privation, poverty, and criminality corresponded strongly with the generic markers of the protest genre, a genre that Williams makes use of in his first three full-length plays. Sensationally, in some of the earlier, more mercenary cinematic forays into the gangster mode, protagonists such as those in *Little Caesar* (1930) typically appear merciless and apolitical. However, this was not the case in Williams's plays.

Some critics claim that the gangster narrative tends to “suppress political dimensions,” even though “America's political, social, and economic flaws are not hidden” (Shadoian 10) a principle which, according to Shadoian, has “not been fully critiqued” (10). Williams, however, in making use of the gangster narrative in conjunction with the protest genre, offers a critique of society at multiple levels: a

critique of the transients who steal from each other, the police who countenance nepotism, the ultimately ineffectual bourgeois students, and the high “society” elite (*Fugitive* 25), whose self-serving, ostensibly philanthropic hypocrisy knows no bathetic bounds.

In many examples of full-length protest plays from the late 1930s, playwrights expanded their range of possible generic criteria and, notably, began to borrow characterization and settings from other genres. Such leftist playwrights “used drama to present their different political perspectives, as a result of which there were plays written from various political angles” (Mishra 1). S. N. Behrman (1893–1973), George Kaufman (1889–1961), John Howard Lawson (1895–1977), and Robert Sherwood (1896–1955) experimented with non-traditional protest plots, characters, and topics. For example, Behrman’s *No Time For Comedy* (1939) examines the experiences of a playwright tempted to abandon protest writing altogether in order to continue, instead, with remunerative comedies. Kaufman’s *Let ’Em Eat Cake* (1933) invokes pure satire, as its title indicates. Lawson’s *Gentlewoman* (1934) focuses on the rich, whose love of wealth conflicts with their professed sympathy for the poor. Sherwood’s *Waterloo Bridge* (1930), set in London during World War I, concerns the chastity of a prostitute who, in order to preserve a doughboy’s chivalric ideals, refuses to give herself to him. Williams’s own impressive capacity for generic experimentation may be seen in later variants of his full-length apprentice plays, such as the fantasy aspects associated with the modern Southern Gothic (*Introduction, Candles* xiv) and the science fiction narratives, exemplified respectively by *Spring Storm* (1938) and *Stairs to the Roof* (1939).

In terms of narrative, the classic gangster plot traces an easily readable arc, in which “[t]he gangster’s life is noisy but short. . . . He gets to the top, he gets to confront an inexplicable (for him) death” (Shadoian xv). However, Williams’s more flexible approach—achieved by blending in salient aspects of the gangster subgenre—also includes the necessarily “sordid” (*Candles* 54) treatment of narrative, characterization, topics, setting, iconography, and staging techniques of the protest genre, which results in a virtual layering of protest and gangster narrative criteria in which “strange attitudes evolve and unpredictable qualities enter the mix” (Shadoian xv). The critical estimation of the protest genre was considered “downgraded” (Clurman 1), but this attitude especially prevailed in relation to the gangster narrative, which was “held in contempt intellectually” (Shadoian 3). In depicting violence, the gangster narrative goes far beyond mere protest, as it graphically portrays not merely a “socioeconomic milieu that we prefer to shut our eyes to but . . . [also] a place of perpetual and violent conflict” (3).

Interestingly, in *Fugitive*, Terry, like Birmingham Red in *Candles*, dies after being shot. Birmingham Red, however, does not consistently appear to “confront” an inevitable death (*Fugitive* xv), as does Terry, since “every instance” of the gangster subgenre “poses an opposition, the conflict it gives rise to, and, by extension, the likelihood of violence” (4). In this respect, Williams establishes Terry’s tragic destiny from the beginning, not least through Glory Gwendlebaum’s likewise troubled sense of her lover’s sinister fate.

The episodic structure of *Fugitive* serves both to “overemphasize” (*Fugitive* 25) and to overlap certain purposefully intense moods and atmospheres that resonate eerily with “a certain amount of burlesque” (25) as scenes or “episodes” are played off against each other (Hale, *Introduction*, *Fugitive* xvii). The boisterous, “ad-libbed” donation of

Christmas “charity” (*Fugitive* 25) contrasts with the “firebug” episode (22), while Chuck’s hopeful quest to raise enough money to buy his snow shovel out of hock (111) ends with the theft and subsequent pawning of Leo’s ring, presumably to obtain money for Chuck’s cocaine (134). Finally, Terry’s death mars Leo’s return to his family. In *Fugitive*, the cumulative details from each scenic episode culminate in a representative “slice-of-life” (Hale, *Introduction*, *Fugitive* xiii) episode. We note the uncomfortable recollection of assorted characters: the doomed, tubercular Carl, the talented Texas, and Leo and Terry. Although “fear, mistrust, and misunderstanding of women is a staple of the gangster genre” (Mason 30), Williams adds “a certain amount of . . . humorous exaggeration” (*Fugitive* 25), as when the Junior Welfare League descends upon the flophouse in scene 1.

After expressing his passion to the “graceful and relaxed” yet “hard and shrewish” Glory (*Fugitive* 3), Terry dies in the office of the squalid flophouse. While Terry had previously enjoyed, and even flaunted, the spoils of his criminality—liquor, molls, expensive clothes, and cash—the flophouse stifles his zest for action. An untimely death prevents him from “riding straight out clean as a knife” (*Fugitive* 139). Temporarily stripped of the vanity associated with the gangster figure, Terry becomes instead a self-effacing fugitive and, as a fugitive, his character arc fails to ascend (Shadoian xv). Yet Terry remains capable of supreme gestures of contempt, as when he jokes with his G-man pursuer, O’Connor, as his life ebbs from his mortal wounds: “[i]f you coppers wanted to keep me locked up somewhere you shouldn’t have shot so goddamn many holes in my carcass for me to be running out through! [He laughs.]” (*Fugitive* 146). In

this respect, as Shadoian observes, the gangster subgenre may be said to encompass sardonic humor, an “amorally exuberant” narrative, and even parody (Shadoian 24).

Transients, Petty Criminals, and Other Deviants

In Williams’s protest vision, social chaos dominates both the criminals and the transients uprooted from their homes across America, whose fates have thrown them, along with the Gwendlebaums, together into the same “Hell.” In keeping with the perceived link between mental irregularity and criminality characteristic of the gangster narrative, Williams’s deranged characters in *Fugitive* figure as stock types. He experiments with the “idea of criminality as a form of madness” (Shadoian 15). Significantly, mental deviance also figures in the protest genre, in which the intense pressures of grinding poverty cause certain characters to exhibit “neurotic symptoms” such as “obsessive compulsions” and “fixations” (Mishra 15). As Shadoian points out, society definitely “seems like a large psycho ward” (15). Although “schizophrenic” (*Fugitive* 18) characters often conform to fixed modes of expression, they nonetheless make a decisive contribution to the action. However, the narrative arc of the neurotic character, in general, differs from that of the gangster, in that the neurotic does not exhibit any measurable advance or rise in the unfolding action (examples being Jabe, Rocky, Pete, and Leo). Such characters exist as the embodiment of antipathy or ambivalence “in the face of meaningless misery” (Mishra 15). In fact, Leo’s final speeches in scenes 7 and 8 question a divinely ordained “masquerade” (*Fugitive* 147) and recall his abortive suicide attempt, in which he prays to “God” and imagines that he hears Glory’s voice calling to him (*Fugitive* 126).

As the flophouse transients accost one another and communication breaks down, the pyromaniac, Abel White, “anxiously fingers his face as though suspecting some visible deformity” (20) while a drunken Chuck finally “pulls off Leo’s ring” (*Fugitive* 134). More significantly, the criminally insane Abel and the furtive Chuck characterize their “experience of the self as empty . . . rudderless” (Harper 129), and effectively deploy the play’s distancing techniques. In attempting to escape a federal agent, Terry raises the epic, Brechtian question of whether criminality—in this case clearly depicted as the “the bitter blossom of poverty” (Ottley and Weatherby 2)—constitutes a “legitimate” form of protest against the moral ambiguities, injustices, and tensions that proliferate in settings of deprivation and criminality. Specifically, Leo, by his own admission, a weak, “licked” (*Fugitive* 127) male, finally returns to his family’s flophouse, where the police interrupt Terry’s flight upon discovering him. Leo finally has a moment in which he meditates on the play’s concern with madness as emblematic of the human enigma.

Williams’s original script calls for a cast of over thirty transients (none of whom, however, appear as desperate as Terry Meighan). Williams draws on, and even combines, various aspects of specific characters within a generic subtype by pioneering a classically cinematic approach to characterization in this social gangster play. *Fugitive*, however, boasts multiple examples of each type. Shadoian identifies several character types specific to the gangster subgenre (to which this analysis assigns examples): the quiet sufferer (Glory), the “rat” (Jabe; *Fugitive* 56), the neurotic (Abel or Carl), the daydreamer (Leo), and the detective (O’Connor; viii). Not surprisingly, the charismatic Terry wins the support of the underclass to which he returns. In this respect, the play focuses less on

the gangster's lack of place in society and more upon his wished-for reintegration into an alternative world (Mexico); an escape, however, that O'Connor will not tolerate. Since the play's iconography of deprivation dominates the underclass, even Terry's grisly fate contributes to Williams's Depression portrait of "downtown . . . as a place that bred crime" (Zinn 395). The play's tragic aspects do not derive solely from Terry's crowning self-sacrifice, although he dies to protect Glory.

Tragically, Glory insists on returning to leave a note for her father but lingers too long in helping the drunken, disoriented Leo to bed, which attracts O'Connor's attention. Williams implies that if a character as ingenious as Terry faces destruction, then the underclass, such as the tubercular Carl, stand little chance of survival. Indeed, Leo expresses such ambivalent sentiments after Terry's shooting: "I guess that God's asleep . . . tonight there's nothing left to be done but sleep for a time and forget, while the snow keeps on falling" (*Fugitive* 147). In light of the characters' redemptive longings, so typically of Williams, Kimball King suggests that Williams "conceived of his mission as an artist" as a "doctrine of love . . . to extend a hand to society's outcasts" (641). Leo likewise articulates his difficulties in adhering to established social codes—"business! That's the whole thing to them and to me it's nothing at all" (*Fugitive* 132)—and focuses instead on the relentless mechanisms of social entrapment—"they're all caught in it except just a few like us you an' me, the poor bums that flop here" (133). Leo resists the ideological American Dream of opportunity, enterprise, and the "grab bag of success" (78), by conjuring up an Expressionistic nightmare of related abuses.

In *Fugitive*, Williams borrows and adapts the gangster narrative from contemporary film to meet his nascent "plastic" (*GM* 131) conception of the overarching

protest agenda. In this play the gangster embodies a seemingly more insidious form of deviance; he inhabits the shadows of America, pulling strings in the background rather than overtly challenging social constraints and expectations. For example, Terry goes into hiding, becoming part of a destitute underclass that exists as an invisible presence that cannot be named; and Chuck, the so-called family friend and loyal employee, steals from Leo.

The “gangster-as-fraud” (Mason 52) figure holds power, more than the power inherent in any large organization—even though that power can be eliminated by federal agencies. He wields a largely destructive social influence. The perception of the gangster as the subject of a nationwide manhunt and, at the same time, a criminal in hiding desperate enough to steal from those closest to him, undercuts the larger-than-life status often assigned to this character type. However, Williams’s protest narration of suffering, poverty, and privation emphasizes the pervasive nature of crime (and of gangsterism in particular); almost everyone, given the right set of circumstances, would qualify as an “operator” (*Fugitive* 73).

In terms of characterization, the classic gangster generally exhibits both contemptible and heroic traits. The term *gangster* implies a “big time” (*Fugitive* 36) status, given that he generally heads a league of rogues. Williams assigns other terms to miscreants of a lesser stature, such as *rat* or *skunk*, which apply to the police informant, Jabe (56, 43). Terry, however, displays the “touch of dignity” that the term *gangster* distinctly “calls for” (Shadoian 19).

Notably, it “took a combination of the sound film, Capone’s Chicago, Prohibition, and the mood of the Depression to inaugurate the 1930s phase” of this pervasive

subgenre (Shadoian 29). However, instead of a “stock” (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159) gangster, typically associated with flashy and flamboyant excess operating in a stock environment of reckless opulence, Williams creates a far more interesting and complex character by foiling many audience expectations informed by the audacious gangsters of Depression-era cinema. He plucks this criminalized character from a milieu of immoral affluence and immerses him even further in a tragically unstable, wicked, and ultimately destructive world. Mere survival entails constant vigilance, mobility and ingenuity. As a member of the “criminal class” (*Fugitive* 75) considered too “big time” for the flophouse (36), Terry finds himself trapped in the world of “stir” and “the city morgue” (24), a world inhabited largely by “poor homeless men” (25).

Throughout his life, Terry seeks a share of “power in a world of danger” (*Fugitive* 53), a goal that Williams shows is the direct result of having been the son of a tubercular prostitute. Terry’s motivation derives from the possibility of escape. He wishes to “[n]ot be afraid anymore” (138) and, possibly, to go “straight”: “I wanta get out of this game . . . [f]rom now on I wanta live like a regular gent” (100). Williams implies that Terry might well be able to reclaim his integrity by escaping with Glory, although when Terry demands that Glory steal from her father, we come to recognize a certain Jekyll and Hyde (Mason 53) duality common to the classic gangster character in cinematic representations as well. Williams’s lampooning initially targets the upper echelon of an unstable social hierarchy, a rarefied level occupied by a self-absorbed “sassociety” (*Fugitive* 25) elite that exerts bureaucratic control over the officials below, including the police, the media, and the government. As well, they exercise control over the working class—i.e., the Gwendlebaums—and the underclass, comprising the proletariat and petty

criminals. This class structure informs Williams's questioning of "the inequities and injustices of contemporary society" (Worthen 1486). The parodic, "screwball" (*Fugitive* 19) aspect of Williams's treatment of characters in *Fugitive* will be discussed further below, in terms of visual exaggeration and burlesque, and in relation to the topic of madness and "schizophrenic" behavior (18).

Terry represents a new kind of gangster figure: he can still display his feelings, despite living in a world known to be petty and "humanly defective" (Shadoian 79). He is an ennobled and yet alienated gangster, both antisocial and, paradoxically, responsible. In Williams's dismal urban landscape, Terry's "fantasy of alienation validates the individual at the expense of society" (Clarens 169). Williams, resisting any attempt to depict the classic gangster's outwardly directed masculine drive, portrays Terry as a narcissistic, defensive "ego in retreat" (Clarens 199), in his fondness for fine clothing and his disappointment at being unable to "hock" (*Fugitive* 41) his fashionable belongings for even a portion of their true value. He finally gives in to the temptation to cash in his marked "centuries" (hundred-dollar bills; *Fugitive* 31) from the heist, so that he can outfit himself with a "smart new overcoat, hat, gloves," and "glittering" shoes (*Fugitive* 115). This act of sartorial egotism ultimately attracts the unwanted attention that brings federal agent O'Connor to the café across from the flophouse on that fateful New Year's Eve.

Williams's use of a compressed narrative in *Fugitive* constitutes a structural pattern also common to other full-length plays of his apprentice period. In the majority of these plays, the action takes place over a short period of time; the protagonist's life unfolds over a period of days rather than spanning a number of weeks, months, or years. In leading us through the final days of a formerly successful "big shot" (Mason 55),

Williams prefigures Terry's doom as early as in the opening scene, for the intense red light above the doorway to the flophouse "illuminates this little Hell" (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xvii) and, hellishly, confirms the inevitability of Terry's death at the end of the play.

In trying to remain a step ahead of the law, Terry develops a preoccupation with the passage of time. His successes and failures depend on timing; Williams emphasizes this point through the ever-present calendar from which Glory tears pages (*Fugitive* 71), as well as through the cathedral bells that mark the passage of time and dominate the action in the flophouse. Although Terry attempts to "fence" the stolen bank notes, his efforts are unsuccessful because he is still "too hot" (75). He times his escape for midnight on New Year's Eve, when the majority of the city's inhabitants—the police in particular—will be distracted (122). However, time, which once seemed to be Terry's ally, ultimately fails him. While he may have made the right connections to procure his "new outfit even to the gloves" (117), he fails to realize that he has merely dressed for his own execution. By contrast, time appears to be on the "right" side of the law; notably, on the side of Federal Agent O'Connor. O'Connor stalks Terry, appearing with eerie precision when Terry flashes his gun and a bum "skunks" (43)—informs—on him and also, when Glory draws attention to their incongruous presence in the flophouse on New Year's Eve. O'Connor waits patiently at the Brite Spot café for Terry to come out of the shadows and is duly rewarded. Try as he might, Terry cannot escape. O'Connor returns, like a "watchful" (141) Faustian devil, for his due.

Williams also explores the ambiguity inherent in Terry's motivation to re-enter the "criminal class" (*Fugitive* 75). Terry basically portrays himself in a positive context,

as a disenfranchised youth who “lammed out” (101) in order to survive. Initially, he appears powerful and his self-reliant individuality seems to assure his freedom. He finds, among a handful of transients, a sort of surrogate gang. There, he also finds Glory, who agrees to hide his gun. However, as a lone gangster in a milieu of poverty and despair, Terry asserts his solo status, as one not in need of a gang to bolster power and status. He outwits the Syndicate that refuses to help him launder the stolen “bank notes and bonds” in his possession from a recent “heist” in Detroit (73). Williams also implies that the Syndicate seeks to betray Terry in order to profit from his notoriety through the character of Drake, who attempts to extract a profiteering share of Terry’s stolen money by “fencing” it: “I guess the Syndicate turned you down cold this time” (73). Terry’s independent criminality makes him more radical, ideologically, than federal agent O’Connor. Williams clearly posits Terry’s energy and vitality as positive. He is, after all, a “social gangster,” forced into crime by accident and necessity in accordance with the norms of the protest genre. As Hale suggests, Terry’s speech in scene 5 (“Me, Terry Meighan, M.D.!”) provides us with the rationale underlying his rebelliousness, revealing how Terry’s father was “killed in an accident when Terry was a baby, his tubercular mother forced into prostitution to keep them fed, [details of] dead-end job in a slaughterhouse [and] finally his rebellion at never getting ahead” (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xv). Williams not only accounts for Terry’s privation, evoking our sympathy, but also reveals Terry’s recollections as interspersed with violent images which hint at his exploitation and, ultimately, his death.

In a verbal “montage” sequence, a loquacious Terry first stages for Glory their fugitive “flight” to Acapulco (*Fugitive* 118), then the revolutionary fall of “big

corporations” (121) and, finally, the pair’s escape through “the first clean patch of sky with a sprinkle of stars like cold water dashed in your face when you’re half-dead of thirst” (138). Unfortunately, Terry seemingly has no control over his descent into the underworld and his inevitable end. Williams highlights how Terry conjures up the thrilling and extravagant lifestyle of the gangster, creating an image of the gangster as an economic success story worthy of emulation (but also, sadly, as a pathetic social pariah). However, the high risks associated with criminality ultimately catch up with Terry, whose betrayal by the informant, Jabe, stems from Jabe’s financially motivated self-interest. Jabe contrives to deliver Terry to the authorities, thereby facilitating Terry’s gangland-style execution by the G-man, O’Connor.

In his opposition to Jabe, the rat, we find Terry’s street code far more appealing, as played out in the final action scene of the play in which Terry displays his heroic defiance, even unto death. Williams endows Terry not only with vitality but with a hopefulness and frankness in the face of persecution, thereby heightening Terry’s appeal. Unlike O’Connor who, with cold demeanor, is shunned by all but Jabe, Williams does not portray Terry as an alienated gangster, for he strikes up not only friendships but also a romantic relationship, all within the confines of the Gwendlebaum flophouse. His unflinching opposition to the official social ideology, as professed to Glory in the “Me, Terry Meighan, M.D.!” episode, stands out among this cast of bitter outsiders. Williams shows us that Leo ultimately fails as well, especially in his mission to learn the way of the world “out there” (*Fugitive* 132) (although his failure is due largely to the widespread economic Depression). Like Leo, Terry displays the antisocial qualities of the disenfranchised. However, with his sharp decisiveness, he outsmarts his adversaries; that

is, until he falls in love with Glory, who inadvertently betrays him by disregarding his repeated warnings not to turn on the flophouse's office light, thereby drawing attention to their presence.

Nonetheless, Terry recklessly demonstrates the kind of control over the streets befitting a "big time crook" (*Fugitive* 36) by flashing his pistol to recover for Glory the contents stolen from the till. He once again risks discovery by expelling the disturbed, "schizophrenic" (18) arsonist—the "firebug" Abel (22)—from the flophouse, much to the transients' collective relief. Terry's ability to rely upon his wits alone allows him to maintain his unaffiliated status which, in turn, enables him to track down Drake—a de facto representative of Terry's former employer in Detroit—owing to Terry's familiarity with gangland territory. As a "lone" gangster, his patent loss of control over gangland turf assigns him an idiosyncratic outsider's status, just as his fugitive status contributes to his perpetual endangerment.

Social Disorder and Its Discontents

Williams makes the topical "formula" (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159) of protest's "social anarchy and fragmentation" (Mason 6) apparent in the arrival of the ladies of the Junior Welfare League who, with great determination, descend—and condescend—upon the flophouse to distribute "gifts" (*Fugitive* 26). This, however, results in violent "pandemonium" (*Fugitive* 27), which triggers a riot of police-induced "paranoia" (Mason 6). Terry, for example, shoves a socialite and, in the ensuing "satirical" confusion, flees the reporters (*Fugitive* 25) and photographers (*Fugitive* 26) sent to cover the "event." Williams later uses experimental lighting and shadow to intensify the poetic, tour de force quality of Terry's violent death.

Fugitive draws attention to official corruption, through Leo's "radical" activism on campus (84), but Williams goes further. During the scene in which Glory tries to persuade Leo to give up his "conscientious objecting" (83), she comments on the distinction between the respectable and the apparently "safe" (121) ways of making an honest living, such as the family business her father has established, and (on a much lower rung of the social ladder), the transients' hand-to-mouth existence which, truth be told, provides the income on which the Gwendlebaum family depends. The symbiotic relationship between the family and their "distinguished patrons" (114) affects the siblings in different ways, "hardening" (3) Glory even as it weakens Leo.

In demonstrating the failure of both national and local institutions and organizations, both official and criminally conspiratorial, Terry's fate also emphasizes the extent of the Depression's debilitating effects. Ironically, concerning the "distribution" (26) offer from the "Syndicate" (73) to Terry when he attempts to "fence" (74) the stolen cash, the Syndicate ultimately offers help as self-serving as that of the Junior Welfare League's offer to the transients in the "plain old slum" (23). Nonetheless, the Syndicate's notorious association with gambling, prostitution, narcotics—not to mention labor disruptions and racketeering (Zinn 239)—remains pertinent to the play's iconography of protest.

Despite his many disappointments in life, the resilient elder Gwendlebaum stands out as the isolated paternal figure. Williams also employs this character to highlight the demise of the American Dream embraced by many immigrants. The failure and subsequent estrangement of his son, Leo, embodies Gwendlebaum's lost dreams. When the transients point out that the accommodations at the "Sally" (Salvation Army) present

too much of a danger for “young . . . punks” since it is full of “sleepwalkers” (*Fugitive* 13), we can only conclude that organized crime, by comparison, seemingly offers an alternative to any beleaguered “social safety net” (Waiser 25). This alternative is evident in the Syndicate’s (*Fugitive* 73) national organization—however loosely formed and, by turns, both repellent and enticing—as when Drake negotiates with Terry about the prospect of taking over from Terry’s former “fence” back in Detroit, Joe Spitalni (*Fugitive* 74). However, as an independent entity with a hierarchical structure that Williams depicts as arbitrary, the Syndicate ultimately rewards those gangsters that make local connections, rather than displaced, individual members. With no reigning gang boss or patriarch in Williams’s fluid world of protest, the potential for internal disruption within the organization finally sees loyalty supplanted by unchecked greed (as when Terry clashes with Drake).

Such instability echoes the nomadic existence of many of the characters that people the protest genre, for transients and other homeless “vagrants” of the period roamed the country, moving from one shanty town to another. Although Terry’s situation differs from that of the other flophouse dwellers, Terry also falls prey to the country’s economic upheaval. Even the gang, a social structure typical of an unstable society or a culture of transience, reflects the forces of economic instability of the 1930s. Whether exemplified by the character, Texas, migrating from the South, or through references to rail-riding (7), chain gangs (9), and cocaine parties (51), Williams transmits through his characters the anxiety that accompanies such periods of socioeconomic dysfunction, an anxiety further exemplified in the tense dialogue and Expressionistic stage techniques, and physically embodied by Abel. Consequently, Abel’s “schizophrenic” movements

initially appear “slow and vague” (18), but Williams ultimately assigns them a more sinister, “stealthy” purpose (93). Loyalty becomes a casualty in this criminal culture, as when Jabe “rats” (56) Terry out, and as when Terry robs Gwendlebaum, Chuck steals from Leo, and Drake attempts to profiteer a share of Terry’s stolen money.

Despite the tragic protest setting, in which the concept of justice has been all but abandoned, the “gangster” narrative nonetheless calls for poetic justice as its main outcome, which Williams dramatically foreshadows through the use of imagery in Terry’s political exchanges with Glory on the topic of his past privations and of his future dreams. Here, lost opportunity and resentment fuel rebellion:

I’m a sort of one man revolution. I haven’t got any flag or ideals or stuff like that to fight for. All I’ve got is myself an’ what I need an’ what I want. I guess that sounds like a poor excuse for a guy like me to make for himself. But you can believe it or not—I only took this way cause I couldn’t take any other (98) . . . You see, I never had a chance to learn much. Barely able to read and write. I had to make money somehow. God, but it made me sick to see mother go into the back room at night with men she’d picked up on the street! Hear them laughing in there! And what the kids told me they did! And then the next morning that sick grey look on her face—and her spitting up blood!—I stood as much as I could of that sort of thing and then I quit school and lammed out. I tried to go straight at first. I got me a job in a packin’ house in Chicago. Bashin’ hogs over the head with a club—standin’ ankle deep in the muck! (101) . . . And so I

started my own little private revolution. It's been going on ever since.

You've seen it in all the papers. (102)

Terry's romantic plans to flee with Glory in true "fugitive" fashion notwithstanding, the criminal must always prepare for tragedy, for even if he "does not realize the instability of [the] role, the spectator in the theater [is] far more . . . aware of the risks" (Harper 123). Neither must it "be held that good always triumphs over evil" (91), although here Terry attempts to put a positive spin on his tragic end (Harper 91) by announcing that Glory will be "better off" without him (*Fugitive* 145) (this despite her blighted opportunities at the flophouse and uninspiring ex-fiancé). Leo also assures us of Terry's freedom in death: "[t]hey never *caught* him . . . never catch his kind until they learn that justice doesn't come out of gun barrels" (*Fugitive* 147). However, if death is the price one must pay, then the price of justice is clearly too high.

Another marker of the gangster narrative appears in the form of *Fugitive's* exploration of the concept of poetic justice. However, in Williams's "adaptation," (Hale, *Fugitive Kind* 70), the extreme type of characterization dictates a more tragic outcome than that portrayed in the film that inspired it.¹² According to Williams's stage directions, the threat of impending disaster ultimately transfixes or "hypnotizes" (*Fugitive* 142) Glory. Her initial "terror" (*Fugitive* 139) gives way to what she most dreads throughout the play, for as her love for Terry increases, so does her sense that she will ultimately witness his violent death. That tragic event indeed occurs at the moment that he valiantly protects her, after the police use her as bait in order to lure him from hiding. They subsequently force her to serve as a human shield during the final firefight

¹² In *Winterset*, the poet-gangster Garth Esdras has already reformed.

In *Fugitive*, Williams often replicates and reinforces key elements of humor or parody (Harper 12)—although also such comic relief often figures prominently in the gangster narrative—through the topical protest conventions that Williams makes use of. The elements of “burlesque” (*Fugitive* 25) that he calls for in the stage directions in relation to a “charitable visit” to a local flophouse on the part of St. Louis “socialites” (25) humorously captures how quickly the ladies’ exceedingly opportunistic photo-op degenerates into a brawl. Indeed, Williams aims to provide “a satirical, impressionistic interpretation rather than one of exact realism” (25). The playwright cautions, however, that his suggestion of “humorous exaggeration” (25) and experimentation with different moods “should not be carried too far” (25). This pattern of opposition carries over into characterization and staging techniques, especially as *Fugitive* explores both theatrical “impressionism” in the high “sassociety” burlesque scene (25) and a “lyrical,” expressionistic technique which, as posited in the stage directions, is “a progression from the realistic” (124), the latter effect being especially evident in Leo’s atmospherically poetic, and yet politically anarchic, dialogue.

Likewise, even as he plans a life with Glory, Terry cannot easily abandon his chosen path, since crime seems to offer him far more than the meagre rewards that come from an adherence to a crisis-related work ethic during the Depression. Moreover, he even convinces Glory to rob her father in order to finance their anticipated escape to Mexico. Through this device, Williams undercuts the conventional narrative arc of the gangster subgenre, in which the protagonist has already reached the peak of his criminal career. Terry’s actions are determined both by Glory’s support and by his loyalty to her; hence his willingness, after he has recklessly recovered the money stolen from the

flophouse by a transient, to risk his own safety for Glory's sake. This same flamboyant act, however, attracts O'Connor's attention when a "bum" informs him that "some young fellow flashed a gun" in the flophouse, and this disclosure ultimately seals Terry's fate (*Fugitive* 42). Yet his subsequent and legally sanctioned assassination makes the law's moral superiority somewhat ambiguous. This kind of moral ambiguity typically runs throughout Williams's later, full-length apprentice plays—including *Nightingales* and, according to Saddik (*Blueprints* 68), *Stairs to the Roof*—in which individual struggles play out against the backdrop of a corrupt system or institution.

Glory puts a fine—if ironic—point on the topic of class (*Fugitive* 75) distinctions within the transient environment, judgments which appear all the more evident as many of the characters betray those closest to them or are themselves double-crossed in some way. Thus, Jabe acts against Terry, Terry against Gwendlebaum, Glory against Herman, and Leo against the institution that provided his scholarship. Even Olsen the Swede betrays his "partner" Carl, by allowing Carl's dreaded "sawbones" to take him to the "city hospital," presumably to become "rat-food" (his worst, Orwellian fear; 43).

Williams deliberately blurs the moral distinctions between the capitalist and the "criminal class" (75) systems, with the result that Depression-era drifters on both sides of the law are made to suffer while the powerful, as ever, remain invulnerable.

Williams makes an overt, protest-style critique of capitalist society in *Fugitive*, while touching nonetheless on topics of nostalgia for the founding ideals of America, such as those of frontier exploration and of fair play, both embodied and parodied by Texas. Unlike the rest of the transients, Texas treats pyromaniac Abel with kindness; that is, until Abel betrays him and attempts to steal his sister's photo, tearing it in the process.

Texas's nostalgia for the past he once shared with his beloved sister, however, is contradictory because—although he has suffered abuse in a Southern prison—he nonetheless holds out hope for the future. Texas's poignant protest, best expressed by his song, aptly sums up the hardship of vagrancy: “Me mother is dead and in heaven/Me father is gone down below/Me sister is gone to join Mo-thurr!/And where I'll go nobody knows” (39). Williams critiques Depression-era society's ongoing commitment to failed “business” (132) ideals; a development decried by Leo—“That's the whole thing to them and it's nothing to me at all” (132)—a failure which, for example, compels Chuck to steal Leo's ring, and leads Terry back to a life of crime. Williams suggests the link between such ideological perversion to a failure of masculinity, as both a selfish realization of desires and a retreat from traditional masculine duties of, for example, the respective concerns of others and the “establishing . . . elements of a community based on trust and civic responsibility” (Mason 59).

The romantic attachment between Glory and Terry symbolizes the connection between the criminal underground and “official” society (*Fugitive* 62). Both *Fugitive* and *Nightingales* delimit significant protest ideals in that they deal with the oppression of a criminal underclass. However, instead of laying blame, Williams locates corruption in society as a whole, and thus traces this decay through the criminal underground and even to the social institutions charged with bringing the “guilty” to justice. Furthermore, in *Fugitive*, the social elite purport to help the underclass through charitable activities. And in Williams's next full-length protest play, *Nightingales*, a corrupt, sadistic warden claims that maintaining order “takes a firm hand” (*Nightingales* 64).

In 1937, around the time that Williams composed *Fugitive*, he also wrote an undated letter to his mother, complaining that his “latest [radio] show was cut all to pieces because . . . [y]ou aren’t even allowed to say ‘damn’” (qtd. in Leverich 252). Nonetheless, Williams used both the graphic violence and the dialect that was “characteristic” of the 1930s gangster narrative to punctuate and to “heighten the story line” (Shadoian 8). Notwithstanding the relative conservatism of his time, Williams investigates topics germane to the gangster narrative such as “articulations of masculinity and their perversion” (Mason xvii), as well as oblique critiques of capitalism in its various corporate manifestations—for example, as decried by Terry, Texas, and Leo (*Fugitive* 121).

Iconography of the Underworld

Compared to his earlier work, including *Candles*, Williams plainly implements a more mature, more flexible, and less rigid construction in *Fugitive*, owing in part to his inclusion of an extensive cast of characters. Nonetheless, the voyeuristic aspects of the narrative offer us the vicarious thrill—albeit a sordid and violent one—of gangster adventures and fast-paced action. The playwright presents the underworld at a distance, as a hypnotically fascinating place replete with flamboyant local color, a variety of dialects, and marginalized inhabitants; in addition, a place that offers the cruel illusion that it is possible, indeed likely, to escape from grinding poverty. However, Williams evokes the anxiety and grimness intrinsic to the milieu and characteristic of its inhabitants. As indicated earlier, as a protest play *Fugitive* borrows many of the elements of its characterization from the gangster subgenre, with its “tough-talk/tough-gesture repertoire of tough guys and flinty dames” (Shadoian 12). Yet absent from this play are

the restaurants, lavish penthouses, and speakeasy clubs normally associated with the glamorized “anything goes” exuberance of gangster criminality (24).

Forgoing such traditional settings, Williams instead provides a surrealistic urban landscape populated by a cast of trapped and frustrated men, all victims of poverty and desperation. However, as we often find in the gangster narrative, the protagonist thug possesses “dignity and only wants to be able to live a simple, decent life” (Shadoian 13). After *Fugitive*, Williams “discarded his gangster” inheritance (Hale, *Introduction*, *Fugitive* xxi), although he continued to explore the political implications of the criminal element in society. After *Nightingales*, however, Williams abandoned the protest genre altogether in favor of generic experimentation, as in *Spring Storm* and *Stairs to the Roof*.

As in the protest genre, the sweep of the urban landscape associated with the gangster narrative represents a “fog-saturated” (*Fugitive* 23) “corrupt majesty” (21) complemented by the glamorous addition of crime’s spoils. The play is set within such a landscape, albeit one lacking any “majestic” trappings of glamour: Williams describes the flophouse interior as an atmospheric void, one that reflects the mood that emanates from the oppressive “large glass window” that admits

. . . a skyline of the city whose towers are outlined at night by a faint electric glow, so that we are always conscious of the city as a great implacable force, pressing in upon the shabby room and crowding its fugitive inhabitants against their last wall. (3)

In keeping within the protest parameters that define *Fugitive*, Williams develops a politically charged version of the “death of the big shot” (Mason 55) narrative formula common to the gangster narrative. Terry proclaims proudly that his crimes have “crashed

the headlines” (*Fugitive* 102). But Leo dismisses Terry’s superficial, “fugitive” existence as a form of “running away” (147) to escape from the false society that they inhabit. However, in keeping with the protest values presented in this play, Terry does not transcend his suffering; he simply faces an end to his alienated existence. Terry’s dream of distinction—and of the luxury that accompanies it—dies in the dismal environment of a national economic crisis.

As a variation on the protest genre, which enunciates more “mutable conventions and iconographies” (Mason 39) than the gangster subtype, Williams formulated *Fugitive* so that it “allows new narrative forms and variations . . . to come into existence” as opposed to a restrictive or exclusive structure in which rigid codes prescribe the “text’s successful articulation of conventions and its subsequent entry into the generic canon” (39). In many ways, this protest-gangster generic combination marks a significant development, since Williams continues his exploration of genre in later works, such as the fantastic and surreal *Stairs* (1940) and, even later, in his first professional production in Boston, *Battle of Angels* (1941). Williams displays an uncanny ability to question society’s failure to incorporate the ethnic, urban dispossessed in its representation of the retention of power by a ruling class—embodied in scene 1 by the “society” elite (*Fugitive* 25) and the police—over the immigrant working class (in this instance, the Gwendlebaum family). Thus, Glory feuds openly with Sylvia and other members of the Junior Welfare League, whose loud disclosures of their social status herald their arrival: “lahst summer on the Riviera—the Isle de France—Bryn Mawr—Vassar—Mme. Renaud’s in Geneva—Mt. Holyoke—traveled abroad last summer in Mrs. Atcheson’s pahty—azalea Lofton de—Dorothy Stuart” (27).

A marked rejection of the most prominent father figure occurs in a number of protest plays, although this topic can only be briefly touched on. Here, the elder Gwendlebaum represents both the past, and the old world of Europe. Ironically, the next generation, represented by Gwendlebaum's son, Leo, seems to have nothing to contribute to the dynamic American city in which the family lives. His disillusioned dream, shared by many other "[y]oung writers of the 1930s" (Mishra 21), collapses when his belief in a collective ability to create "a milieu in which the spirit could flourish, unburdened by materialistic conditions" (21), the "grab bag" (*Fugitive* 78) he disdains, ends with humiliation. Like Terry, Leo embodies yet another American Dreamer who seeks to "live out a dream common to . . . [the] particular configurations and contradictions of American society, a dream in conflict with that society" (Shadoian 6). Both Leo and Terry have a dream, although Leo's is strongly linked to his "social conscience" (*Fugitive* 82). Despite his "alluring criminality," Terry's dream also reveals his "capitalist pluck" (Shadoian 18). Leo apparently changes his mind about suicide and abandons his former ideals, ultimately adopting an ambivalent attitude:

I'm licked. It was too big out there. Too many streets, too many people. I got all confused. It didn't look that way from the streetcars when I was going to school in the mornings. It looked like I belonged to it then. The people's faces looked like mine and they seemed to be doing the kind of things that I could be doing. But that was all a mistake, an optical illusion. I found that out when I tried to get out there and be like they were.—I didn't belong. (*Fugitive* 127)

Williams uses the gangster as an ironic symbol of protest values, in addressing the breakdown of America's pervasive "success" ideology (Shadoian 78). These values are also expressed through the characters of Terry, Drake, the rest of the transients, and even through the Gwendlebaum family. All are imprisoned by the social constraints of a capitalist society within a sterile, urban setting. Williams's tragic plot never resolves the inner conflict implicit in the criminal who attempts to reform. Terry, for instance, yields to temptation and returns to a life of crime out of necessity before he finally comes to realize, after a meeting with a Syndicate representative, Drake, that the criminal organization bases its associations more on betrayal than on opportunity. As in the "social gangster" subtype of Hollywood films (Cook 307), Terry's ill-omened attempt to escape to a new life with Glory ends with the death of his escapist dream.

Social justice also fails, as demonstrated by the figure of Jabe Stallcup, an informant responsible for meting out the "justice" (*Fugitive* 121) that irrevocably destroys the future planned by Terry and Glory. We see Terry dying in Glory's arms—another failed romance narrative—with a federal agent standing above. The play thus becomes less of a psychological and moral study of the criminal element—a study for which "Tom had done his research in dives among the warehouses on the St. Louis levee" (Hale, *TW's St. Louis Blues* 621)—than a study of social and historical tensions and the paradoxical successes and failures these forces provoke. Incidentally, this combination provided a markedly contrasting generic type compared with the later trend of "anticommunist" subtypes (Cook 514), such as the gangster films produced in the 1950s. Williams uses most, if not all, of the distinctive properties of the protest genre: a domestic setting, an exploration of political activism and its consequences, a study of

attitudes toward the poor, and a cast of characters that includes drug addicts and/or prostitutes (Bertha in *Fugitive*, like Star in *Candles*, is a “flinty” prostitute hailing from the South).

Ironically, when considered against the backdrop of the Depression period, the gangster figure embodies a glamorous, if sinister, dialectic, based partly on the audience’s wishes and dreams and held in check only “by a nominally Christian morality, enshrined in state ordinances and laws, which, by the late 1930s, would automatically ensure the criminal’s punishment” (Shadoian 29). Although Williams establishes an essentially static setting through the venue of the flophouse, the “atmospheric build-up in the second-half” (Williams, qtd. in Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xx) no doubt also results from his use of Expressionistic technique, through which he characterizes the city as, alternately, a prison, an asylum, and an institution from which we find no escape (except in death). As a result, both Leo, a university student expelled for activism, and Terry, a gangster wanted for a bank robbery in Detroit, flirt with death as a form of “escape” (*Fugitive* 147) from their social problems.

Society and its system of laws exists on the one hand while, on the other, so does the tragic—yet appealing—antiheroic character that breaks its laws, and that, in so doing, “activates both our need to hang onto moral and social laws and our wish to get outside them” (Shadoian 30). Rhetorical conceits such as the poetic imagery of the falling snow, and Chuck’s “hocked” shovel (*Fugitive* 16)—conspicuously absent—serve as markers that Williams incorporates into an Expressionistic, uncertain atmosphere. In one sense, the protest plays are documentary in their attention to “sordid” (*Candles* 54) detail. However, within the gangster subgenre, the spectators function as “the awed onlookers of

the atypical intensity of both the gangster's life and death" (Mason 30), an intensity which Terry embodies in terms of both gritty toughness and, finally, in stylized glamour.

Certain characters display an economy of movement that suggests "the movements of a deep sea diver" (*Fugitive* 34), and all operate together in an impressive unity of design and structure. As previously stated, a gangster trapped in a flophouse makes for a striking, if bizarre, tonal modulation, since Terry's materialistic, colorful, lifestyle contrasts sharply with the drab existence of the transients. Thus does Williams deny Terry one of the most engaging aspects of the gangster subgenre; namely, the celebration of exceptionally atypical extravagance. Incidentally, Leverich points out that Williams would soon witness "firsthand" the scenarios he had previously realized with the Mummers in *Fugitive Kind* while on a cross-country tour with musician and friend James Parrot in 1938: "9.4 million Americans were still unemployed, and what Tom was observing . . . were desperate members of the one-third of a nation who remained, in the President's words, ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished" (292):

I'm amazed by the number of destitute transients on the highways. You see them everywhere. Fine, able-bodied young men, who are unable to make a living anywhere, simply wander from place to place, begging for any kind of work . . . but a valuable experience as it gives you a very clear, unforgettable picture of the tragic dilemma in which many Americans are now finding themselves due to the economic mess we are in.

(Williams, qtd. in Leverich 292)

Fugitive's inventiveness springs from its modulation of tones, blending of the tragic and the comic, and meticulous—but nonetheless pithy—stage directions, protest-

style tonal austerity, and gestural constraints. In fact, *Fugitive* traces the experiences of the dozens of transients brought together in the oppressive, Expressionistic flophouse, a venue that Williams dutifully researched, as described in a letter written on 8 August, 1938, to his professor, E. C. Mabie, at the University of Iowa: “spending a good deal of time with a notebook on the public beaches and stopping at a cheap South-side hotel to get authentic material for my flophouse play [*Fugitive*] in case I ever get time to revise it” (Williams, qtd. in Leverich 266).

Furthermore, despite its protest status, emblemized by the static flophouse setting of *Fugitive*, the play displays a decidedly Expressionistic quality in its staging technique, which avoids representing the gangster as a flashy icon of macho alienation and unchecked materialism. Still, the play also anticipates the “coming new breed of . . . gangsters” (Mason 40), characters that were “low-key and moody loners who carried with them an aura rather than a milieu” (Clarens 145). While the members of the cast interact exclusively within the flophouse, the play’s imagery signals that they still belong to a limited but useful power-structure. O’Connor, representing the federal government, stalks the underclass until an informant, Jabe, brings him into the “inner circle” of the transients and criminals in the flophouse. O’Connor makes abundantly clear his need for Jabe to identify Terry: “[w]e haven’t got much to go on. Not even a picture. All we got’s a general description” (*Fugitive* 53). Conversely, Terry’s ease on the streets conforms to the paradigm of the gangster narrative, where control of the streets means control of the city and all of its “avenues of escape” (Mason 46). Terry’s downfall occurs when he moves off the streets and into the interior space of the flophouse. Williams

initially portrays the flophouse as a prison, one in which Terry “shrinks back . . . to the darkest corner of the room” (*Fugitive* 5).

Williams also portrays the flophouse as the ultimate deathtrap for Terry when, in death, the “cigarette slips from his fingers” (146). In the play’s final sequence, Terry attempts to escape from both the gang and the power structure associated with it. Instead, he dies in the elder Gwendlebaum’s office, finally cornered in a space over which he has no control. This final scene demonstrates Terry’s utter loss of dominion over the urban terrain he inhabits. The excessive force that the State uses to capture Terry underlines the futility of challenging existing power structures. *Fugitive*’s strong “protest” message, as Williams explained to his mother, may have hurt the play’s chances of further production in 1938: “[t]hey like [*Fugitive*] better than any play submitted,” he wrote of the Federal Theater’s New Orleans directors, “but are afraid the social message might be too strong for a southern city” (qtd. in Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xx). After the Mummies staged *Fugitive Kind* in 1937, the production won “enthusiastic” (Hale, *Scholars* 70) acclaim for its “sordid realism” (Hale 70).

The iconography of oppression pervades the family unit, which forms the principal vehicle through which Williams airs the political “socioeconomic and political issues raised by the Depression” (Mishra 21). Through Leo’s “Marxist” (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xiii) analysis of a stratified social structure based on materialism, Williams reflects the culture of his time, notably a concern with access to education. Here it should also be noted that Williams was unable to return to the University of Iowa in the fall of 1938, principally because Professor Mabie did not grant him the scholarship he sought to continue on with a Master’s degree (Hale, *Early Williams* 19). Williams

explores a vast array of topics, such as the corrosive effects of poverty, the stifling constraints of bourgeois convention, and the social expectations and entitlements relating to one's marital and economic status. Thus, a hesitant vision of a socialist society emerges in *Fugitive Kind*. Just as other playwrights of the period had politicized their dramas, Williams displays a concern with the socioeconomic and political issues raised by the Depression. Thus, the flophouse includes individual ethnic groups. For example, Williams indicates a connection to the secret immigrant society known as the Mafia by Terry's "contact out East," Joe Spitalni (*Fugitive* 100). Also, the curtain rises upon a group of transients "idling about the room" while "[t]wo Italians seated on the bench are playing La Morra, an Italian game in which two individuals extend their fingers from fists, simultaneously shouting out numbers (in Italian), the winner being the one who names correctly the sum of digits projected" (3).

Of the main protagonists, the most compelling call to political protest comes from a college student, Leo Gwendlebaum, an immigrant character that tenderly asks whether his adopted sister, Glory, recalls how "on the boat coming over how both of us cried when we saw New York from the deck?" (*Fugitive* 86). Similarly, Olsen—also known as "the Swede" (19)—bemoans the loss of his traveling "partner"(43), Carl, after Carl succumbs to the "galloping consumption" and dies coughing up blood, complaining to the end about the "lab'atory rats them amachur sawbones feed you to when you die in this town" (7). The "most important minor character" (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xvii), Texas, in conversation with the other transients, also indicates the direction that *Not About Nightingales*, Williams's next full-length apprentice play, will take, as he describes

the punishment meted out to prisoners in Georgia: “[w]hen a guy gits sick they stick him in th’ sweat-box . . . that’s got all hell skinned for heat” (*Fugitive* 9–10).

Fugitive depicts a group of depressed men, out of touch with traditional values that no longer come to bear upon their collective experience. The city brings together denizens such as Texas, Rocky, Pete, and other homeless drifters, while gangsters such as Terry and Drake remain deeply entrenched in the criminal underground. The vandal of the play, Pete, scribbles on the flophouse wall, “FOO IS FOO” (*Fugitive* 38), an absurd statement that evokes Dadaist or Surrealist objective correlatives for unreason and even “insanity” (“fou” in French). Nonetheless, such illogical statements heighten the iconography of chaos, highlighted once again by Leo in his final, “socially conscious” (82) call to “tear down the rotten old walls that they wanted to lock us up in” (147).

For his part, Terry not only expresses a world-weary awareness of his “outcast” status (*Fugitive* 105) in smoking a final cigarette (95), but also exhibits a form of pride based on his firsthand experience of social corruption. Terry inevitably dies for subscribing to a seditious variation of the protest play’s American Dream gone awry, just as the rest of the transients succumb in various ways; even the young, bright Leo falls prey to the illusory lure of an ambiguously idealistic dream which Williams also presents as illegitimate. For example, Chuck, the corrupt character employed at the Gwendlebaum flophouse that receives his charity from Glory coerces a vulnerable Leo into drinking until he passes out. He then steals Leo’s ring, presumably to pawn it in order to go “sleighriding” (51) with a prostitute “snowbird”—and cocaine-addict—named Bertha, and thereby undermines Chuck’s initial, and apparently sincere, intention of retrieving his “hocked” snow shovel (110): “Mr. Gwendlebaum, they all want their walks clean for

New Year's. . . it gets slippery see? and when they come home tonight plastered after their big celebrations, what do you think they would do? . . . fall on their fannies and knock their brains out" (111).

In scene 2, Williams again emphasizes the dreary urban iconography by stipulating that "[i]t is dull outside: a fog has rolled up from the river a few blocks east" (*Fugitive* 34). He further describes the shady urban dwellers that "pass dimly across the big window, shoulders hunched against the damp cold, heads bent" (34). Williams both heightens the tension and emphasizes the drabness of the transients' experiences with the flimsy Christmas bells and streamers tacked "about the cracked plaster walls," and which, instead of providing cheer, appear "totally unconvincing: life here is more like a perpetual Ash Wednesday than any other holy day of the year" (34). Ironic contrasts underpin the iconography of bells and streamers, and the festive intent belies the grim daily struggle for survival.

In a 1938 letter to Willard Holland, who had directed *Fugitive*, Williams indicated his interest in experimenting with "atmospheric" staging techniques that Williams felt were necessary in order to "bring the city and the snow onto the stage" (Williams, qtd. in Leverich 248). In scene 1, for example, Williams establishes the city's pervasive presence: "[t]he noise of the city crowds through the opened door, harsh, blatant noises and the cry of a newsboy" (*Fugitive* 6). Thus, the diffuse iconography of the "snow" corresponds to cocaine use throughout the play, by both the drifters, and by Bertha. Despite the Expressionistic *mise-en-scène*, the "mood" (Demastes 3) of the play remains essentially "realistic" (Demastes 3), a style featured in the majority of protest works that addressed "social and psychological issues," and that "contest[ed] the optimistic master

narratives of American society” (Demastes 5). Although the Expressionistic techniques that Williams prescribes in his production notes reinforce the play’s iconography of protest, his ultimate goal—to impart a protest message—also depends upon whether the viewers “accept [the play] as corresponding with ‘reality’” (Rothman 196).

United by a dominant set of conventions and semiotic markers, the “classic” gangster imagery associated with late 1930s cinema has “been given a privileged position within the study of the genre” as “paradigmatic” (Mason xv). The position taken here is that although the gangster conventions discussed in regard to *Fugitive* share a set of iconographic features and narrative patterns with the “classic gangster narrative” (Shadoian 5), as in the films of the 1930s, Williams combines the conventions with obligatory sets of iconography within a subcategory of the protest genre (that of the “social gangster”). However, *Fugitive*’s protest iconography (poverty, suffering, martyrdom), its ideological frameworks (the American Dream-turned-Nightmare and the Great Depression), or narrative structures (social Darwinism) cannot be reduced to those found in the classic gangster narrative, so the play retains its clear-cut political message. Thus, Williams effectively transposes the gangster character into the protest genre setting, in which the stage directions and visual scheme correspond to Depression-era extremes, such as seedy cafés like the Brite Spot (located across the street from the main action unfolding at the dreary flophouse).

Williams situates the gangster character in a cramped, crowded environment so that we are made aware of the ways in which “relations of power . . . are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life” (Bunyan 174). As illustrated in Leo’s poetic, “lyrical speech” (*Fugitive* 130), the city’s “chaotic conditions” (*Fugitive* 131)

exist beyond both the control and the comprehension of its inhabitants. Like the Syndicate, the city imposes its own harsh sentence as it “beckons and destroys” (Shadoian 7). In the gangster environment, the city controls its inhabitants with a harsh and grim constraint reminiscent of “a prison” (Shadoian 7), depicting a milieu that Williams would soon take to its logical extreme in *Nightingales*, in which society as a whole, “and not just cities where the gangsters congregate” (7), is portrayed as a prison.

In *Fugitive*, the Syndicate displays a kinship to the hired “Rover” variety of thugs operating in Williams’s first full-length play, *Candles* (102). Williams develops the level of menace of the criminal network in *Fugitive* into a powerful, multifaceted organization operating on an international scale, a dramatic example of the gang-as-Syndicate, and of the power of the criminal enterprise. Even here, the national collective of the Syndicate takes on a grim personality of its own at several points throughout *Fugitive*, such as in the portrayal of its extensive reach as indicated by the press communiqués with Terry’s former “fence” in Detroit (*Fugitive* 74). Williams further indicates the extent of the powerful network after Terry infiltrates the St. Louis underground and meets with the threatening, “weasel”-type character of “Drake” (*Fugitive* 75). Certainly, Williams’s fusion of the protest and gangster markers generates permutations but remains firmly within the protest genre’s ideological code. More importantly, Williams invests his take on the protest genre narrative with the gangster’s venal adherence to criminality as a means to procure economic prosperity.

In Williams’s protest world, American society puts forth an economically depressed and bereft image replete with a series of Hoovervilles, with a guiding patriarch just as absent or ineffective as Papa Gwendlebaum proves to be. The well-known story of

Glory's symbolic name as recounted by both Leo and Texas, and of how she came to be a part of the Gwendlebaum family—"[r]emember on the boat coming over how both of us cried when we saw New York from the deck? I caught hold of your hand and wouldn't let go till Papa promised that you would come along with us!" (*Fugitive* 86)—harks back to a political form of surrogate paternalism enforced through quota systems meant to "perpetuate the traditional dependency" of many European immigrants (Zinn 211). Interestingly, in revisiting the family dynamic, Williams's protest narrative also anticipates an "important feature" (Mason 60) of the iconography of the later, post-1940s gangster film genre, which entails an ideological reversal: although Terry steals the Gwendlebaum family's savings, he nonetheless plans to repay them. In fact, Terry dies because he returns with Glory and helps Leo to bed instead of leaving immediately, and thereby alerts O'Connor to his presence.

This return to familial responsibility indicates that, in Williams's Depression, even the gangster bears no immunity to the iconographic protest motif of familial dysfunction (nor does he reject what the Gwendlebaums represent). Likewise, Terry does not condemn, nor does he symbolically reject, his late mother and her personal struggle. Reforming in order to become a "regular gent" (*Fugitive* 100) with Glory by his side offers a way for Terry to enter the noncriminal world of the family's domestic sphere in order to gain stability and legitimacy although, outfitted in the latest gangster fashion, he does not yet realize that his implacable desire for the ostentatious "smart overcoat" may have cost him his life (115). Despite the fact that topics such as single motherhood, prostitution, and the "arrogance of wealth" found popular expression on both stage and

screen during the 1930s, Williams's unflinching examination sets *Fugitive* apart from many other protest works (Wiltz 426).

By contrast, the ubiquitous image of the powerless transient pervades *Fugitive*'s exhaustive iconography of suffering, which ranges from familiar motifs of mistrust and betrayal, suicide, and death, to familiar patterns of dialogue. Williams introduces Terry as a skulking fugitive, initially hidden from view by the few shabby pieces of furniture in the sparse, broken-down "lobby" (nothing more than a single room with a desk, the large window of which "frames" the looming presence of the city; *Fugitive* 3). Both the "shadows" and a strategically placed newspaper obscure Terry's features, while his place in the flophouse's "darkest corner" (5) further denotes his criminality. Such imagery clearly signifies the shadowy nature of the gangsters, while ironically effacing Terry from the protest narrative. Like Herman, Terry retreats offstage, obscured from view in a lurking withdrawal which further suggests his impotence. Both fall, in a sense, victim to the inadvertent femme fatale Glory (while, as an isolated figure outside the limits of society and merely killing time, O'Connor's manhunt action unfolds on the periphery).

Despite the easygoing exterior of "Chuck," a shiftily parasitic character with a propensity to convincingly solicit small change in order to reclaim his "hocked" snow shovel (*Fugitive* 110), Chuck privately indulges his drug addiction, sexual deviance, and a predatory materialism. In an aside to the audience, Chuck also betrays his excitement at the prospect of trading Leo's "school ring" in exchange for sex and cocaine, images that bear out the intimations of Leo's emotionally depressed speech, leaving Leo to bemoan, in turn, his own "awful [and] sad" (134) existence. Not surprisingly, Chuck abandons his snow-shovelling scheme while drinking away the "advance" on his pay (111) taken from

Glory earlier, instead of retrieving his shovel from the pawnbroker. For all his bluster about its retrieval, however, Williams reveals the character's insincerity, since Chuck plies Leo with drink to steal Leo's class ring and, instead of securing the shovel, Chuck takes the ring to Bertha. Finally, Chuck "whispers exultantly" that he will now pay a visit to Bertha, after having robbed the "drunken, exhausted" Leo (134). At this point, Leo displays an awareness of his own inability to assert himself, wondering if the problem lies within: "is it just inside of me?" (134).

Beneath a jagged skyline, various "objectors" (*Fugitive* 83) protest the fact that American society has lost touch with its time-honored values, thereby turning politically conscious students such as Leo into outsiders who feel that they have no place in society. Leo explains to Glory that he was "kicked out" of university (76) for what Glory considers "Bolshevistic . . . writing" (39), whereas street-smart criminals such as Terry are firmly entrenched in the underworld (that is, until Terry's death in the play's final scene). However, many stock images associated with both working class heroes and gangsters retain tragic connotations, which Williams emphasizes through the play's configuration of the protest "martyr" in the form of those characters that take on the authorities directly, such as both Leo and Terry. Clarence Williams sings the "Sugar Blues" on the flophouse radio, while transients engage in prostitution, Leo loses his scholarship, and Terry dies as a "fugitive backed against his last wall" (3).

As the action unfolds, we observe Terry's transformation from a "gangster big-shot" (Mason 55) into an "inconspicuous" (*Fugitive* 72) nobody, then a fallen loner and, finally, into a doomed antihero. Terry's sensational demise plays out alongside the ambiguous, generally humanized portraits of the transients and the petty criminals of the

flophouse, suggesting the instability of a social setting rife with widespread violence, poverty, and an arbitrary rule of law. Such instability figures most prominently in the symbolic levels of the play with, for example, the snow metaphorically and temporarily cleansing the blanketed city, and when “God” grants a fleeting reprieve from its urban “nastiness”:

All you can see is the snow . . . the buildings aren't there anymore. You can't see the Union Light and Power. The Cosmopolitan Trust has disappeared. The Western Pacific's been blotted out by the snow. Tonight's God's night of sleep, I suppose. He's tired of looking down at the nasty mess we've made of ourselves. He's pulled down a big white shade to cover us up. Now our stink can't reach his nostrils. Our squawling's drowned in the long white feathery thunder of snow. (130)

Williams's Expressionist staging techniques also function to convey the distorted viewpoints of his unstable, often neurotic, personalities, just as the proliferation of characters contributes to Williams's emergent, “inconclusive” twist (Hale, *Fugitive Kind* 70). In the “protest” genre, even a notoriously powerful “big time” gangster (*Fugitive* 36) such as Terry cannot resist the downward arc of the protest play. This sense of impending doom haunts Williams's characterization of the grief-stricken “outcasts” (105), but also in the topic of loss, as evident in the defacement of Texas's photo of his sister; the implied loss stemming from romantic betrayal (115); the loss of potential opportunity (111); and the loss of Leo's ring, his scholarship, and his values, along with his peace of mind, thereby heightening his extreme anxiety (7). Although Williams's stage directions call for both Expressionistic and Impressionistic effects to accompany particularly

anguished speeches, such moments also serve to highlight Leo's gradual separation from reality, and to make his alienation all the more pointed.

Throughout *Fugitive*, the cathedral bells (134, 137, 138) clash with the screaming sirens (65), rumbling trucks, clanging streetcars (72), and general traffic noises from the street (87). The resulting cacophony causes Leo, in his final speech, to question whether "God" will continue to sleep through these trying "revolutionary" (121) times. In short, as Kolin observes, Williams Expressionistically decries "social ills": "*Fugitive* reads like a combination of gangster films, [and] Clifford Odets-style agitprop drama" (Kolin, Rev. *Fugitive Kind* 151). Undeniably, the play's production notes reveal an awareness of the Expressionistic technique. Williams emphasizes this shadowy world of transience and vagrancy through an avant-garde use of Expressionistic staging, which serves to highlight the play's political concerns as they are reiterated in Leo's statements of faithlessness and despair, through whose voice "Williams was adding his protest to the clamor of many 1930s intellectuals, saying that society's evils, carefully disguised behind the cosmetics of hypocrisy, were being maintained by capitalist greed" (Leverich 245).

Unlike many of the protest plays of the 1930s, however, *Fugitive* depends heavily upon an Expressionistic challenging of the verisimilitude of realistic theater by "staging individual emotional, unconscious states of mind directly" (Worthen 1482). Moreover, *Fugitive*'s evocative use of color and symbolic patterns serve to highlight the play's political message. With respect to color, for example, the title of scene 3—"You Ought to Wear Bright Colors"—serves to emphasize the Depression-era drabness against which Glory's provocative red dress stands defiantly out.

In regard to lighting, Williams stipulates that “the set is realistic” until “the final scenes of the play, where the mood is predominantly lyrical, the stage is darkened, the realistic details are lost—the great window, the red light on the landing, and the shadow walls make an . . . Expressionistic background” (*Fugitive* 3). Williams intends that all aspects of the staging technique—lighting, sound recording, and color—interact graphically in a highly effective, and aesthetically coherent, composition. In *Fugitive*’s production notes, Williams clearly intends to set the tone for each scenic episode with a set of projected titles.

In addition, Williams specifies a deliberate distortion of the silhouettes and the contours of the sets and backdrops for expressive purposes. Williams also stipulates that the characters enact exaggerated, physical manifestations of their emotions, as in Expressionism, which also “depends heavily on an actor’s exaggeration of movement in jerky or slow, sinuous patterns” (Bordwell and Thompson 380). As characterized by Williams in similar stage directions, the parade of shabby transients fades into the darkened flophouse setting. In scene 8, for example, Terry succumbs to his gunshot wounds and collapses under the “Hellish” (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xviii) red “arc light” beyond which looms a “sky behind the city’s towers” (*Fugitive* 147). Terry’s dying, shady silhouette echoes the indistinct shapes of the buildings as “[t]he transients come slowly downstairs, singly, their dully curious faces and shambling figures grotesquely lighted by the red bulb at the landing [and] group themselves in a mumbling half-circle about the central figures of Terry, Glory and the officers” (146).

Squalor in the Urban Setting

With respect to the play's setting, as well as to Leo's description of the social milieu, Williams shows us a desperation so pervasive that the residents of the flophouse even confront the "sassiety bims" (*Fugitive* 25) by taking it upon themselves to invade the flophouse in order to conspicuously dole out their charity. In his pursuit of independence, Leo makes a foray into a seemingly foreign (127) and hostile urban landscape, but soon returns to collapse on a bench in the flophouse, empty except for Chuck. Despite the foreboding cityscape pressing in through the picture window, the flophouse now becomes a sanctuary: "[t]he stage will be lightless except for the arc lamp beyond the large window, and the effects of the room . . . will be so nearly indistinguishable that the setting might almost be that of a cathedral" (126). Williams's stage directions include Expressionistic staging techniques that "project" the protagonists' otherworldly visions and unconscious states of emotion in scene 8 ("They Won't Ever Catch Our Kind"): "Chuck's speeches will remain upon the realistic plane but Leo's will really be passages of poetry and will have to be delivered as such" (126).

Williams also anticipates the movement, during the 1940s, of the classic gangster subgenre away from the device of the "big urban gang boss who dominates and threatens society" (Mason 64). However, Williams hints at this domination both with repeated references to the mysterious Joe Spitalni and by the presence of Drake. For O'Connor, Terry constitutes a relatively minor annoyance to be eradicated after a brief but highly publicized crime spree. Significantly, Terry stands for what O'Connor fights to deny; namely, that during hard economic times within a system of capitalistic "slavery" (*Fugitive* 85), crime pays. *Fugitive* also expresses power relations in terms of the

individual's relation to society, and particularly through the conflict between traditional ideology and mores, on the one hand, and on the other, social change. Here the gangster becomes an emblematic figure of protest, bent on escaping from poverty and from the chronic restlessness that characterizes the Depression. In short, by temporarily exiling a "gangster" character to a "protest" setting, Williams successfully attacks ideological forms that "wouldn't have been easy in the late 1930s . . . to market" (Hale, qtd. in Mitchell 2).

Although Papa Gwendlebaum maintains a measure of economic independence as an entrepreneur despite the collapse of the national market and the ensuing financial depression, his inability to lead his children by example indicates his lack of effectiveness as a patriarch. The flophouse, which he established as a family business, affords access to the Gwendlebaums' personal space on the part of all who rent a bed. Here Williams portrays the territory of the vagrant underclass as no longer confined to public spaces, but as extending even into private homes and, hence, into the domestic sphere. For example, Chuck violates Leo's personal space, just as Abel violates Glory's.

The geographic expanses separating Terry, Glory, and Mexico, and through which Terry plans to race his car, all too quickly lead to a dead end. The open country through which he plans to escape "with the wind in [his] face" (*Fugitive* 138) in a "Packard Six" (118) offers only an illusory freedom, and his time rapidly expires, as it must, for a gangster character that, in this protest drama, will most certainly be punished for his crime. Unmistakably, in this economically and spiritually depressed setting, the lives of transients such as Terry and Carl matter little; nor can carefully planned border crossings—"violating the Mann Act" (135)—alter Glory's tortured fate. As Williams

discovered, the staging of class conflict in accordance with protest conventions was often dictated by the expectations of Depression-era audiences.

In identifying the various social and economic failures that resulted from the downturn of the 1930s, Williams depicts the “Middle Western city” (*Fugitive* 3) of the play as “hard hit by the Depression” (Hale, *TW’s St. Louis Blues* 621). Incidentally, Williams’s hometown of St. Louis had “one of the largest ‘Hooverilles’ in the country, an area of packing-case shelters strung along the Mississippi under the Eads Bridge” (Hale 621). Glory alludes to this “reality” as follows: “[w]hen it drops below thirty, business always picks up [because] fellows live in boxes along the river” (*Fugitive* 67). Williams adheres far more to an overarching code of protest and thus offers us neither a retrospective analysis nor a straightforward stylistic replication. Rather, he reinvigorates the protest genre through his experimentation.

Williams makes much use of Expressionistic, spatial and personal metaphors. By limiting the sphere of action to the flophouse, he examines the corrosion of traditional notions of ownership since strangers occupy the territory of an apparently loving family (the Gwendlebaums). It also uses the characters’ urbanized isolation to imply the “power of space” in a world in which “criminals do not have permanent urban territorial bases anymore but have become increasingly mobile, and are therefore able to occupy any space in America by virtue of their vagrancy” (Bunyan 175). Williams’s underlying message remains consistent with the general tenor of the protest genre, which, although it portrays capitalism as corrupt, also demonstrates the immorality and pointlessness of crime. Nonetheless, the value of social investment in a moral and legal charade is also clearly undercut by Williams’s ambiguous ending, as articulated by Leo: “. . . if [God]

never wakes up—then we can play God, too, and face them down with courage and our knowledge of right, and see whose masquerade turns out best in the end, theirs or ours” (*Fugitive* 147).

Cinematic Influences and Techniques

In an apparent effort to offset, or to compensate for, the traditionally stolid, 1930s protest conventions associated with naturalism and agitprop, Williams, in his stage directions, emulates “the fluidity and the sense of simultaneity” (Brandt 168) common to many film genres. In so doing, he employs the darker, grainy iconography of the *noir* style of “expressionism” (*Fugitive* 25) common to the gangster films of the 1930s (Mason 58; Shadoian 30). As Hale points out, the techniques that Williams learned in the “formative . . . twenty years he spent at the movies” (*TW’s St. Louis Blues* 610) in St. Louis enabled him to recast the conventions of traditional theater in this now more politically aware cycle of apprentice drama. Leverich notes that during this apprentice period, Williams was “dealing with the emerging persona of Tennessee Williams—a creation that was quickly coming to life” and, also, that “Tom” Williams, and much that Tom had written, “would soon be put away with the things of youth” (101). Clearly, this outstripping of his youthful self was consistent with a belief that he could shape the components of the dramatic conventions that he had received just as readily as the elements of his malleable youthful persona, hence his concern with the protean, open-ended aspects of his theatrical inheritance.

In 1937, Williams wrote in his journal that he was “inspired” (qtd. in Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xiii) by the film version (1937) of Maxwell Anderson’s play, *Winterset* (1935), particularly by Anderson’s indignation at social injustice. Williams

confronts many of the same topics that Anderson explored in the 1937 film version of his play (Sahu 5) and, like Anderson, includes political commentary as well. However, Williams expands and transforms Anderson's "gangster" character, Garth Esdras—whom Anderson had denoted in a way that was consistent with the "classic" (Shadoian 5) American gangster narrative, so popular at the time on stage and screen—into the character of Terry Meighan. Thus, Williams melds the protest genre with the "interesting subtype" (Cook 515) of the gangster narrative.

While he was composing *Fugitive*, Williams found it a challenge to decide upon the play's generic criteria, whether "it be comedy . . . or lyrical tragedy [since] his fertile imagination could conceive the material in any genre" (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xiii). Moreover, *Fugitive* borrows from popular film in that, like film, it adapts conventions both from the overarching protest genre and from the gangster subgenre, using, as an approach, a "fragmentation [that] was not new" to the gangster formula (Shadoian 29). It is possible, then, that popular "social gangster" (Clarens 49) films which employ predominantly protest generic criteria but with a criminal twist, such as *The Petrified Forest* (1936) and *Winterset* (1937), might well have inspired Williams. In this respect, as Hale has suggested, Williams's adaptation of the subtype also "combined Marxist ideology with the excitement of gunfights" (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xiii).

In keeping with the play's Expressionistic staging that "bases its style primarily on a cinematic use of *mise-en-scène*" (Bordwell and Thompson 380), Williams makes use of a cinematic "suture" (Rothman 192) technique, which serves to "cue" (Rothman 196) the audience to identify with the characters' "basic articulations" (Dayan 190) as well as with their point of view. We find the use of "suture" particularly evident in

Williams's treatment of Leo and Terry. For example, when Leo describes his attempt at suicide, he invites the audience to adopt various "discursive positions" (Silverman, *Subject of Semiotics* 205). First, we adopt that of a victim; second, that of a "voyeur" (206), and finally, that of the police officer on the beat: ". . . just as I started to hoist myself over the rail I turned around and bumped right into a cop and he said, 'What the hell are you doing out here?'" (*Fugitive* 126).

Through this technique, Leo's graphic description of his attempted suicide becomes "matched" with that of the audience (Silverman, *Subject of Semiotics* 206), which by now has been persuaded to identify with the respective points-of-view of, among others, countless drifters, members of the "criminal class" (*Fugitive* 75), and working class "cops" (29). For example, by staging Leo's clearly traumatized emotional response to what he has seen and experienced, Williams "sutures" the emotional response of the audience to those of Leo, such that the audience's point of view temporarily converges with that of Leo (Dayan 190). Ultimately, Leo persuades us to see the world through his eyes, as he "moves to the window through which can be seen dimly the lights of the patrol wagon . . . [as] the sky behind the city's towers brightens faintly during [Leo's] speech [and] snow can be seen falling through the arc light" (*Fugitive* 147).

Although *Fugitive* was Williams's second full-length play, and his first complete, noncollaborative composition as a playwright (at least with respect to the full-length plays), his evident concern with Expressionistic experimentation runs counter to the relative "indifference . . . to the use of theatrical techniques" (Mishra vi) that was commonly displayed in the works of contemporary playwrights working within the protest genre, such as Behrman, Kaufman, Lawson, and Sherwood. These playwrights,

however, tended to experiment not so much with form as with content. Intriguingly, in “fragments” of an “unmailed” (Leverich 248) letter (December, 1937) to the play’s director, Tom Willard, Williams also “protests” that the Mummies’ production of *Fugitive* did not make use of the Expressionistic effects as the playwright had intended for the play’s second half (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xx).

In *Fugitive*, Williams also strives to “experiment” with a more cinematic, rather than a strictly theatrical approach and, therefore, structures the play “in eight scenes, rather than acts” (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xviii). Moreover, Williams uses a “familiar stock of images or motifs” (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159) including those of “humor, lingo, violence, class warfare, racism, and hopelessness” (Kolin, Rev. *Fugitive Kind* 151)—characteristic of the protest genre. Each scene “has a commentary” (Hale, *Introduction, Fugitive* xvii), ranging from the ironic “A Big Group Picture, All Smiling” in scene 1, to the cynical “They Won’t Ever Catch Our Kind” in scene 8. Williams also makes experimental use of light and shadow upon the cramped flophouse “scenery” (*Fugitive* xx) throughout *Fugitive*, which seems to echo the “jinx” (*Fugitive* 34) that afflicts the vagrants as their struggles play out in those eight scenic episodes. With respect to the protest aspect of *Fugitive Kind*, Williams makes use of Leo, the ex-student, as an “ideological ventriloquist” (Dayan 191) with a commitment to protest journalism, in order to propagate leftist ideas. Leo’s speeches make a dramatic “statement” (Dayan 190) with political rhetoric and protest iconography inspired by the many horrors that occur offstage (horrific tales of torture as reported, for example, by Texas and Carl).

Just as Expressionism “consciously chooses to regard the individual as an abstraction” (Szondi, *Theory* 65), Williams’s nascent brand of overtly “expressionistic”

staging devices (*Fugitive 3*) also enrich the play's gangster motifs as he isolates certain characters through the direct application of "plastic theater" techniques such as lighting and sound. In comparison, as in Maxwell Anderson's lyrical and political drama *Winterset* (1935), by which Williams was himself inspired, the abstraction and emptiness of the individual "fugitive" acquires a poetic, rhetorical foundation.

Todorov's examination of "admixtures" (86) comparable to Williams's combination of the protest genre and the gangster narrative remains relevant, for it draws attention to the shared generic expressions or properties common to both the protest play and the gangster film. Consider, for example, the similar characterization and iconography peculiar to the depiction of the slums: in narrative terms, the classic cinematic gangster narrative classifies a set of works bound by a "sequential addressee/response convention . . . as in the medium of protest drama, and even of the traditional theater in general," in that the viewer must "follow step by step the process of identification," which is "the first condition" of genre identification (Shadoian 5). Williams explores topics such as failure, homelessness, and suicide, thereby building the dramatic tension to a crisis in a fog-filled atmosphere of dread and uncertainty.

Although predominantly a protest play, *Fugitive* also features a handful of generic markers common to the gangster narrative. Some of these markers fall squarely within gangster territory and even push beyond its limits, such as *Fugitive's* pervasive iconography of poverty. Expressionistic *noir* elements (Mason 58) include such features as the double-crossing "femme fatale" character, reminiscent of Glory, who indeed brings about Terry's downfall, even though she does so unwittingly. The love triangle comprising Glory, Terry, and her fiancé Herman, further reinforces the narrative of back-

stabbing and betrayal that Williams so imaginatively orchestrates. Interestingly, “the narrative of concealment and double-cross was a new idea” (Mason 58), even in the gangster films of the 1940s. By introducing such a new twist, Williams was clearly ahead of his time.

CHAPTER IV
NOT ABOUT NIGHTINGALES

Williams's experiments with genre owe much to the extreme socioeconomic conditions of the 1930s, conditions that forced playwrights to adopt a more politicized and documentary approach to grim, Depression-era realities and galvanized them into revisiting the protest genre. That genre's prison narrative subgenre had gained currency in Hollywood after the summer of 1929 when "the penal reform issue was out in the open after the prison riots of Dannemora and Auburn" (Clarens 48). Nearly a decade later, Williams would write his first full-length protest play based on a contemporary news event: *Not About Nightingales*.¹³

In the wake of the Depression, and by now aware of the imminent prospect of war, Williams intended his project both to expose, and to serve as a protest against, a violent, real-life scandal. The universal thrust of Williams's poetics extends the immediate scope of *Nightingales* beyond the narrow calculus of prison riots and sadistic avengers, and the play's political concerns encompass a broad protest message of social reform. Williams's panoply of allusions ground the play in a comprehensive, international, and nonpropagandistic concern with justice.

The Prison Narrative

In reading the script, Nunn was struck by the obvious influence of protest as a genre. Interestingly, Auli Ek, in *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives*, notes that the prison narrative has only recently come to be recognized as an important subtype within the protest literary movement. Ek contends that prison

¹³ Shortened in this chapter to *Nightingales*.

narratives have often been critically situated anywhere “between serious and entertaining literature” (77), and he further suggests that as a distinct subgenre, they “have generally received little critical notice until recently because they are considered to represent a low aesthetic enterprise” (8).

In making the play a vehicle for social protest, Williams tended to either accentuate the isolation of his characters or else engulf them in a drama of unwitting hostility. Certainly, some critics of the protest genre felt that the play had sunk to the level of propaganda, complete with stereotypes that comprised crudely allegorical and essentially reductive representations of political attitudes and gestures. Like the majority of writers engaged in writing prison narratives (Franklin, *Prison Writing* xxxii), Williams enjoyed no great literary reputation at the time. However, *Nightingales* prefigures the dramatic talent and contemporary relevance that was to appear, full-blown, in the playwright’s later writings. As well, Williams radically injects into *Nightingales* such staging techniques as those of sound and lighting effects, poetic imagery, theme music (especially jazz), and stylistic flourishes that would later become the hallmark of his work. Williams also draws on such standard cinematic elements as an episodic plot structure and an ambiguous ending, both of which herald the three experimental apprentice plays to follow. In short, Williams’s artistic signature was already evident. Captivatingly, although *Nightingales* exploits the sensationalism that surrounded the Philadelphia County news story, he mediates this by offering us the metaphor of a set of birds trapped in a cage (creatures that, even when resisting, display a grim awareness of the tragic nature of their plight):

JIM: Ev'ry man living is walking around in a cage. He carries it with him wherever he goes and don't let it go till he's dead. Then the walls come to pieces and he stops being lonesome—'cause he's part of something bigger than him . . . [blowing an enormous smoke ring and piercing it with his finger] The Universe! . . . But, sometimes, I think, Ollie, a guy don't have to wait till he's dead to get outside of his cage. . . . No. A guy can use his brain two ways. He can make it a wall to shut him in from the world, or a great big door to let him out. [He continues musingly.] (*Nightingales* 38)

The radical diversity of the generic criteria common to the five full-length apprentice plays is such that the plays hardly seem less radical now than they surely must have seemed in the late 1930s. After the economic crash of 1929, an immediate wave of political oppression swept across America (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 161). In the introduction to his anthology, *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*, editor H. Bruce Franklin claims that, during times of economic and social upheaval, a “dialectic [develops rapidly] between the consciousness emerging inside the prison and the forces at work in the larger society” (12). By the mid-1930s, prison narratives had already departed both from the confessional style of the late eighteenth century and from the straightforward, picaresque, adventure stories of the nineteenth (177). As in the gangster narrative, the prison narrative provides an opportunity for vicarious participation in the various criminals' sordid, and yet thrilling, adventures (126).

In his preface to *Orpheus Descending*, Williams states that he had never written anything to compare with *Nightingales* “in violence and horror” (qtd. in E. Williams 97).

In so doing, he sought to protest the social problem of crime and imprisonment, as well as the harsh sentencing laws that, some believe, were responsible for turning the construction of new prisons during the Depression into a corrupt “growth industry” (Franklin xii). Perhaps *Nightingales*’ overtly politicized subject matter contributed to its neglect. And yet, although Williams had become increasingly outspoken in his objections to social injustice as the Depression wore on, his plays, according to his mother, were rejected by the WPA Writers’ Project because “his writing did not contain enough social protest” (E. Williams 98) to qualify in that category. Certainly, Williams displays strong compassion for the appalling conditions experienced by the oppressed prisoners.

This study makes reference to the classic or “golden” (Sklar 176) generic prison narratives that Hollywood made popular during the 1930s, in response to the “prevailing anxiety” of society, an anxiety that “drew the attention of the [studio] executives to what was current and newsworthy” (Clarens 50). Depression-era filmmakers expressed a social bravado, in “settings . . . that provided the fullest opportunity to raise the pitch of excitement on the screen, to amaze, to frighten” (Sklar 176). Beginning in 1934 (Clarens 139), however, the newly formed Production Code censors began enforcing their standards. The Code became a cause for concern in the production of many Hollywood films of the period, while the studios’ collective output was effectively stifled. Nonetheless, Williams’s attraction to “the more important freedom of expression that only the theater offered in those times determined the course his career would take” (Leverich 252).

Characterization

Williams does not base his narrative on the underlying, simplistic dichotomy between mind and body found in the majority of the cinematic prison narratives of the 1930s. Instead, the youthful Williams finds “both the simple emotional truth and the surefire dramatic poetry of situations that sometimes stray perilously close to prison-movie clichés” (Isherwood 90). However, many of Williams’s prisoners lack condemnable qualities (Clarens 49). Butch inspires the prison population to unite behind a list of grievances which all inmates share: overcrowding (*Nightingales* 122), overwork (9), and poisonous food (61). Yet the hunger strike is largely a result of their overwhelming allegiance to Butch: “[w]e’re witcha!” (123). Williams emphasizes The Queen’s isolation and loneliness as emblematic not merely of an individual character type but as a common social experience, just as the lovely Eva enjoys relationships only by correspondence (77). Rather than relying on stereotypes, Williams creates his characters with certain character actors in mind. Thus, Williams creates characters that move beyond these reductive categories. For example, in his stage directions, Williams characterizes Jim “à la Jules [John] Garfield” (39). Later, in *Stairs to the Roof* (1940), he would create the part of earnest everyman Benjamin D. Murphy “with Burgess Meredith in mind” (Williams, qtd. in Hale, *Introduction, Stairs*, xxi).

Williams’s resistance to stereotypes remains evident throughout the full-length apprentice plays. By contrast, in the films of the 1930s, the prison population-at-large tends to be portrayed in two distinct ways: either as dumb, foolish brutes, or as repressed pseudo-intellectuals. In the case of *Nightingales*, although Williams makes his effeminate vulnerability obvious, The Queen nonetheless fights heroically to save young Swifty.

Throughout the play Butch resists, fights, and kills owing to his staunchly political convictions. Yet in episode 7, “Butch Has A Dream,” the outwardly toughened protagonist fantasizes tenderly about his ex-lover Goldie (*Nightingales* 56). In contrast to the proverbial canary in the coal mine, Canary Jim is not simply a passive informer. Nor does he intend to remain forever imprisoned in his cage. Yet, when he can no longer “repress” (86) his rage, we sense that all will be lost. Both Whalen and Eva dismiss, at their own peril, the Canary’s warnings of impending disaster, as Jim senses all too palpably that something decisive will occur. In the surprising climax, the two leaders of the prison’s warring factions, Whalen and Butch, grapple for supremacy, with deadly consequences for the warden.

Canary Jim espouses the sort of liberal moralism that was popularly debunked in the 1930s since it was “unable to cope either with man’s immediate political or with his ultimate religious problems,” and “asks no questions about justice” (Niebuhr 498). Jim takes an ambivalent position in his ambivalent and unresolved “musings” to Ollie about “intellectual emancipation” and suicide (*Nightingales* 38), his philosophizing about guilt, and overstates the gross inadequacy of Webster’s definition of guilt as paraphrased by Williams, which assumes the notions of free will and responsibility (both of which Jim is forced to question by the end of the play).

In the end, Jim forfeits his hope for a parole that was based on ten years of “copper” (*Nightingales* 11, meaning good behaviour), by responding to Butch’s direct call to “fight it out” with the Boss (159). Jim ultimately abandons both his earlier self-serving philosophy and the prospect of fighting for change through legal channels, taking the prison’s so-called “Quick Way Out” (15) by diving into the channel below (15).

Initially intending to taunt the prisoners by this suicidal escape (15), Jim now sees the warden's unbarred window not as certain death but as a "miraculous" opportunity, convinced as he is that the Lorelei steamer will have "a rope or something hanging over the side" (162).

According to Jim, his experience of life inside the cramped cells is nothing but an intensification of the life outside the prison where, given the hard-won and often monotonous nature of Depression-era employment, virtual prison walls both entrap, and yet shelter, a cast of disenfranchised men. Williams's sustained commentary on political issues also finds expression in Butch's dreamlike fantasies of the sexual love he once shared with Goldie which, by turns, clash with the brutal interruptions of Monroe City Prison's harsh reality. Yet, these two worlds come together in Butch's final resistance against Whalen, when he enjoins the prisoners to sing their last song in protest.

A religious crisis develops in *Nightingales*, stemming from the staff's and the inmates' reaction to the warden's "scientific" approach to control, his belief in corrections, and his lack of faith in social rehabilitation (*Nightingales* 5). The first Chaplain, a character most likely modeled after Williams's own highly-principled grandfather, a minister of the Episcopal church, attempts to check Whalen's evil "authority" (131) and to work against the injustices within Monroe City Prison: "I'm a conscientious steward of Christ, and as such I protest against the inhuman treatment of convicts in this prison" (103). Jim, on his part, naïvely awaits a form of social "justice" (Niebuhr 498) that will never come, placing his unfulfilled hopes in a social order which he believes will hold Whalen to a higher moral standard, and in his eagerly anticipated opportunity to "sing so loud and so high that the echo will knock these walls down"

(*Nightingales* 70). However, with the Chaplain's replacement by a sycophantic new "Reverend" (*Nightingales* 107), Whalen enforces his own code of morality by means of a ruthless form of social control that includes coercion and bribery (*Nightingales* 111).

Protest and the Prison Narrative

The prison narrative falls under the overarching genre of the protest play. Disturbing topics and graphic narratives help to explain the prison narrative's secure place in the literary subculture as a subtype of the protest genre, despite the fact that the prison narrative's stock characters epitomize the marginality of its caged human specimens (Clarens 49; Ek 8). Despite their very marginality, prison narratives remain outside the aesthetic categories of *high* and *low*, since some critics consider the compelling "fusion of power and fear" that they represent to be as "symbolically central as the moral and aesthetic other that undergirds American society" (Stallybrass and White 9).

Bray's observations concerning the profound "aesthetic evolution" of Williams's later, more experimental, works (Bray, *Moise* 59) pertain to Williams's earliest full-length plays as well. In order to "attain the sensational effects" so common within the prison narrative (Sklar 176), Williams stipulates experimental staging techniques, including varied sound and lighting effects, in his extensive, comprehensive, and boldly expressive stage directions for *Nightingales*. But Williams goes beyond "sensationalism for political effect" (Sklar 176), and his innovative mix of "fantasy . . . with realism" (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii) further challenges many of the traditional notions of genre he had inherited. Williams undercuts the protest genre's typical precondition of an overt political message or solution, insofar as both ambiguity (Hale, *Fugitive Kind*

176) and contradiction ultimately complicate the political thrust of the play's conclusion. Ultimately, and in contrast to the traditional protest concerns over the systemic and pervasive injustices of Depression-era society, we are left with a greater sense of mystery, for we find more chaos, more loose ends, and more degeneration into crime and disorder, all of which constitute an unanticipated trajectory.

As Hale reminds us, the play-going public in 1938 undoubtedly “found a play with murder, violent death, a sympathetic Black character, a drag queen, and syphilis difficult” (*Introduction, Nightingales* xxii). Despite such contradictions, when combined with “horrifying” violence (E. Williams 97), two macabre scenes of comic relief (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xxi), and morbid plot shifts, Williams offers us an infrequent emotional reprieve by hinting at the future prospect of redemption: “[a]lmost a chance!” (*Nightingales* 162). Here, messages of “protest” and revolt are ambiguously conceived or, as in the work of Ibsen (Sahu 1), alternately exalted and condemned. Undeniably, Williams adopted such ambiguous conceptions, which pervade all five of his full-length apprentice plays, as an important stylistic feature.

Williams's experience of the Depression, along with the difficulties that he was personally facing, help us to understand more fully the various kinds of political statements he was making about racism, elitism, and class conflict.¹⁴ We know that Williams took his inspiration for *Nightingales* from the headlines, which reflected Depression-era American culture even as “a wide range of cultural products fed the popular imaginary with representations of life in prison” (Ek 1).

¹⁴ These topics will be further explored in chapter 2, in the discussion of *Spring Storm* and *Stairs to the Roof*.

Some critics consider the prison narrative, a subtype of the overarching protest genre, as a signal retreat from the radical consciousness of much protest writing, insofar as the prison narrative “is directed primarily against the inflexibility of a legal system which victimizes an innocent individual, not a marginalized people or a social class” (Franklin *Prison Literature*, 155). A study of *Nightingales* reveals generic markers of both the overarching protest genre and the prison narrative subgenre, along with their internal incongruities and contradictions.

Prison narratives not only examine a significant communal problem but also seek to reform that problem indirectly by offering a sustained social critique of embedded systems of reform and rehabilitation. Although Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* continues to influence a number of scholars since its translation into English in 1977, a largely sensational handful of cinematic and literary work, of an autobiographical or a fictional nature, had focused upon prison narratives before that date. Williams’s collection of “white social outcasts, marginalized ethnic minorities, and poor blacks” (King 640) thrown together in prison thereby occasions “discourses of otherness” (Ek 5), a mode of which often reproduces popular stereotypes of criminal identities that are “raced and gendered” (6). However, in more subjective representations, such as Williams’s, the protagonists’ fierce expressions of individuality and their repeated protestations against Whalen’s corruption signal their resistance to the

. . . totalizing and individualizing procedures exerted by the state or criminal justice system, by foregrounding prisoners’ refusal to be classified and categorized based on criminal acts that turn individuals into statistical data. Thus prison narratives counteract the established logic of

imprisonment and promote forms of prisoner subjectivity that transgress those based on de-individualizing criminality. (Ek 6)

Although the fierce Darwinian struggles among the inmates are at least partially relieved by a sense of poetic justice (as when Butch exacts payback to the warden), Williams casts a baleful eye on the traditional estrangements associated with prison literature. Williams's prison narrative cannot be lumped together with other such narratives, although, for many audiences, prisoners throughout the ages often constitute a set of stock types (Clarens 49). Here, his principal concern with the culture of those who have been separated from society at large invokes a tragic unfolding of events. For Williams, the only message that arises from the prison riot explicitly addresses prison reform, including the need to eliminate overcrowding, bad food, corrupt authorities, and physical brutality.

Fact or Fiction?

Although prison narratives are, in general, "fictive representations of prison life, yet they are nonetheless perceived to be factual" (Ek 77). Williams bases his exposé on the Living Newspaper protest model. With the inclusion in *Nightingales* of such details as *The Archaeopteryx* and the various prison songs and chants, Williams indicates, as does Franklin, that significant art derives from the misery of the prisoners, whether that art is created by the oppressed classes themselves or by socially conscious artists from more privileged classes (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 30). To bridge the chasm between the playwright and his protest subject matter, Williams employs the point of view of a liberal, prison-educated, self-styled reformed offender, Canary Jim (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 30 xiv).

Inflammatory topics remain notably absent in the prison films of the period that may have inspired Williams, censored as they were by the Production Code.¹⁵ Nevertheless, through the medium of drama, Williams explores how the issue of race impacts society at almost every stage of the criminal justice system in much the same way as do non-fiction scholars such as Joseph Hallinan. *Nightingales* employs the discourse of the 1930s protest play to expose sociohistorical and ideological assumptions about racist hierarchies in prison and in society at large. As a prison narrative, the play exposes the prison system's predominantly racist and often dictatorial administrative policies typically perceived either as apolitical, or as practical necessities for prison management. By focusing on the social hierarchies of race within Monroe, as espoused by Boss Whalen, Williams seeks to identify and to expose the racist ideology that shapes the authoritarian discourse of imprisonment (Ek 75). As well, with the oppression and suicide of Ollie, Williams shows how the prison system was "designed largely to replace the earlier form of Black Chattel slavery" that had remained central to the oppression of Black people since the 1860s (Franklin, *Prison Literature* xv). These issues remain firmly ingrained in the "institution-originated discourse" (Ek 75) of characters such as Whalen, as he carries out his duties as if by rote: "[r]ead what's on the card, that's all!"

(*Nightingales* 34).

Homosexuality

Generally speaking, homosexuality has been portrayed through stereotypical imagery, perhaps owing to the fact that some homosexuals have traditionally had to

¹⁵ Not a caricature, Williams's truly sympathetic, courageous, and friendly Queen is a character virtually absent from the casts of Hollywood's forays into the prison experience during the classic or golden period of American cinema, and even from such pre-Code films as director Mervin Leroy's unforgettable *I Was a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932).

practice skills of impersonation, thereby fostering an “acute awareness of image-making in others” (Sontag 529). Campy characters risk dismissal as the hackneyed or larger-than-life projections of a stylized effeminacy especially common to the prison narrative. However, Williams resists this tendency and spares us the use of generalized images (Schiavi 1). Instead, he chooses to humanize The Queen rather than stereotype this “overtly effeminate” (Feingold 135) gay character. In this genuinely sympathetic portrait, the play’s secretly sensitive, generic Butch character kills The Queen as an act of mercy in Klondike:

QUEEN: I got to get out of here! Lemme out! Lemme out! [He pounds at the wall, then staggers blindly towards the radiators.]

BUTCH: Stay away from the radiators! [Queen staggers directly into the cloud of steam—screams—falls to the floor.]

He’s scalded himself. [Queen screams and sobs.]

Stop it! Goddamn yuh—[He grasps Queen’s collar and cracks his head against the floor.] There now!

JOE: Butch—you killed him.

BUTCH: Somebody shoulda done him that favor a long time ago.

[Shapiro mumbles in Yiddish.] (*Nightingales* 143)

Parallels exist between Williams’s life and the events and characters portrayed in *Nightingales*. John Lahr reviews some of these noteworthy correlations. “Like Canary Jim,” writes Lahr, Williams was “planning a great escape: he was about to spring himself from the incarceration of his unhappy St. Louis family” (92). Michael R. Schiavi notes that “Williams cites his [own] effeminacy as the initial inspiration for his artistry and,

therefore, the bedrock of his subjectivity” (1). “Young Tom” admits to his effeminacy, but “attempts to ascribe it to external influences” (Schiavi 1). Clum reminds us that “Williams encapsulates the problems of writing about a gay artist before gay liberation allowed writers to be more open about their sexuality and to express that openness in their works” (Clum 72). As we shall see, Williams began insistently and “courageously [to] raise the subject of homosexuality” (Clum 73) during his apprenticeship. This ongoing topical impetus continued to “outrage conservative, homophobic critics” throughout his career (Clum 76).

Evidently, Williams began playwriting at a time when Broadway theater was exceedingly timid about any serious representation of the lives of homosexual characters. This was due in part to the Wales Padlock Act, passed in 1927 in response to the perceived threat of plays about homosexuality (Clum 72), and which forbade representations of homosexuality on the stage. Clum notes that since “homosexuality was equated with treason, writers such as Williams were discouraged from publicly admitting their sexuality in their work” (73). Williams thus “pushed the envelope of homosexual representation in a particularly repressive period” (74). By the time *The Glass Menagerie* achieved Broadway success a few years later in 1945, Williams “was sexually ‘out’ in the pre-liberation sense of sexually active and open about his homosexuality with friends and colleagues” (73).

Political repression aside, masculine and feminine “stereotypes form a great part of prison life” (Büssing 201) and camp characterizations are used to highlight contradictions within the prison narrative. The Queen’s complaint—“[a]ll my life I’ve been persecuted by people because I’m refined” (*Nightingales* 27)—sheds a significant

light upon commentary regarding Williams's own persecution, attested to by "E. Dakin Williams, Dakin Williams and Shepherd Mead, Lyle Leverich, and Donald Spoto, all of whom note young Tom's effeminacy as the catalyst for peer and paternal abuse" (Schiavi 1). Williams effectively channels "the demon of his youthful self-presentation" into "worthy art" by suggesting the complexity of "an affect" rather than reducing it to "spoof or pat interpretation" (1). Williams's protest-imbued interpretation of the prison narrative serves as his attempt to bring political issues, such as those of forced convict labor and, to some extent, Williams's conception of the convict experience, to the awareness of contemporary audiences:

SCHULTZ: Lights out in five minutes.

BUTCH: Ahh, yuh fruit, go toot yuh goddamn horn outa here. Mus' think they runnin' a stinkin' sweatshop, this workin' overtime stuff. Git yuh task done or come back after supper. Goddamn machine got stuck. Delib'rate sabotage, he calls it. I'd like to sabotage his guts. [To Queen.] What happened to you this mornin'?

QUEEN [In a high tenor voice]: I got an awful pain in the back of my neck and flipped out. When I come to I was in the hospital. They was stickin' a needle in my arm—Say! What does plus four mean?

(Nightingales 17–18)

Technocracy

Furthermore, through the warden's unsavory and yet charismatic dialogue, Williams interprets the popular technocratic discourse of the Depression era. According to Mauritz Hallgren, technocratic social critics of the period contended, just as Whalen

does, that human labor—here, the prisoners who toil at embossing machines (63), for example—should, above all, “not be considered in any discussion or contemplation of radical changes in the industrial structure” (Hallgren 143). Clearly, the prison metaphor applies to industrial modes of mass production in factory settings, and to the regimentation of labor and life in an industrial technocracy. Many critics agree that Williams’s apprentice plays, and *Nightingales* especially, are the work of an artist with a socially conscious (Feingold 135) protest message, and this message “is obvious,” insists Celia Wren: “we are all implicated in the brutalities” at Monroe (Wren 17).

Characters Under Surveillance

As a “wild adventure for the storybooks” (*Nightingales* 160), the cliff-hanger separation of Eva from Jim nonetheless affords a chance (160) of something new arising from the strike, along with a sense of hope that remains conspicuously absent from the lunacy of the self-styled warden, a petty “Benito Mussolini” (82). Yellow Canary Jim Allison, much like Birmingham Red in *Candles* or the criminal Jim O’Connor in *Fugitive*, typifies the ultimate “burning scar” (162) of martyrdom that Eva finds so irresistible. Both in his drive to expose the appalling conditions in the prison and in the tragedy inherent in his criminal record—“ten bad years” from the age of sixteen (96)—the Canary exhibits personal qualities comprising both criminality and innocence. His affair with Eva endangers them both when Whalen, reaching for the whip, admits his disillusionment at having “put too much confidence in the wrong people” (149). However, until Jim’s acceptance of the hopelessness of escape from the plight he shares with his fellow convicts, the Canary maintains, with considerable charm, the optimism of a thwarted hero, almost up to the very day of the Klondike riot on 15 August (139). At

this early point, however, Jim unleashes his fury toward the warden's regime, predicting that the prison walls will "blow wide open" and explode with "hate, torture, madness, fury" (135).

In *Nightingales*, the multiethnic status of the prisoners functions to destabilize the "us versus them" social constructions common to prison narratives. Indeed, Williams often revises such constructs, "resisting an ideology of otherness" (Ek 5). For instance, he unites the former enemies, Butch and Jim, in armed rebellion as they overthrow the warden's "stinkin' sweatshop" (*Nightingales* 17). A scientifically (13) regulated existence, which has been put in place to reinforce Whalen's agenda of control, distorts human emotions and actions. Ultimately, the fatal effect of Whalen's regime upon the characters provides stark evidence of his baleful influence.

After the initial hunger strike, the ensuing bonding together of the prisoners, the developing relationship between Jim and Eva, and the impending media attention they hope to generate, including notices in the *Sunday Supplement* (*Nightingales* 13), the *Daily News* (14), and other "newspapers" (114) and media outlets—such as the *Morning Star* (93), the "Associated Press Bulletin," the "United Press," and at the "Columbia Broadcast System" (94)—spectators remain unprepared for the spectacle of such an offensive and inhuman place of punishment as the Klondike, where Whalen's particularly brutal guard, Schultz, leaves the inmates from the unruly Hall C to die (81). After Swifty, The Queen, Shapiro, and Joe succumb to the roasting heat, Schultz finds himself locked in and forgotten when Jim and Butch, a pair that forms an unlikely alliance in order to overthrow Whalen, succeed in escaping. Thus Williams concludes this most political of his full-length apprentice plays with an unusually gory climax. Nevertheless, he

characteristically shapes it with fantastic ambiguity. We encounter extremes in the final scene of the play, as Eva clings to her love for Jim, and Jim, albeit ambivalently, finds his freedom. Jim decries love as “something nasty that’s done in dark corners around this place” (101). But when the Canary takes the “Quick Way Out” to hitch a water-logged ride alongside the Lorelei excursion steamer, he leaves behind a “faintly smiling” Eva, all the while clutching his shoes (163).

Spirituality

Williams’s highly charged poetic language challenges the conventions associated with traditional prison narratives, since it opens up a utopian dimension, as in the depiction of Jim’s ultimate anagnorisis. Despite the prevailing “inhumanity” (*Nightingales* 53) of the prison, and Williams’s alternative use of fantasy conventions and staging techniques (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii), the inmates’ motivations, compulsions, and prejudices do not appreciably differ from those of any other character to be found in the tradition of the protest narrative.

Williams counters Whalen’s “scientific” regulations (*Nightingales* 13) by focusing on the political implications of Black spirituality, as, for example, when Ollie blesses “Presiden’ Roosevelt” (35). This clearly contrasts with the “intellectual emancipation” arising from Jim’s agnostic musings (35), which are almost religiously celebrated. Williams also deftly characterizes Shapiro’s fatalistic Judaism (139), as well as acknowledging the two sides of institutionalized, jailhouse Christianity, as exemplified by the caring Chaplain, on the one hand, and the insincere Reverend on the other. Although Jim dutifully endures the warden’s sadism in the hope of parole, his fate remains ambiguous. Nonetheless, the deaths of Swifty and The Queen, both euthanized

by Butch, seem to be inevitable, while necessity governs Butch's frenzied, Klondike-tortured mind at the warden's brutally cruel whim. Death in the Klondike—having already claimed the lives of both Sailor Jack, a character who moves to a “psychopathic ward” (70), and of Ollie—now comes for Swifty, The Queen, Joe, and Shapiro.

Men and Women in the Prison Narrative

At times, the arc of the typical prison narrative may run counter to that of the overarching protest narrative, in that female characters in prison narratives often endanger the very men they offer to console and seek to help. For example, Eva brings a chaotic influence into the prison, and manifests a strikingly foreign entity within its rigid hierarchy. *Nightingales'* “intruding female” characters, which Büssing observes as being characteristic “throughout the prison narrative genre” (22), are also strangely, and almost hypnotically, methodical. Even Mrs. Bristol, the “matron” (*Nightingales* 3) who seeks to visit her beloved son in prison ultimately becomes a catalyst of disruption to the Warden's scientific approach, by forcing Whalen into “taking time out from our routine business” in order to protest the inhumane treatment of her son, Jack(32). In this respect, Eva is no different, for her presence jeopardizes Jim's parole, escalates the conflict with Whalen, and ultimately precipitates the riot. As a victim of the repellent/attractive “father's seduction” (Gallop 489), Eva unmistakably displays an inability to resist the Whalen's mesmerizing domination:

EVA: [rising slowly]: Could you give me a job?—Please, I'm—terribly nervous, I—if I don't get a job soon I'll—

WARDEN: What? Go off the deep end?

EVA: Yes, something like that! [She smiles desperately]

WARDEN: Well, Miss—uh—

EVA [eagerly]: Crane! Eva Crane!

WARDEN: They call that window the “Quick Way Out”! It’s the only one in the house without bars. I don’t need bars. It’s right over the bay. So if it’s suicide you got in mind that window is at your disposal. No, Miss Crane. Next time you apply for a job don’t pull a sob story. What your business executive is interested in is your potential value, not your—your personal misfortunes! [He takes a cigar]

EVA [turning away]: I see. Then I—

WARDEN: Hold on a minute. (*Nightingales* 15)

As to the men, *Nightingales*’ characterization of the two “hypnotic” (Wellwarth 274) male rivals for Eva’s attention, Boss Whalen and Canary Jim Allison, prefigures such other charismatic “angry-young-men” (274) as Jimmy Porter in John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956).

Even in a sexually segregated prison setting, Williams finds room for a female character motivated by “the unemployment situation” in a typically imperfect world of despairing protest (*Nightingales* 45). Initially, Williams introduces Eva, the warden’s new secretary, as an incomplete creature, as someone with no “social life” whatsoever, involved in relationships only “by correspondence” (77), and trapped by the tedium of her mundane existence. Eva is “so busy job hunting” after moving to Monroe City, that she has no “time to cultivate friends” (77), a fact which the warden uses in order to exploit Eva’s vulnerability, making her all the more easily hypnotized by him, despite his “coarse” and “stout” appearance (13).

In yet another instance of ambivalent characterization, the stage directions stipulate that the morally repugnant warden is nonetheless a physically attractive figure, with “powerful . . . good looks” (*Nightingales* 13). In fact, even as Eva professes to Jim her self-disgust, she nonetheless expresses an inability to resist the warden’s perverse tales and advances. Also, as she readily admits to Jim, she rigidly endures the warden’s fumbling (*Nightingales* 80) embrace, not because she is hungry (133), nor only to free Jim, but because of Whalen’s horrifically fascinating powers of attraction (83).

Disturbingly, throughout *Nightingales*, Whalen’s relationship with Eva consistently conforms to a traditional father-daughter paradigm, rendered even more perverse here through its incestuous connotations (44, 60, 79, 150, 158). The warden spouts the baby talk of a man in his dotage—“Puddikins? Popsy dust wanted to know if oo was being a dood little durl!” (60), while his protestations concerning his “cute’s the dickens” offspring—a “girl” because he “[w]ouldn’t have nothing else” (60)—are interspersed with his tales of young women who, in the throes of passion, call him “Papa”:

WARDEN: Why don’t you drop that formality stuff? [He crosses to Eva.]

How do I look to you? Unromantic? Not so much like one of the movie stars?—Well it might surprise you to know that I go over with some of the girls! [He seats himself on the corner of the desk.]—I had a date not so long ago—girl works over at the Cattle and Grain Market—’bout your age, build, ev’rything—[He licks his lips.]—When I got through loving her up she says to me—“Do it again, Papa do it again!”—[He roars with laughter and slaps his desk.] Why?

Because she loved it, that's why! [He rises and goes to the inner door.]

You ever been in here? (80)

With the development of the love triangle involving Jim, Eva and her employer, Williams hones his radical approach to the “seductive/disarming/unsettling” notions of Whalen’s sexist ideology (Gallop 489), the fantastic implications of which he will explore not long after in *Stairs to the Roof*. Whalen confesses his sexual desire for Eva through his use of “baby” talk (*Nightingales* 149), as well as through the voyeuristic control of his young and attractive “flunkies” (Eva, his “girl,” and Jimmy, his “boy”):

WARDEN: [slowly, studying Jim’s face]: Okay. Yeah, you’re a good boy,
Jim.

JIM: Thanks.

WARDEN: [leaning back]: I like you, Jim. Why? Cause you got a face
that looks like it was cut outa rock. Turn sideways, Jim—Eva?

EVA: [at the files]: Yes, Sir?

WARDEN: Ever seen a cleaner-cut profile than that? Like it was carved in
stone, huh? Them jaws, the nose, the mouth? I tried to break that when
Jim first come in here. Never did. It stayed like it is—stone face!
Never got it to change, not even when I give him fifty stripes with a
rubber hose ev’ry morning for fourteen days.—Remember that
Jim? . . . Jim’s on my side all right. I couldn’t break him so I made him
useful. Take off your shirt, Jim—show Eva your back.

JIM: Yes, Sir. [He obeys with curious, machine-like precision. Diagonally across his shoulder down to the waist are long scars which ten years could not obliterate.] (62)

In characterizing the warden as an incestuous father figure, Williams emphasizes both Whalen's passionate, early identification with a mother figure (*Nightingales* 44), and his affair with his wife's second cousin. Well-meaning matrons such as Mrs. Bristol seem to pose no threat to Whalen, nor do they engender competition among the men. Whalen calmly lights a cigar and orders his guards to forcibly remove "Mrs. B" after she learns what both the prisoners and the play's spectators already know; namely, that the warden "cooked the brains out of" (19) her son:

MRS. B: My boy, Jack, my boy! Not what you said! Anything but that! Say he's dead, say you killed him! But don't tell me that. I know, I know. I know how it was in here. He wrote me letters. The food not decent. I tried to send him food—he didn't get it—no, even that you took from him. That place you sent him three days, Klondike. I know—You tortured him there, that's what you did, you tortured him until you drove him—[She turns slowly to Jim.]—Crazy? Is that what you said?—Oh, my precious Jesus, oh my God! [She breaks down, sobbing wildly.] (33)

Jim, a liberal humanist, initially bases his intention to change the prison, unrealistically, on the relatively soft principle of moral reasoning (Niebuhr 498). He attempts to achieve this goal while claiming to be working against Whalen from the inside (*Nightingales* 126). Jim initially sees prison as being a scientifically (13) sound

opportunity for contemplation and meditation under near-monastic conditions, as a result of which he earns ten years of “copper” (“in here copper means good time”) for “extolling the inspirational quality of prison life” (11). His complicity in promoting the heinous prison system explains why he initially chooses to isolate himself from the other prisoners, who shun him for his editorials such as “Prison: The Door to Opportunity” (11) that appear in *The Archaeopteryx*, Monroe City Prison’s “monthly publication” (so named for an extinct species of “reptile-bird” [9]). Many prisoners wonder whether Jim, like other isolated inmates, will “go stir bugs”; furthermore, since they perceive Jim as a traitor, no one “will have nothin’ to do with him but Ollie” (23). In his stage directions, Williams makes Jim’s stress immediately evident, for “Jim stands motionless . . . his arms raised slowly—the hands clenched into fists—they vibrate, outstretched, with a terrific intensity—then slowly fall to his sides” (47). Jim also admits to Eva that he will soon “blow up!—Crack to pieces! I’m drawn as tight as I can get right now!” (125). His pent-up frustration will ultimately spell his doom. For example, when Jim’s conversations with Eva achieve a certain level of intimacy, the star-crossed couple is outed by a guard who notes that “the Canary’s turned into a lovebird” in “the southwest corner of the yard” (148), which invokes the warden’s wrath and precipitates Jim’s fateful visit to Klondike.

Jim ultimately comes to realize that both his adaptive role as the warden’s “stooge” (*Nightingales* 126) and his simultaneous renunciation of all other prison relationships have been in vain, a turn of events that, much to Eva’s dismay, he sees as the “dirtiest trick they’ve played on us yet” (127):

JIM: You know what it's been like. Hated like poison for ten years by everybody but him. Working for him and all the time hating him so that it made me sick at the guts to look at him even! Ten years of being his stooge, Jimmy boy, do this, do that! Yes, Sir. Yes, Mr. Whalen!— My hands aching to catch that beefy red neck of his and choke the breath out of it! That's one reason why they shake so much—and here's another. Standing here at this window, looking out, seeing the streets, the buildings, the traffic moving, the lights going off and on, and me pent up here, in these walls, locked in 'em so tight it's like I was buried under the earth in a coffin with a glass lid that I could see the world through! While I felt the worms crawling inside me. . . (126)

Eva also learns to keep any underlying disaffections for her boss in close check. She agrees to the warden's sexual demands behind the office's inner door, in exchange for a letter endorsing Jim's parole (152). Although Jim tries (just as the Chaplain does) to convince Eva to flee the dangerous situation at Monroe, he nonetheless refrains from undermining her autonomy, even as she submits to Whalen for the sake of securing the letter. However, her sacrifice comes too late, for the prison environment explodes into conflict, through the presence of the troops sent by the authorities to quell the rebellion. This confrontation forces Jim to take the "Quick Way Out" (15): diving into the bay. The fact that Jim "got here before the Depression" seems to have left him unaware of the economic downturn, and Eva tells him that there "was a case in the paper where a man busted a plate-glass window so he could go to jail and get something to eat" (45). Interestingly, Jim seems to accept the idea of Eva's attraction to the Boss, but with none

of her avowed self-disgust at the notion (83). Jim's preoccupation with his own repression (86) and self-loathing brings the couple to the brink of doom, yet they never lose their affection and sympathy for one another:

JIM: That's it. Something that's locked up and keeps getting more and more all the time. There's lots of men in here with fingers that shake like this. It's power. Outside it runs dynamos, lights up big cities. But in here the power's all gone to waste. It just feeds on itself, gets bigger, and does nothing. Till something sets it off like a match does a keg of powder—and then you got an explosion!

EVA: Explosions are such a waste of power!

JIM: Yeah. But what's the alternative here?

EVA: Your writing!

JIM: Editorials for *The Archaeopteryx*?

EVA: No, you've got next month to think of Jim! (86)

The poetic justice finally meted out to Monroe's sadistic Boss particularly suits this would-be Mussolini, given that his overthrow, complete with a "munitions raid" (155), prefigures that of his role model, Mussolini, in 1944. Whalen strives to keep Eva for himself in his "inner" sanctuary, which he had already "fixed up nice" to seduce his "wife's second cousin," who later died of a mysterious "operation and Whalen bought his wife a mink coat" (44). He tells this compromising story in order to solicit Eva's "sympathy [with] all of us [who are] nervous, strained, overwrought" (153). However, from Whalen's point of view, Eva loses her ostensibly moral high ground when Whalen's guards discover her in the darkened yard with Jim:

WARDEN: Aw! [to Eva] You a while ago. Got hysterical in here.

Objected because there wasn't no chaperone in the house. Then you run out there like a bitch in heat and—

JIM [starting forward]: Stop it!

WARDEN: Aw!

JIM: It's easy to say things like that when you've got a gun stuck in my back. (149)

Michael Feingold, in his review of the Broadway production of the play in 1999, found the play's unexpected generic twists fascinating, in that “more interesting than Williams's attempts to replicate the slick [Hollywood] pattern are his lapses from it” (135):

The villainous warden who drives the men to revolt and tortures them is given a gaze of hypnotic power, in the Gothic monster tradition (some of Williams's earliest stories appeared in *Weird Tales*). An overtly effeminate prisoner, called The Queen, is written to be played for pathos instead of comedy, a notion that would have sat no better with Broadwaygoers of the time than with the keepers of Hollywood's Production Code.

(Feingold 135)

Whalen's dictatorial doctrine owes much to the belief in white male supremacy and to political fascism. Undeniably, Whalen caricatures Mussolini, who was himself caricatured by the media at this time (1938). Whalen runs the prison with fascistic precision according to his own materialistic and political manifesto. He not only controls Eva's access to the mainland but also controls what the reporters from the *Morning Star*

learn about the poisonous (*Nightingales* 61) prison food. Moreover, when Eva questions the warden's arbitrary filing system, his "prisoner indexes" (31), and his corrupt "manipulation of figures . . . in the commissary report," Whalen admits to having embezzled "about six hundred dollars" (78):

WARDEN: You're in a position where you got to meet the public. Big men politically come in this office—you give 'em a smile, they feel good—what do they care about the tax payers' money?—those boobs go aroun' checkin' over accounts, where did this nickel go, what's done with that dime—jitney bums, I call 'em!—No, Siree, I got no respect for a man that wants a job where he's got to make a note of ev'ry red copper that happens to slip through his hands!—well—policy that's what I'm after!—Being political about certain matters, it don't hurt ever, yuh see? (79)

Williams exploits the grotesque incongruities of Eva's relationship to Whalen; romantic scenarios of liberation through eroticism are likely to strike the audience as inappropriate, especially as Eva seems bent on submitting to Whalen like a domesticated bird (the Crane of her namesake?), hypnotized as she is by this reptilian, cigar-chomping monster (*Nightingales* 9). The warden also tortures his victims, a typical manifestation of Whalen's concept of masculine supremacy. But his capacity to attract ultimately dissipates, and his final rites take place as he is sentenced, in true protest fashion, by the underclass he had consistently oppressed.

Williams links global politics to the prisoners' hard-won justice and newfound power—"the two rulers face each other . . . there is scattered gunfire, and a flickering

light is thrown through the windows like the reflection of flames” (*Nightingales* 159)—while barricaded inside the warden’s inner room in the prison’s tower, a stark symbol of Whalen’s phallic power. Williams often depicts protest idealists as martyrs and caged outcasts, although nowhere so literally as in *Nightingales*:

JIM: Ev’ry man living is walking around in a cage . . . till he’s dead. Then
the walls come to pieces and he stops being lonesome—
[Butch grins delightedly and nudges Joe; he describes a circle with his
finger and points at Jim’s cell. They both crouch grinning, listening, on
the bench by the wall.] (37)

At first, Whalen toys with the prisoners and their families, seeing “people as subjects rather than selves” (Timpane 752), and remaining relatively unconcerned by a hunger strike that initially involves but a small number of unorganized prisoners. Notably, what Crandell indicates in “Peeping Tom” applies as well within the confines of Monroe, in that “to crave intimacy seems only normal, just as to dread it, considering the prevailing cultural prohibitions against both incest and homosexuality, also seem normal” (32). Furthermore, to crave intimacy and to dread it, as Whalen’s perversions seem to dictate, “is to be caught in the paradoxical place of the erotic voyeur” (Crandell 32). Although Whalen underestimates the resourcefulness of the men in Hall C, he finally realizes that they form part of a larger and more committed band of protesters clearly capable of drawing national media attention to their plight. During the subsequent takeover of the prison, Whalen finally dies at the hands of those he had sought to dominate.

Prison Types: Butches, Queens, and Niggers

Sabine Büssing, in *Prison Fiction* (1990), posits that the “stock characters of prison fiction” consist of variations on a common duality; in other words, characters such as The Queen alternate with, or are complemented by, the Butch character type (14). Manifestations of individual will, as seen in the character of Butch, reveal an exclusively masculine mode of socialization. Thus, Butch’s hyper-masculinity offers an alternate approach to the illegitimacy of criminality as an extreme counterpoint to the more rigidly ideological, yet functionally implicit, policing of mainstream social roles. In *Nightingales*, the Canary intends to molt away his criminal past—“[t]here’d be yellow feathers floating all over Hall C!” (*Nightingales* 37)—in order to become an agitator for prisoners’ rights:

JIM: There’s a chance I might get [parole]. And if I do I’m going to justify my reputation as a brilliant vocalist, Butch. I’m going to sing so loud and so high that the echo will knock these walls down! I know plenty from working in the office. I know all the pet grafts. I know all about the intimidation of employees and torture of convicts; I know about the Hole, about the water cure, about the overcoat—about the Klondike!—And I know about the kind of food—or slop, rather!—that we been eating! You wait a month! That’s all! When I get through Whalen will be where he belongs—in the psychopathic ward with Sailor Jack! And I promise you, things will change in here—look—here’s an article about the Industrial Reformatory in Chillicothe!—that’s the kind of a place this’ll be! (70)

However, Jim's naïveté contrasts with the intense and controlling will of Butch, who responds to Jim's speech by "throwing the paper aside" and announcing, "Allison, you're full of shit" (*Nightingales* 70). In this way, Butch overcomes his inner fragility, which he manifests through Surrealistic fantasies about Goldie, his glamorous former lover. These romanticized dream-sequences afford a poignant contrast with Williams's political subject matter, thereby helping such fancies to assume a more complex dimension by comparison, since he punctuates the prison narrative with acute physical and emotional extremes. Surprisingly, Butch's imaginative flair and creativity allow him to temporarily "escape" the prison and the confinement of his own body through projecting an Expressionistic (Hale, *Introduction*, *Nightingales* xvii) fantasy in which he becomes reunited with his former lover, Goldie (*Nightingales* 56). In this intimate episode even the hardened Butch can manifest the tenderness suppressed by the majority of prisoners as he recollects the tune of Goldie's theme song, "Roses of Picardy" (56):

BUTCH: I always had that special feeling about you, kid. Honey, I used to try to find words to tell yuh what you did to me nights when you opened your mouth against mine and give me your love . . . I never told you about those times I watched you sleeping and how I felt toward you then. Because I wasn't good at making speeches. But I guess you knew.

GOLDIE: Of course I knew. I knew you loved me.

BUTCH: I wonder if your face still looks like that when you're sleeping.

GOLDIE: I haven't changed. You oughta know that Butch.

BUTCH: You don't go out with other fellows, do you?

GOLDIE: No. You know I don't. I been as true as God to you, Butch . . .
 Some girls say one man's as good as another. They're all the same. But
 I'm not made like that... I give myself, I give myself for *keeps*. And
 time don't change me none. I'm still the same . . . The same old kid.
 Running my dancing slippers down at the heels. But not forgetting
 your love. And going home nights alone. Sleeping alone in a big brass
 bed. Half of it empty, Butch. And waiting for you. (57–58)

Ultimately, Williams demonstrates that even the “butchest” of men “are destroyed for offering an alternative view of masculinity” (Clum 77) which makes their sympathetic nature vulnerable to the exploitation of others, even as it leads Butch to resist the corrupt prison authorities and to sustain hope in the struggle through song and fellowship.

The ironically named Klondike conjures up scenes of torture (*Nightingales* 123) diabolically imposed through scalding temperatures and hot steam. Butch fights the warden's system while watching his friends' demise, which testifies to his indomitable will (this, despite being beaten and repeatedly tortured by the prison guards). Williams scrutinizes the various agencies of propaganda, especially in his pillorying of Whalen's multimedia stranglehold, Jim and Eva's resistance of which ultimately leads to the overthrow of the warden's abusive authority.

In his introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the notion of heterosexuality as indicative of normative behavior, given its dependence upon the notion of homosexuality as indicative of abnormality (6). To a certain extent, the same could be said of the depiction of homosexuality or effeminacy in *Nightingales*. Interestingly,

although The Queen may be non-normative at Monroe, his cellmates do not reject him as deviant.

As one of the most readily identifiable figures in prison fiction, The Queen offers the homosexual character's point of view, one that other inmates nonetheless "often completely ignore" or ridicule (Büssing 22). As in many works of this type, Williams shows "how the homosexual is forced into a certain position right from the day of his imprisonment" (25). Although Williams does not portray The Queen as objectified, nor as interested in making sexual advances, the character nonetheless endures persecution for being refined and, therefore, considered odd (*Nightingales* 27).

According to Büssing, the prison Queen "appears at best as a pathetically absurd creature that deserves pity but no admiration of any kind" (52). Although prison "queens" generally face ostracism as objects of derision, Williams here softens the stereotype with sympathy. He invests The Queen with a kind of sympathetic heroism that resists assimilation into the predominantly butch population, although The Queen also, on occasion, serves as a target of ridicule. Williams also exposes to us The Queen's "complex effeminate trajectory—one that encompasses both rhetorical verve and violent vulnerability" (Schiavi 2). Further, Williams assigns to his queen character a certain inner strength, self-respect, and an indomitable sense of humor: "I don't trust no man honey. . . . No further'n I could kick Grant's Tomb with a fractured toe! [*He giggles.*]" (*Nightingales* 66). On a side note, in *Nightingales*, Canary Jim, yet another ostracized character, clearly respects The Queen.

Thus, *Nightingales* offers a compellingly original portrayal of the stereotypical Queen character. Williams does not focus unduly on the homosexual as outsider, yet The

Queen's function as Klondike's first martyr marks him both as a typical scapegoat, and as a fully realized character in his own right. Accordingly, he attempts to comfort (*Nightingales* 120) and, finally, to save the life of the ailing Swifty, begging Butch to give Swifty a chance (141) to continue taking turns at Klondike's makeshift air hole (140): "[Swifty] ain't dead yet . . . he's unconscious, Butch!" (141). Given that this may well be Williams's "first homosexual" character (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xx) in a full-length play, the particular, and significant, personal context of *Nightingales* must be fully taken into account in any assessment.

The Queen protests against his constant exposure to senseless, institutionalized discrimination, and yet, aside from Butch, The Queen remains the only character that confronts the other prisoners in an open and direct manner. This engenders their respect. Williams, while still in the process of coming to terms with his sexuality in 1938, would go on to create a gallery of fascinating, doomed gay men (Clum 74). *Nightingales'* Queen is significant in being the first example of such a character. Like a number of the openly gay characters in Williams's plays, The Queen finds martyrdom in death.

The Queen faces a measure of derision at the hands of his ostensibly heterosexual fellow-convicts, and not only as a newcomer unfamiliar with the lingo—"what's plus four mean?" (*Nightingales* 18)—but because his affective difference sets him apart from the other men (Büssing 119). Though the Queen earns the respect of Ollie and Jim, The Queen's cellmates ridicule his overly fastidious grooming habits. Prior to the Queen's death by scalding after a failed attempt to save another inmate that, like himself, was trapped in Klondike, Butch asks for The Queen's solidarity in song. "You know some good songs," he tells The Queen, adding emphatically, "you got a voice!" (*Nightingales*

138). This appeal signals a dramatic contrast between the derision typically directed toward the prison sissies or punks (98) and Butch's respect for The Queen's poise and feistiness. Like Swifty, who claims that his sentence was a mistake and, according to Butch, a frame job—"[y]ou don't look like you'd have gumption enough to crack a till" (51)—The Queen has also been imprisoned for a nonviolent crime; namely, the possession of marijuana.

Williams reveals the collective effort of the characters to shed the "animalistic" (*Nightingales* 71, 157) identity which the typically fascistic warden imposes upon them as prisoners. This imposition drives Ollie, another persecuted character, to commit suicide, an act so transgressive that Whalen strikes it from Ollie's permanent record, substituting instead "[s]evere hemorrhages" (91) for cause of death. Whalen's soon-to-be dismissed Chaplain believes the suicide "could have been avoided" (102), while the general population initiates a chant "gradually rising in volume and pitch": "KILLED OLLIE—THEY KILLED OLLIE—OLLIE'S DEAD!" (92). Undaunted, Whalen dismisses Ollie as a "fool nigger" (102). Williams demonstrates from the outset that, as a Black person, Ollie is especially disenfranchised within the penal system, lacking either choice or self-actualization long before he is turned (Büssing 11) into a convict. Williams challenges the notions of individual freedom, class freedom, and even human freedom, as Jim attempts to humanize Ollie before the warden:

WARDEN: Give Eva one of them cards—Naw, outa the top drawer. Fill that out. Name—What was that smoke's name?

JIM: Oliver. Oliver Jackson.

WARDEN: Special friend of yours?

JIM: All the men liked Ollie.

WARDEN: Huh. How old?

JIM: Twenty-six. (91)

Williams also demonstrates that Ollie's "crimes" are mostly owing to poverty and hunger, and to his refusal to endure torture. At this point, suicide simply offers him a form of escape from the prisoner's unrelenting suffering. Whalen reminds the departing Chaplain, albeit in explicitly racist terms, that "[n]obody made that nigger take a dive" (102).

Social and Political Coercion

Depression-Era Social Values

Williams's characters limn the experience of socially sanctioned enslavement (Feingold 136), while laying bare the effects on the prisoners of abuse and confinement, not to mention the psychological effects of such entrapment. Ollie discovers that principles of justice, such as "law and equity" (Franklin 42), do not apply to his condition. To wit, Whalen tells a begging mother that she "might as well be talking to the moon" (*Nightingales* 30) for all the good her appeals to his mercy will do. Tragedy follows as Whalen attempts to exert a sort of satanic, and increasingly frenzied, control over the prison until the play's final episode in act 3, episode 4, "The Showdown" (153). Making his entrance in the style of a worldly seducer, Whalen ultimately offers Eva and Jim the forbidden indulgences that accompany both privilege and privacy, all the while tempting the pair with cookies baked by the mother of the prisoner whose brain had been "cooked" (19) in Klondike's own version of hell:

WARDEN: Hello, hello there! [He removes his coat and tosses it to Jim.]

Breezy day, hot breezy day! [He winks at Jim, then belches.] Too much ground-inspection! [He loosens his collar and tie.] Excuse me, lady, I'm going to do a striptease! Yep, it's a mighty wind—feels like it comes out of an oven! Reminds me of those—[He wipes his forehead.]—those beautiful golden-brown biscuits my mother used to bake! What's this? [He removes the cover from the basket.] Speak of biscuits and what turns up but a nice batch of homemade cookies! Have one, young lady—Jimmy boy! (13)

Moreover, Whalen's "dictatorship" (*Nightingales* 82) stunts the possibility of intellectual and physical development among the prisoners. Eschewing the notion of reforming criminals, he openly mocks their "social rehabilitation" (6). Rather than preparing prisoners for reintegration and "citizenship," Whalen imposes a "dictatorial model on the poor" and presents "people who have problems" as the embodiment of such problems (Lipsitz 146), vowing, "I'm not going to mollycoddle those bastards" (115). Whalen applies a model of military discipline that is based on the latest scientific (13) approaches to managing the labor that the prisoners carry out within the factory. Whalen's brand of fascism dictates the behavior both of the sycophantic Reverend and of Eva (when she eventually succumbs to his hypnotic spell).

Williams does not neglect to consider the crippling effects of crime in Depression-era society, most notably through the character of Jim that, despite his role as Stool (*Nightingales* 23), speaks on behalf of the oppressed inhabitants of the urban underclass with their collective "case of bad influences" (10). Through Jim, Williams

critiques the social values of law, order, and purported autonomy—“who’s ever been given a choice?” (127)—largely by way of resisting the stereotypically reductive treatment of complex social problems predictably found in prison narratives. Whalen’s masculine anxieties have their source in character deficiencies that associate him with the materialism, selfishness, and ruthless competitiveness that plague many social groups in the wake of an economic downturn. To be sure, even the neoconservative economic policies that had been ushered in to resist the effects of the Depression, such as the mass incarceration of vagrants, proved largely ineffective in transforming the national psyche (Lipsitz 147).

Through his use of veiled political rhetoric, Whalen disguises the seriousness of the inhumane conditions that prevail inside the prison. He also manipulates media coverage of the hunger strike to assert his administrative agenda. As he explains, “[i]t’s my business, I’m going to keep it my business. . . . So just as a routine precaution I’ve ordered the boats to take no passengers on or off the island without my special permission” (*Nightingales* 131). Further, and in order to minimize the risk “of any outside interference while this trouble is going on” (131), he issues a false press release which states that the prison will operate under “quarantine restrictions” because “a bad epidemic’s broken out” (131). Eva, in effect, now faces imprisonment at Whalen’s hands as well. Whalen suggests throughout that the prisoners’ initial demonstration is a spontaneous riot created by a few subversives in Hall C (81), rather than a strike initiated by a unified prison population demanding edible food. However, the poisonous diet, from which Whalen profiteers, inevitably brings about his downfall:

JOE [twisting on his bed]: Oooooo!

BUTCH: Bellyache?

JOE: Yeah, from them stinkin' meatballs. By God, I'm gonna quit eatin' if they don't start puttin' in more digestible food.

BUTCH [reflectively]: Quit eating, huh?—I think yuh got something there.

JOE: Oooooo—Christ! [He draws his knees up to his chin.]

BUTCH: You ever heard of a hunger strike, Joe? . . . Sometimes it works, gits in the papers. Starts investigations. They git better food. (40)

Whalen further manipulates public awareness by preventing Eva from contacting the media. The administration fervently hopes to avert a media frenzy, as demonstrated in act 1, episode 11, “Hunger Strike!”. Whalen hopes to draw attention away from the strike and, in so doing, divert public attention away from the horrifying (E. Williams 97) problems that are “directly related to the performance of the administrators themselves” (Ek 63). Ironically, he wishes to be seen, especially in Eva’s eyes, as having solved the violent conflict that his own policies had brought on. Whalen only manipulates; he never negotiates. Opportunistically, he uses both potential and ongoing conflicts as the means to replace members of the prison staff that he considers disloyal:

CHAPLAIN: There have been too many suicides, several drownings, hangings, so-called accidents, since I've been here. Now it appears that we're in danger of having a mass suicide in Hall C. The men have gone on hunger strike, which I think is fully justified by the quality of food they've been getting.

WARDEN: Aw. Now I'm beginning to suspect who's responsible for the wild stories that have been leaking out to the public about things here.

I'm afraid you're what the boys call a—stool pigeon, Reverend.

(Nightingales 103)

Conflicts and scandals such as the hunger strikes, the spate of suicides, and the prisoners' protest against the new Reverend's speech only serve to convince Whalen that Klondike must be enacted as a means of tighter control: "You might want to drop a word to the boys on hunger strike about the radiator test we made in Klondike. We got the temperature up to 150 degrees—you might mention that" (*Fugitive* 102). Jim's awareness of the possibility of conflict, and of the real and imagined threats that the abused convicts pose, leads him to caution the other inmates that Whalen will likely become all the more adamant in enforcing certain preventative methods—such as water torture, the ominous overcoat technique, and isolation in the Hole (70)—devised to control an unruly prison population. Whalen strives to undermine all attempts at solidarity among the prisoners by thwarting their efforts to transform the corrupt system, hoping to reinforce institutional control through mass torture. Conversely, the prisoners express their solidarity by mimicking "the currently popular models" of the Hollywood prison narratives of the 1930s (Feingold 135). The prison that Whalen touts as a model institution (*Nightingales* 100) is not only the site of multiple suicides but also the site of several deaths that followed acts of torture gone awry. Williams deftly characterizes individual prisoners through the use of dialogue, character foils, and comparatively parallel plotting, which allow him to demonstrate to what extent the prisoners' perspectives diverge from that of Whalen's.

Political Stances: Power, Torture, and Voyeurism

Ambivalence and ambiguity serve as the trademarks of the prison system as Williams portrays it, in which the irrational distortions and imbalances that prison life perpetuates mirror in the inmates' inability to sustain either a rational focus or coherent action when they most need them, such as during moments of intense stress.

Williams keenly distinguishes his characters' opinions from the more normative opinions that his audiences were likely to hold. For example, Whalen's distorted and self-serving notion of social justice remains sharply at odds with more commonly held definitions of that phrase, especially since they are undermined by Whalen's belief in his own absolute power. He consistently strives to conceal any events that could adversely affect the public's perception of his prison, a place that Eva (at least initially) glowingly describes as follows: "[t]hey've got experts—in psychology and sociology and things like that, you know!" (*Nightingales* 5). Notwithstanding such assurances of professionalism and expertise, Whalen, a person of coarse physicality (13), apparently derives his motivation from only two principles: total control over others and immediate personal gratification. To be sure, Whalen's fixation upon the physical and sexual domination of those around him fuels his brutal imagination. This propensity for gratification comes to the fore in how he treats certain objects as fetishes. For example, he inflates and plays with his daughter's "rubber ducky," flashes a photo of her Shirley Temple curls (60), chomps and puffs upon his cigar, grasps at Eva's "right Frenchy-looking" (79) blouse and, later, fumblingly objectifies Eva's unresponsive, rigid body (80).

Thus, Williams reveals to his intended audience the sometimes paradoxical dialectic between the prisoners' psyches and their physical selves. For example, Canary

Jim edits the prison journal, *The Archaeopteryx*, while yet bearing the scars of Whalen's punitive flogging while Butch, a tough-as-nails character, fantasizes romantically about his dance hall days with Goldie, a former lover and a prostitute.

Jim withdraws from the general prison population to serve as the warden's boy but, in an attempt to reconcile his former apolitical stance with his new participation in political resistance, he retraces the history and the agonizing development of his life as a prisoner in true protest fashion. Williams further explores Jim's stock in trade, the erudition and knowledge that he displays in his dialogues with Whalen (*Nightingales* 9). While describing himself as "just an ordinary grifter," we learn from Jim that ". . . now, I'm reading Spengler's *Decline of the West* and I'm editor of the prison monthly" (11). From Eva's point of view, Jim's endurance of Whalen's humiliating abuse appears stoical, yet it represents to her a form of curious, machine-like (62), or even clockwork acceptance—akin to Bram's in *Candles*—of his servitude, evidence of his fundamental passivity (in contrast to Butch, a character who protests the warden's abuse in the radical, prison tradition of direct action [Franklin, *Prison Literature* 114]).

Despite, or perhaps owing to, Jim's sharp intellect, caustic wit, and political commitment, the inmates shun him, and he rarely mixes with the general prison population. As Butch explains, Jim is "number three on the Angel's Record," the first being "Whalen, then Schultz, and then the Stool" (i.e., Jim; *Nightingales* 23). Butch further taunts and threatens Jim's life throughout *Nightingales*. In one such warning, Butch makes a grisly threat through the bars of Jim's cell as Ollie massages the shirtless, greasy Canary:

BUTCH: Yuh'd better start sleepin' with one eye open, Canary. Can yuh do that?

JIM: Never tried it Butch.—Ah, that's good.

BUTCH: Well, yuh better, 'cause if they catch you off guard, Canary, they'll climb down yuh throat an' tie knots in yuh gizzard! [He laughs delightedly at the prospect.]

JIM: That's good, ah, that's—swell. (36)

Williams questions the sincerity of Jim's commitment to a larger political agenda, given that Jim enjoys the privileges (43) not only of a sexual relationship with Eva, but of other perks. For example, Jim claims the right to smoke in prison although it is forbidden (23) and shares his cell only with Ollie, despite the widespread overcrowding. Also, somewhat naïvely, Jim assures the other men that, after his parole, "Whalen will be where he belongs—in the psychopathic ward with Sailor Jack" (70).

Conversely, Williams goes beyond both protest realism and naturalism in his mythologizing of the bravely unyielding Butch. Butch's more radical political stance, which informs and strengthens his extraordinary physical and mental discipline, stands in sharp contrast to Jim's position. Yet, despite Williams's obvious admiration of Butch's capacity for action, he also shows us Butch's tendency to escape, periodically, into fantasy and "visual and auditory hallucinations" (*Nightingales* 43). Williams highlights Butch's ambivalence in two contrasting scenes: the first is the Expressionistic fantasy (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii) in act 1, episode 7, "Butch Has A Dream" (*Nightingales* 56), while in "The Showdown," we see Butch's capacity for endurance, under torture, in Klondike. In the Expressionistic dream sequence, Butch's dreams and

delusions regarding Goldie seem only to strengthen him, however tenuous their relationship may have been. However, Goldie offers him the somewhat dubious reassurance that other men are “just pasteboard stickers, that’s all they are to me, Butch” (*Nightingales* 58).

In the second of the two scenes of delirium, Butch makes an ill-advised and ultimately futile attack on Klondike itself, an attack on the “fucking radiators” that ultimately scald him and that slowly roast the remaining inmates to death (*Nightingales* 145). In order to contend with the ambiguity of Williams’s episodic examination of prison life, Gronbeck-Tedesco points our “attention to other theatrical elements, especially supporting characters and dialogue” (743). Here, in Klondike, Butch has become clearly delirious (145), and Joe’s warnings come too late: “Christ, Butch, it ain’t no good . . . you’ve blown your top” (145).

The otherwise cynical Butch, however, through long exposure to the prison system, is prompted to organize the other prisoners to strike, despite his doubts concerning the likely outcome of such a venture. Throughout the play, Butch reminisces about Goldie, wondering “if a guy is any good at sixty?” (*Nightingales* 25), singing Goldie’s favorite songs along with other dancehall tunes that Joe scorns as having had “time to grow whiskers” (117). Here, he defends Goldie to the end:

JOE: Maybe it was her that put the finger on you.

BUTCH: Naw. Not Goldie. I bet that girl’s still holding a torch for me.

JOE: Keep your illusions, Butch, if they’re a comfort to yuh. But I bet

Goldie was still holdin’ all the torches that she’s held before an’ after

you got put in the stir she'd throw more light across the water than a third alarm fire! (25)

Williams also highlights the usual psychological state of the prisoners, which borders on madness. For example, as a result of having spent half of his teenage years and his entire adult life behind bars, Jim, by his own admission, has been driven “crazy as a bedbug” (*Nightingales* 46). In fact, Williams challenges institutional definitions of sanity and insanity by illustrating the ways in which incarceration requires an insane (Melley 65) form of self-denial. Hence, “cracking up” has become “an occupational disease among convicts” (*Nightingales* 12). Such apparent insanity is endemic among the prisoners, given that the normal responses of active resistance and rebellion are not typically available, or necessarily empowering (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 114), which Williams makes all too evident as, one by one, the men succumb to Klondike’s heat. In the context of Hollywood’s 1930s prison narrative, “[d]ying would mean deliverance from unbearable pain, but also a surrender to the enemy which is beyond contemplation” (Büssing 31).

Butch’s resistance threatens the power structure at the prison but it also seems to hold out the hope of ultimate freedom for the inmates, whose attitudes have been shaped by the despairing conditions that have inspired their acts of protest. Through focusing on the conflicts existing among the inmates, their families, the prison guards, and the administration, Williams succeeds in examining the strong provocations facing all Depression-era prisoners; for example, in Monroe we see the evidence of poisonous (*Nightingales* 61) food and severe abuse. Indeed, Williams shows us the inherently fascistic nature of the prison system itself. By the “Evening of August 15” episode, Butch

convinces the inmates to resist Whalen's regime, and the inmates' newfound political awareness takes on a revolutionary tone:

BUTCH: . . . Some of us are gonna beat Klondike! . . . They come up to us and they say, "You win! What is it you want?" We say, "Boss Whalen is out! Git us a new Warden! Git us decent living conditions! No more overcrowdin', no more bunkin' us wit' contajus diseases; fresh air in the cell-blocks, fumigation, an' most of all—WE WANT DECENT FOOD THAT'S FIT TO PUT IN OUR BELLIES!

[Applause] . . . Maybe when we git through housecleaning this place'll be like the Industrial Reformatory they got at Chillicothe! A place where guys are learnt how to make a living after they git outa stir! Where they teach 'em trades an' improve their ejication! Not just lock 'em up in dirty holes an' hope to God they'll die so as to save the State some money!! [Fierce yammering.] (122–23)

Following the hunger strike, even Eva finds the courage to challenge Whalen, boldly stating, "I think you're exceeding your authority" (131).

As one notes in many traditional prison narratives, Monroe's administrative structure supports the warden's "divide and conquer" (Ek 82) strategy of control. Thus, Whalen attempts to coerce certain prisoners, such as Canary Jim, by offering special privileges (*Nightingales* 43). Such an approach effectively divides the prisoners into two groups: those supporting Jim versus those supporting Butch. Whalen's brutal and legalistic arguments reinforce the status quo and ultimately overcome the "narratives of revolution" that Butch espouses (Conniff 147). We witness this struggle in the way the

powers-that-be—the warden and his administration, including the Chaplain’s replacement, Whalen’s hand-picked, new “Reverend” (*Nightingales* 110)—rapidly retreat from the prisoners’ unrest.

According to Ek, “the look” (95), a steady, challenging gaze used by prison guards and other administrators, serves to control antiauthoritarian forms of resistance in prisons. Williams assigns this powerful look to Whalen by way of emphasizing the power differential between the prison staff and the prisoners. Whalen also objectifies Eva beneath his controlling, “hypnotic . . . gaze” (*Nightingales* 133), using it to ensure her submissiveness in their relationship. The immediate effect of the gaze confirms its efficiency as a means of control (Ek 13). Moreover, the gaze “reinforces the effect of being constantly watched,” under surveillance from which there is little, if any, reprieve (Ek 95). As Butch essentially warns the most recent inmates, such as Swifty, the prison experience “seems to both invite and legitimize the voyeuristic fantasy and pleasure of looking at life” (Ek 97). Whalen’s consistent brutality, repellent immaturity, and cries of self-pity—“I’m a family man! I’ve got a wife! A daughter! A little *girrrrr!*” (158)—all color his reign of terror and stem from a fear of powerlessness. Interestingly, Williams characterizes Whalen as scared (81), unnerved, and frightened (92), words often used to qualify the less obvious, more vulnerable aspects of typical bullies.

Nonetheless, Whalen has at his disposal both governmental and ecumenical control: he dismisses one Chaplain, hires another, and then dismisses the replacement “Reverend,” while yet hoping to buy his silence. Like any other aspiring dictator, Whalen masters the art of propaganda, releasing to the media only that which he does not choose

to suppress as he seeks to indoctrinate the public with his fixed ideas (Dennis 329).

Williams's own views on the link between penology and fascism in 1938 appear below:

It is significant that the great thinkers and artists of Fascist countries have become voluntary exiles because they cannot exist and create in states where the science of government has become confused with that of penology. Thomas Mann, Einstein, Freud, Max Reinhardt, leaders in every field of science and art, have fled from the black-shirted countries.

Without such men there would be no progress in civilization. Culture would become merely a product of the munitions factories. Most of these exiles came to America because they thought that America was free from Fascism. Is it possible that they were mistaken in that belief? Can Fascism come to this country? (qtd. in Leverich, 260)

Although Butch's resolution and determination suggest almost superhuman qualities, his intense drive ultimately proves meaningless, as he finds himself gradually stripped of his free will when agents of the law entrap him in the office of the dead warden, and destroy him. With federal forces closing in, Williams seems to challenge the fairness of the criminal justice system—a system that he shows to be dehumanizing rather than reformative in any sense—as evinced not only in Butch's final moments, but also in how characters such as Canary Jim, Eva, and the prison guards fare within the system (though they cling doggedly to the “idea that work would provide economic and social freedom” (Duffy, *American Labor* 16).

Finally, the riot that precipitates Jim's escape becomes an apocalyptic illumination of the warden's prison administration. The fact that escape becomes a

possibility, legally or otherwise, for Jim—however ambivalently Williams offers it here—and that Jim inevitably must reject it, proves that his courage to revolt elevates him beyond considerations of worldly materialism. Williams metaphorically puts forth such concerns as the Canary leaps from the window of the inner room to follow the Lorelei tourist steamer, while leaving his shoes behind. The Lorelei, incidentally, reminds us that, like Eva, we are all tourists hoping to catch a sensational glimpse into life behind the stone walls on the island of Monroe City Prison:

EVA: Oh, Jim. I would have liked to live with you outside. We might have found a place where searchlights couldn't point their fingers at us when we kissed. I would have given you so much you've never had. . . . We should have had long nights together with no walls. Or no stone walls—I know the place! A tourist camp beside a highway, Jim, with all night long the trucks rumbling by—but only making shadows through the blinds! I'd touch the stone you're made of, Jim, and make you warm, so warm. . . . Oh, Jim, if we could meet like that, at some appointed time, some place decided now, where we could love in secret and be warm, protected, not afraid of things—we could forget all this as something dreamed!—Where shall it be? When, Jim? Tell me before you go!

JIM: Quick! It's almost close enough! Get that shoe off!

EVA [pulling off his shoes]: Yes Jim! But tell me where?

JIM [climbing the sill]: Watch the personal columns!

EVA: Jim!—Good-bye! [He plunges from the window]—Good-bye . . .

[Music from the Lorelei swells . . .] (*Nightingales* 162–63)

The play concludes ambiguously with the depiction of a committed and united prison population, albeit a population with little influence to effect improvement in their deplorable living conditions. Butch awaits certain death at the hands of the federal agents since, unlike Jim, he “can’t swim a goddamned stroke” (26).

Notably, such ambivalence also extends to the prison authorities. Whalen’s technocratic approach to the maintenance of prison conditions—whereby the prison’s “expert dietitian” supposedly accounts for the men’s expenditures of “units of body heat” and “weighs everything by calories” (*Nightingales* 13)—ultimately leads to the imposition of martial law. Moreover, Whalen consistently apes the technocratic rule of fascist dictators such as Mussolini, whom Williams mocks throughout (50, 82, 106). Far from assuming an anticapitalist position, Whalen does not “propose to wrest economic power from the ruling class” (Hallgren 147), but rather, with the help of his “strong-arm squad” (*Nightingales* 20), he protects the interests of the Commissioner (47) and Judge Eggleston (51). In addition, as the warden reminds Butch and Jim, “I’ve got the United States army in back of me!” (158). His assurance, however, is not sufficient to avert his death at the hands of Butch.

Social Determinants: Race, Class, and the Depression

In *Nightingales* the social context of the Depression determines all, and displaces any overly nuanced concern with psychological motifs. Williams fulfills Chandler’s criteria in terms of his chosen topics, but also through his experimental stagecraft and settings, which are designed to reflect Williams’s explicit and “socially conscious”

(Feingold 135) exploration of Depression “subcultures” at the margins of society

(Stallybrass and White 4):

EVA: You don't understand. I was out of work six months before I got this job . . . I got down to my last dime. Once a man followed me along the street and I stood still, waiting for him to catch up with me. Yes, I'd gotten down that low, I was going to ask him for money—

JIM: Did you?

EVA: No. At the last moment I couldn't. I went hungry instead. [Jim looks at her.] Now you want me to go back to that? Times haven't improved. Now maybe I'd have more courage, or less decency, or maybe I'd be hungrier than I was before.

JIM: You'd better hold onto your job, Miss Crane. Even if it means participating in a massacre! (*Nightingales* 113)

We are rarely permitted to overlook the fact that Monroe, a “model institution” (100), functions during the Depression when times simply “haven't improved” (113), and when only a handful of characters can hope to realize any measure of liberty. Nevertheless, the prisoners derive new courage from the harsh prison regime, and despite their misfortunes, Jim and Butch eventually learn to trust one another. In fact, Butch gives Jim his ring to pass along to his beloved:

BUTCH [pulling off ring]: Here. There used to be a girl named Goldie at the Paradise Dance Hall on Brook Street west of the Ferry. If you should ever meet her, give her this—And tell her that I—kept it—all this time.

JIM: Sure, Butch—I will if I make—

BUTCH [going to the door]: So long.

[Rapid gunfire and distant shooting heard outside. Jim unlocks the inner door.] (160)

Significantly, in examining Ollie’s perspective and that of the other prisoners, Williams interprets the various suicide scenarios, including both The Queen’s and Joe’s respective longings for death as a means of escape, and yet Williams assesses, in each case, the characters’ individual acts and their political consequences. The respective fates of Jim and Butch reside in the latter’s “conscious acquiescence in the working of this unavoidable fate” (Büssing 112), a resignation which causes him to bring about not only the warden’s death (“[t]he fish will have indigestion”) but also, quite likely, his own (*Nightingales* 161). Williams’s repeated re-enactment of the suicide impulse—note the matter-of-fact way that the characters, including the warden, discuss the “Quick Way Out” (15, 163)—highlights how the individual actions and desires of each character stem from social determinants. By refusing to play their predetermined social roles within the hierarchy of the prison and, for example, by refusing to shun either Ollie or The Queen, the characters in *Nightingales* reveal how the politics of the inmates “originate with the institution” rather than with the institutionalized individual (Ek 91–92). As in many prison narratives of the period, whether in literature or in film, Williams’s focus, both on social rehabilitation (5) or, as is more often the case, the lack thereof, and on individual characters’ intentions, “works along the lines of sociology rather than psychology” (Melley 28).

Jim remains trapped in prison and, in the end, circumstance forces him to choose between a dubious escape versus doing battle with armed federal troopers (*Nightingales* 158). Thus, despite Jim's hard-earned "copper" (11), Whalen dashes his hopes of release. Jim's fate illustrates the inescapable bureaucratic precepts that create the victims of what Gregory Bateson identifies as a sociological "double bind" (41). The disorienting and destructive effect of Monroe's iron cages cannot be broken "except by an extraordinary self-negation" (Laing 40), and the inmates' fruitless resistance often leads to frightening, schizophrenic scenarios of behavior (*Nightingales* 17) or, even, to "Dementia Praecox" (32). Here, as in the Hollywood prison narratives, motifs such as physical borders, fronts, and even the Island's moat (Hale, *Fugitive Kind* 175), as emphasized in the "Southwest Corner of the Yard" episode (*Nightingales* 148), signify the "structures most under question" (Melley 99) as the riot begins. Williams describes the tragic losses caused by such cramping confinement and the atmosphere of oppression; he intends that such a stark depiction of unnecessary human suffering will evoke in his audience a due sense of outrage and "an impassioned search to avenues of overturning and transforming the causes of that suffering" (Welch 83).

At Whalen's behest, Jim records causes of death in an arbitrary fashion, to be filed alongside the official bookkeeping entries. Williams thereby demonstrates the cold bureaucratic manner in which the prison administration conducts sentencing and routine business (*Nightingales* 32). Moreover, Whalen uses his disproportionate power to dictate according to his personal whims and fleeting emotions, rather than any semblance of genuine, judicial authority. For example, Jim's parole hinges on whether or not Whalen is "steamed up" (125). The martyrs of this prison drama, such as the heroic Queen, and Eva,

who trades sex in exchange for Jim's parole, credibly protest their uncomfortable settings, notably the tiny cells and filthy "Holes" of Monroe (70). The attendant iconography, characters, and settings of the prison, and the vulgar mode of presentation that Williams commonly adopts, all work to underscore the play's protest message. However, the alienation of the characters, each being trapped inside a personal prison or cage (37, 54), marks a stylistic departure from straightforward protest realism, emphasizing instead the individual, personal implications of "going stir bugs" (23) in Monroe's "BIG HELL" (123).

Like Jean Genet, Williams warily refrains from making explicit judgments regarding his incarcerated characters' ostensible amorality. However, in light of the deplorable conditions that prevail within the prison, largely as a result of Whalen's lack of stewardship, Williams provides a key to understanding the actions of the characters. In adopting the guise of a traditional, authoritarian warden, Whalen, in his speech to Eva prior to the hunger strike, attempts to make a "convincing case" (Ek 7) for his domination over the prisoners: "[y]ou think I'm brutal dontcha . . . [you must] realize the position I'm in" (*Nightingales* 64). Whalen's views reveal traces of the aberrant psychology associated with the criminal element in literature, especially those about criminality and other forms deviance, stretching "all the way back to the picaresque origin" of the prison narrative (Franklin 267). As a public relations move designed to stifle the prisoners' acts of protest over the prison diet, Whalen reinstates martial law and, in so doing, effectively makes Eva his prisoner. He willingly applies torture and abuse, only to deny any moral responsibility for his actions: "I was good to you afterwards, Jim!" (*Nightingales* 157). Warden Whalen also displays a typically "desperate need for authority and

legitimization” (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 267), as signalled by the bizarre erotic turns of his “lascivious” deeds and overtures throughout the play (*Nightingales* 133).

Whereas in many of the American prison narratives “prior to 1960, white convicts usually reach a conclusion that can be summed up in the phrase: ‘I did this to myself’” (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 270), in *Nightingales* Williams focuses on how, under the influence of personal and political experience, a prisoner escapes from the burden of his criminal past. *Nightingales* culminates with Williams’s reiteration of the indomitable perseverance of the persecuted criminal, a preoccupation that was common to other writers working within the 1930s protest genre (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 267), such as Langston Hughes, Clifford Odets, and William Saroyan. Interestingly, the warden’s key nemesis embodying class unity and rebellion, Butch, also compares himself to a “Mussolini” type (*Nightingales* 82). His leadership of the Monroe protest, however, belies any such identification through an empathetic awareness of what binds him to the other inmates. As in *Fugitive Kind*, the underclass bands together in *Nightingales* to mock polite “sassiaty” (105), with a corresponding protest message that suggests the elite “ain’t even human” (106). In the final analysis, this realization of the class-conditioned hostility that confronts them helps to define the inmates’ grounds for solidarity.

As a vehicle for protest, *Nightingales* provides a dramatic contrast to the Production Code–approved Hollywood bromides of the 1930s and beyond. Consider, for instance, how Williams presents prison suicide and straight-razor euthanasia as acts of free will and mercy, respectively. Furthermore, in the deadly Klondike environment, only the strongest have any hope of surviving—“don’t chicken out!” (*Nightingales* 145). Ironically, suicide attests to a prisoner’s “free” will (Büssing 154), as when Ollie “butted

his head against the wall and broke it” (*Nightingales* 90), when The Queen expresses the wish to “starve to death” (118), or when Joe begs Butch to slit his throat: “I wanta get done with this!” (144). After establishing the brutality inherent within Monroe, Williams blurs the line between free will and determinism, so much that when Butch decides to “stay here and fight it out” against the “troopers” and their “machine guns” (159), we know that even the strongest can survive for only so long. In truth, Butch’s very assertion of his free will also seals his doom. Williams also points to the uncertain outcome of any attempts to escape. As Jim makes clear, both possible avenues of escape constitute “longshots” (162), and he only gambles on the Lorelei’s passing on the basis of a hunch: “I’ll take my chances with the water” (159).

By the mid-1930s, prison torture and abuse were no longer deemed appropriate subjects for Hollywood’s investigation, at least according to the Hays Office. However, Williams’s depiction of the plight of Ollie in *Nightingales* reflects the reality of the ways in which unemployed Blacks were typically dealt with in the legal system. At that time, in many parts of the country people of color were kept from competing on the labor market by being sentenced to extended prison terms, no matter what the nature of the crime committed (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 106). For example, in 1936 the *New York Times* reported:

Alabama’s new Burglary Law was applied here for the first time today when a jury found James Thomas, Negro, guilty of burglary in which \$1.50 was the loot and fixed his punishment at life in imprisonment. . . . Jurors heard a strong plea for the death penalty.

(“Negro Burglar Gets Life”)

Likewise, in many instances throughout *Nightingales*, Whalen clearly trumps up charges and otherwise falsifies the prison's records. He does so most notably throughout the scene in which Ollie's suicide is made known:

WARDEN: Color—black! Sentence—

JIM: Three years.

WARDEN: Charge?

JIM [slowly]: Stole a crate of canned goods off a truck to feed his family.

WARDEN: Larceny! (*Nightingales* 91)

Race, more than social status, marks the primary “facet of otherness” in the majority of prison narratives (Ek 11) and a critique of such stratification based on race remains central to *Nightingales*. In classic Hollywood prison narratives, if they appear at all, non-white male characters appear to be utterly abandoned by society and are often depicted as left behind to die within the confining walls of the prison (80). Williams does not ignore the experiences of Black inmates “as was the case in [these] earlier representations” (Büssing 45), such as *The Big House* (1930). The play's two key events, the prison protest and the ensuing riot, occur in partial response to the murder of Ollie, a devoutly Christian family man singled out for excessive punishment because he is Black. But Whalen's persecution of the well-liked Ollie unites the entire prison population against him, their common enemy, precipitating the prison riot and all that follows. Whalen dictates the pattern of racial representation commonly seen in prison narratives: authoritarian dominance and administrative supremacy (Ek 11). The administration controls and limits any knowledge of Monroe's brutal hierarchy, misrepresenting the situation of the inmates. In the end, however, Whalen's desperation over his loss of

control gradually becomes palpable as he continues his fight to “get things in perfect order in case the snoopers get busy” (*Nightingales* 115).

Iconography of Incarceration

The Slave Narrative

In parallel with the prison narrative, Williams also draws on the slave narrative, through his emphasis upon Boss Whalen’s (*Nightingales* 96) preferred method of intimidation and torture, the whip, known idiomatically (8) in the play as Doctor Jones (36, 64, 149, 158). The Boss perversely singles out, taunts, and makes an example of Ollie (Oliver Jackson, the prison’s lone Black character), to make an example of him and to quell the uprising through further intimidation. Tragically, Ollie then dies by his own hand. Whalen denies any responsibility for the death when confronted by the ex-Chaplain who claims that Ollie “was goaded to desperation” (102).

Coincidentally, the slave narrative was “not only the first prison narrative”; it was, moreover, “the first genre the U.S. contributed to the written literature of the world” (Franklin, *Prison Writing* 3). In Williams’s version, *Nightingales* the shackled men “shuffle” (*Nightingales* 72) repeatedly in lockstep through the barred, clanging (17) cells, and endure starvation and torture, while Ollie and Butch lead the men in powerful call-response chants (72–73, 138). As Williams demonstrates, during the Depression, Black prisoners often “had an experience no less oppressive and no less collective than their ancestors in chattel slavery,” and, as he also reveals, “work songs have been . . . important to their survival” during such periods of intense oppression (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 100).

Williams's use of the iconography of slavery serves as an unambiguous textual cue for the formation of a collective rebellion. He demonstrates the way in which the death of Ollie—the first character to die under the “brutal” (*Nightingales* 64) regime of the sadistic warden—galvanizes the rest of the prisoners to protest the abuses within Monroe. Ollie's motivation, as indicated by his devotion to his handicapped wife and their six children, humanizes him. Williams forcefully suggests to the audience that they, too, merely by virtue of being cast down from their relatively comfortable social existences, could be reduced to the semblance of an “animal” (72) by the merciless Whalen. In the end, the prisoners are reduced to “a pack of wolves,” having “caught the smell” of “the pig” (157). Likewise, the Gothic iconography of the subhuman, faceless “something” (84) of Eva's recurring nightmare, and the “blue devils,” as described by Ollie (35), torment both the prisoners and staff. Such psychological scars are the by-products of Whalen's blatantly propagandistic, and virtually boundless, authority. In one particularly graphic depiction, Whalen reminds Jim and Eva Crane of their subservience:

WARDEN: See them scars, Eva? He got them ten years ago. Pretty sight he was then. Raw meat. The skin hung down from his back like pieces of red tissue paper! The flesh was all pulpy, beat up, the blood squirted out like juice from a ripe tomato ev'ry time I brung the whip down on him. “Had enough Jim, ready to go back to that embossing machine?”—“Naw,” says Jim,—“Not till it's fixed!”—He defied me like that for fourteen days.—I seen I'd either have to kill him or I'd have to admit that he'd had me licked.—I says to him, “Jim you win! You don't go back to that embossing machine, you stay right here in

the office an' work for me because you're a man that's made out of the stuff I like." Stone face! Huh, Jim? (63)

Sensational Spectacle

Sensational details (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xviii), such as Whalen's whip, the large purple scars borne by both Jim and Butch, and other such images and motifs, were also common both to the "pulp" novels (*Nightingales* 83) and film serials (162) of the period, together with the play's cliff-hanger mode of narrative structure.

The iconography of bloody spectacles, ferocious strikes, and naturalistic dialogue plays out against a background of jazz age music and protest songs. In *Nightingales*, Williams underscores the relentless horrors of prison life, through the use of such iconographic motifs as oppressive labor, the absence of nourishing food,¹⁶ the lack of sanitary conditions and, of course, torture (in the form of sadistic floggings, mass scaldings, drownings, hangings, severe isolation, and routine beatings). While not all of the major symbols of domination and imprisonment receive an accompanying sexual emphasis, a number of Whalen's methods and instruments of control take on sexual overtones; for example, his use of hypnotic mind control over Eva—"I knew if he touched me I wouldn't be able to move" (*Nightingales* 83)—and his voyeuristic involvement in Jim's relationship with Eva—"[I]et go of that girl—get your shirt on and get out"—and even the sadomasochistic sexual connotations of the whip Whalen has christened "Dr. Jones" (158), with which he threatens Jim.

As in *The Big House* (1930), Jim discovers under the threat of "unnecessary punishment" (Clarens 50)—most notably, from the iconographic representations of Dr.

¹⁶ Whalen infers that pellagra may have been a problem (*Nightingales* 14) and several prisoners also suffer ptomaine poisoning (61).

Jones and of Klondike's steam heat—what Butch already knows: that convicts in Monroe must be prepared to fight, and even to die, for their beliefs (*Nightingales* 159). More importantly, although aesthetics and poetry find only a severely limited place in Whalen's prison—limited to the prison monthly, *The Archaeopteryx* (9), Jim's recitations and compositions, Ollie's and Butch's songs—this muted emphasis nonetheless demonstrates that humanity can be galvanized by a shared rhythm or an internal beat (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 82), further symbolized by the classical theme music (*Nightingales* 47) Williams calls for in his stage directions.

Gothic Elements

We may detect a Gothic influence in many of Williams's narrative techniques, but especially in the full-length, fantasy plays that Williams wrote toward the end of his apprentice period, *Spring Storm*, and *Stairs to the Roof*. In both *Spring* and *Stairs*, Gothic markers provide the primary structuring devices, while in *Nightingales*, Williams imbues the Gothic element of the fantasy genre with a more subtle atmospheric treatment, as in the Chaplain's bitter farewell to the warden and the "shadows—ghosts!" of the penitentiary's imprisoning Gothic imagery (*Nightingales* 104). Although Williams makes relatively sparse use of Gothic conventions in *Nightingales*, he nonetheless invokes familiar Gothic settings and motifs, such as enclosed settings, castle walls, stone towers, Gothic architecture and ruins, and he creates an atmosphere of pervasive dread, imprisonment, and isolation (Weston 15), through insistent patterns of dialogue:

CHAPLAIN: Things I've seen that I can't forget. Men, tortured, twisted, driven mad. Death's the least of it. It's the life in here that's going to stay with me like an incurable sickness. And by God, Whalen, that's

not profanity—by God, I won't rest easy till I've seen these walls torn down, stone by stone, and others put up in their place that let the air in!

Good night. (*Nightingales* 104)

Christian Iconography

Christian iconography, featuring angels and devils, saints, sacraments, and above all, retribution as a means of final redemption, takes ubiquitous precedence in many prison narratives (Büssing 63), and Williams employs such imagery in *Nightingales*' subplot, with its corrupt jailhouse religion. In act 2, episode 1, "Not About *Nightingales*!", the first Chaplain attempts to protest Monroe's appalling conditions, and suggests Whalen's culpability in Ollie's death, claiming that Ollie was "goaded to desperation" (*Nightingales* 102). Whalen unceremoniously dismisses him, in fact, and begins telephoning for a replacement before the assiduous Chaplain has even had a chance to vacate his office. Clearly, the Chaplain, with his conscientious (102) theological stance and pragmatic concern, speaks from a more progressive, liberal school of compassion and rehabilitation, while Boss Whalen espouses the traditional belief in discipline and punishment:

WARDEN: Sorry, I didn't mean to make it that strong. Jim's a good boy, but it don't hurt to remind him once in a while of his old friend, Dr. Jones. [Eva averts her face.] You think I'm brutal doncha? You got to realize the position I'm in. I got thirty-five hundred men here, men that would knife their mothers for the price of a beer. It takes a mighty firm hand.—Yes, Siree! [He picks up the rubber duck—inflates it some more.] Cute, huh?—She'll make a fuss over this! (64)

Although the replacement “Rev” proclaims total loyalty to his new boss in act 2, episode 3, entitled “Mr. Whalen Interviews the New Chaplain,” he too finds himself driven from Monroe by the terrifying anger vented upon him by the prison population. During a speech coached by Whalen, the inmates bombard (111) the new Reverend with hymnals, as he unwittingly follows Whalen’s instructions to touch on iconographic images most commonly associated with corruption and abuse in his address:

WARDEN: Well, your job depends on this one. I haven’t got time to go into details, Reverend. But I want you to touch on three particular subjects. I don’t care how you bring ’em in, just so you *do* and so you give ’em the right emphasis.

REVEREND: Three subjects!

WARDEN: Yes, Siree. You mark ’em down, Reverend—food!

REVEREND: Food!

WARDEN: That’s the first one. Then—heat!

REVEREND: Heat?

WARDEN: Yep. And then—Klondike! [A bell sounds.] (100)

Motif of the Bird

An important and recurring image in prison fiction is that of the captive bird, which Williams makes abundant use of. He associates captive birds (Canary Jim) with stool pigeons (*Nightingales* 62) and, more specifically, “yellow” canary-type characters (37), that purportedly sing to the authorities. Here Butch explains the associations of certain prisoners with captive birds: “[h]e ain’t in yet but we got a little songbird in the next cage who sings real sweetly sometimes for the boss” (54). Williams further

reinforces the traditional meaning of the cage (37) symbol—the loss of freedom—most notably in the one-act entitled *Escape* (c. 1935–39)¹⁷ and in *Battle of Angels* (1941), a full-length play Williams revised and produced shortly after writing *Nightingales* and the other apprentice one-acts. Incidentally, Büssing makes a compelling connection between the image of the caged bird and that of that of the closeted homosexual (191).

Captions

Williams's bases his technique less on Marxist principles or Brechtian alienation devices (such as the *verfremdungs* effect), than on his peculiar mix of social realism, Gothic and fantasy elements, and a germane anticipation of what pragmatic concerns will come to bear upon the plays in production. As in *Fugitive Kind*, Williams makes use of programmatic agitprop captions in *Nightingales*. Although this Brechtian device draws from the techniques he had learned at Iowa, "Tom had used captions in his two other proletarian plays before he heard of Brecht" (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii). Such captions are also reminiscent of those featured in certain popular, serialized crime films, such as *The Clutching Hand* (1936).

A Brechtian Influence

Since all the plays under scrutiny in this section illustrate Williams's questioning of the systemic inequities and injustices of Depression-era society, instances of individual redemption, albeit not confined to religious experiences, receive reinforcement from each characters' poetic contribution to the play's dialogue; for example, as Jim reassures Ollie,

¹⁷ Interestingly, in this early, undated, one-act play, a character named Texas, as in *Fugitive Kind*, listens while his fellow convicts attempt to escape from the bunkhouse of a Southern chain gang (Williams, *Mister* 39).

“you’re not alone, though, cause you are part of everything living and everything living is a part of you” (*Nightingales* 39).

Although Williams never abandoned this poetic dimension, some critics found it incongruous, albeit conceding that “there may be enough of Williams’s poetry lurking” in the play’s dialogue to make it “an intriguing exercise” (Musto 4). Others registered the play’s prison-movie style (Isherwood 90), or remarked upon the Gothic elements of fascinated horror (Musto 4). In any case, Williams was content to experiment with, and to develop, his generic markers, even resorting to the romantic ideology of privileged (*Nightingales* 43, 47) characters such as Jim and Eva, albeit marred by the “protest” elements of the triangular subplot involving the warden.

The marked ideological contrasts of the various characters, including those of both the Chaplain and his replacement, the new Reverend, forcefully point to Williams’s developing political philosophy, and to his personal artistic aspirations. Indeed, they prefigure Williams’s later experimental (or “outrageous”) plays (Dorff 13). In accordance with Williams’s plastic aesthetic criteria, as stipulated in his 1945 Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, which marked a culminating moment of his apprenticeship, the surreal fantasy settings of *Nightingales* could be seen as lacking in the explicitly “straight” or photographic realism that Williams later rejected outright (Williams *GM*, 131) in favor of a more Brechtian, alienating, and transformative, approach to the reality of aesthetic experience:

When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a

more penetrating approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. (131)

Brecht's take on dramatic realism, like Williams's, lends itself to a flexibility of generic designation that accommodates a variety of formal innovations without compromising the strength of the contemporary political message. In "Popularity and Realism," Brecht defines *realism* as:

. . . discovering the causal complexities of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power/writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up . . . making possible the concrete, and making possible the abstraction of it. (82)

These "causal complexities" complicate the standard definitions of realism since realist subject matter encompasses varying topics. "No genre," writes Eric Sundquist, "is more difficult to define than [protest] realism," for "in material it includes the sensational, the sentimental, the vulgar, the scientific, the outrageously comic, the desperately philosophical" (vii).

Song

Williams intended that the formal elements of *Nightingales* should assist in the play's Brechtian effect. As in *Fugitive Kind*, to punctuate the action and give it a more contemporary resonance, Williams calls for songs and theme music, with some lyrics sung in a chanting call-response technique, while other strains of music establish a nondiegetic background tone¹⁸ (Metz 174). By incorporating a measure of resistance into their song, which, in effect, co-opts and even transforms what they are forced to endure, the inmates, led by Butch, attempt to strengthen their collective bond during the horrifying Klondike experience:

BUTCH: Come on you sons-of-guns! Put some pep in it! Sing it out, sing
it out loud, boys! [He sings wildly, hoarsely.]

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag an'

Smile, smile, smile!

[The others join in feebly—]

Sing it out! Goddamit, sing it out loud!

What's the use of worrying

It never was worthwhile!

[Joe tries to sing—he is suddenly bent double in a paroxysm of coughing.]

(*Nightingales* 138–39)

Other examples range from the “Dardanella” (*Nightingales* 117), an orchestral tune popular in the dance halls of the twenties, to abstract jazz (111), and include Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (43), which Williams acknowledges as the play's theme

¹⁸ Sound not derived directly from the action unfolding onstage; from the Latin *diegesis*, meaning *narration*.

music (71) since, as Jim reports, the “Fourth o’ July” will come “in the middle of August” (46).¹⁹

Human beings derive their deepest impulses from what are ultimately the most paradoxical, hidden, or private sources, “the beat of our own heart and pulses, our breathing, the movement of our limbs” (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 83). Music, dance, and poetry are thus often intimately connected, and “all three come to enrich sex, the primal rhythmic activity” (83). It is therefore no coincidence that Butch, the character with the most powerful erotic imagination, leads the prisoners in song throughout, and he habitually sings to remind himself of Goldie (*Nightingales* 117). Likewise, Butch and Ollie, with their individual dreams and whispered prayers, demonstrate their shared sense of rhythm. And as Eva tells Jim, with “desperate gaiety”: “[a] brass band can sell me *anything* Jim!” (47).

Singing or chanting prisoners link their individual, internal rhythms to a collective pulse and broader “verbal meanings” (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 83). Incidentally, Butch at first defiantly chants “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” (*Nightingales* 67, 119, 139, 146)—a show tune from 1918—as an expression of resistance, just as Singing Convict 51310 does in the film *San Quentin* (1937). However, we soon learn that Butch’s expansive repertoire also includes the 1915 World War I marching song, “Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile” (138), and one of the last great Victorian parlor ballads, “Roses of Picardy” (1916). Butch employs songs and call-response chants, especially when he attempts to unite the convicts in solidarity, as in his

¹⁹ While the *1812 Overture* has no obvious connection with American historical events, it nonetheless remains a tradition at many Independence Day celebrations. Best known for its climactic volley of cannon fire and ringing chimes, the overture commemorates Russia’s 1812 defense against Napoleon’s invasion.

spirited acts of defiance as their leader—“[s]o if I ain’t yellow boys, don’t you be neither!” (123). The stir-bug Sailor Jack, driven insane by his experiences in Klondike, schizophrenically (17) repeats the 17th century French chanson “Auprès de ma blonde” until the “screws” drag him off to the psychopathic ward after his torture in Klondike (70). Likewise, the inmates’ bantering dialect—“[a]nytime I want you grifters to muscle in on my singin’ I’ll send you a special request” (118)—seems at first innocuous, although ultimately it bonds the prisoners together and serves as a means of survival.

Authentic versions of old slave work songs survived as convict work songs well into the 1940s and beyond (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 100). Similarly, Ollie’s spiritual chants powerfully express his sense of doom and oppression, while yet signalling his yearnings for liberation. Notably, he is the first prisoner to lead the others in song:

OLLIE: Down in Mizzoura where I was born

I worked all day in a field of corn,

Got plenty hot but at night it was nice

’Cause we kept our beer in a bucket of ice.

CHORUS: Turn on the heat, turn on the heat,

They’re gonna give us hell when they turn on the heat.

They’re gonna give us hell when they turn on the heat.

BUTCH: There’s one rap that a connie can’t beat

When the warden says, Boys, we gonna turn on the heat!

CHORUS: Turn on the heat, turn on the heat,

They’re gonna give us hell when they turn on the heat.

They’re gonna give us hell when they turn on the heat.

(*Nightingales* 73)

The “Stir” as Setting

The Prison Setting

Although political issues come to directly thwart a love affair, Williams also makes these issues more affecting by hinting at the forces of love and community at stake in any truly authentic political action. Here, Williams safeguards himself from the false dualism that would pit the personal against the political in his work. Prison walls do not conjure welcoming imagery of settings in which love, friendship, and affection flourish (Büssing 57), and thus Ollie’s intimate massage of Jim with “liniment or bacon grease” (*Nightingales* 36) seems to afford a rare moment of fleeting transcendence within the penal environment.

Paradoxically, Monroe’s idiosyncratic setting neither excludes nor suppresses an element of “caged” (*Nightingales* 37) eroticism for Jim, Eva, and even Whalen, although the couple’s love ultimately runs adrift in the sadomasochistic environment created by Whalen. Eva’s hopes for love (128) with Jim are dashed, along with Jim’s hope for parole: both are sacrificed when the hunger strike escalates into a riot, which occurs after five prisoners die in Klondike. Yet, however stifled in expression, affection and loyalty are still to be found within Monroe, and despite the cramped cells, deadly torture, brutal guards, sirens, and searchlights, this oppressive setting even serves to spur the prisoners to heroic displays of loyalty (witness Joe’s devotion to Butch). Temporarily taken to be a merely outward sign of imprisonment, the prison “walls-as-obstacles” (Büssing 66) seem to recede and to become bearable, as even Butch unconsciously sheds his overwhelming psychic restrictions and liberates himself from a more painfully restrictive inner prison.

Prisons, while frequently depicted as places of degradation and dehumanization, also provide, ironically, a setting fraught with “romantic connotations” (Büssing 11). In *Nightingales*, the presentation of the imprisoned protagonists’ inner struggles contrasts sharply with the protest-style romantic yet ultimately treacherous subplot: the triangle involving Eva, Jim, and Whalen. *Nightingales* uses the lovers’ negotiation of emotional freedom to explore different degrees of imprisonment despite the relentless brutality at Monroe.

To this end, the action takes place in three locations: outside the imposing Inner Door of Whalen’s office, inside the cells, and in the Klondike (torture chamber). The monotony of the prison setting accentuates each character’s strengths and weaknesses. The narrative of *Nightingales* depends on the tension between numerous dichotomies, including those that pit friends against enemies, beauty against destruction, and prison administration against the inmates. Williams bases the most extreme example of such narratives—often dealing exclusively with prisoners striving to attain liberty through sacrifice or martyrdom—on an entirely different level of conflict. For example, the prison itself becomes a moral testing-ground where even seemingly untouchable wrongdoers such as Whalen find themselves on probation, and as the precipitators of their own destruction.

The Panopticon

Many prison narratives, and other types of literature in which oppressive, enclosed settings figure prominently, incorporate the concept of the panopticon, a system of surveillance devised by the eighteenth-century utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham as a prototype for the ideal prison, “which perpetually monitors prisoners’ behavior . . . to

establish a system of social and cultural surveillance in which all participate” (Ek 99). In his comments on the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault notes the significant “effect of the loss of privacy” in prison life, specifically as it pertains to the “induction” of the inmates “into a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). The setting of *Monroe* is no different in this respect, as Williams demonstrates from the outset with the introduction of the aforementioned Mrs. Bristol, a visitor to whom Jim apologizes for stonewalling, adding “I’m not allowed to give out information” (*Nightingales* 12). Williams further emphasizes the effect of constant surveillance as the guards discover Eva and Jim and, in cinematic fashion, a spot “suddenly moves down and shines full upon Eva,” and she screams; a siren wails; seconds later, a spot “comes up on the office” and Whalen enters to interrogate the pair (148). Thus, Williams exposes the most intimate details of the many inmates’ collective existences.

Prison narratives do not merely emphasize the authoritarian construct of the prisoner’s identity (e.g., stool pigeon, trusty, or rat) but also generally reveal a more intimate portrait of the prisoners as individuals. For example, anxiety, impotence, and derangement, often as a result of extreme loneliness, reach riotous critical mass in many prison narratives, including that of the classic Hollywood prison film. Characters such as Butch—“[d]ontcha all lie there like you was ready to be laid under!” (*Nightingales* 138)—and Shapiro—“I have it in my blood to suffer” (139)—respectively, decry or vindicate various examples of such physical and psychological suffering. These narratives invert the othering process by relocating “representational power in the prisoner” (Ek 100). Williams’s genuine triumph stems from his ability to manipulate the

audience's collective role as voyeur by turning it on its head, which he accomplishes by making use of compelling personal detail, as well as of jailhouse territorialism, in forming his intimate, experimental portrait of life in prison.

Despite the fact that Williams effectively risks alienating his prospective audience in order to dramatize the suffering of the Depression-era prisoners, he also turns his detached gaze into an empathetic awareness of the political stakes that most concern the prisoners, challenging the prison system's assumption that its authority rests on the premise that not all convicts merit humane treatment. However, this assumption informs every level of interaction within the institution, and especially at the level of the prisoners' responses to authority. As such, as Butch knows all too well, it must be resisted:

BUTCH: A con ain't a human being. A con's a con. [The lights fade on the others and concentrate on Butch.] He's stuck in here and the world's forgot him. As far as the world is concerned he don't exist anymore. What happens to him in here—they people outside don't know, they don't care. He's entrusted to the care of the State. The State? Hell! The State turns him over to a guy called a Warden and a bunch of other guys called guards. Who're they? Men who like to toss around other men. (*Nightingales* 53-54)

Williams further points to the panopticon-induced psychological effects of constant scrutiny—“[k]eep it covered!” (54)—but instead of focusing solely on the surveillance of prisoners, the prison itself develops into a metaphor for society, envisaged as the controlling and vigilant instrument of public inspection, or, as Butch opines:

BUTCH [at the window]: Anudder boat load a goddamn jitterbugs. Dey're trowin' th' glims on us. Whaddaya think this is? Th' Municipal Zoo or something? Go to hell, yuh sons-a-bitches, yuh lousy—

SCHULTZ [rapping at the bars with a stick]: After lights in there!

BUTCH: Someday it's gonna be permanently 'after lights' for that screw.

(40)

Perpetual surveillance, an invariable aspect of the prison setting, transforms the object of the gaze into the other; the prisoner becomes the object of the communal gaze. This relentless scrutiny, in turn, serves to institutionalize the practice of voyeurism. The shirtless Jim offers us an especially extreme example of this, as his “purple scars” (36) shock Eva, even as they are solicitously massaged by Ollie. Surveillance, construed as a form of voyeurism, affirms the “hierarchies of difference between the social and moral standards” of those characters that observe, and those who are observed (Ek 97). As in traditional prison narratives, and especially in *Nightingales*, both punishment and surveillance function to authorize the warden's control of the gaze upon the body of the prisoner, as when Whalen orders Jim to strip and to display his disfigurement before Eva. For his own perverse pleasure, Whalen further indulges the “dynamics of fantasy and pleasure that the body under display and discipline produces” (Ek 97), as when he claims to have hired Eva for her “shape . . . that would knock the bricks out of a Federal Pen” (*Nightingales* 17).

In keeping with the prison narrative subtype of the 1930s protest genre on both screen and stage, the sensational spectacle of criminality in *Nightingales* reinforces the difference between the spectator and the other by focusing on the—albeit humanized—

deviance, albeit humanized, of Monroe City's prisoners. Williams fetishizes (Ek 98) such deviance through his insistent attention on torture in Klondike, by dwelling on Whalen's perverse predilections, and by stressing the grotesque aspect of bodily functions; for example, The Queen's manicure set, which goes "out wit' the slop bucket" because it ostensibly "smelled like rotten bananas" (*Nightingales* 26).

Cinematic Influences and Techniques

As Hale indicates, prison films meant "big" box office business in the late 1930s and "Tom had obviously been seeing them" (*Introduction, Nightingales* xvii). Hale further suggests that "Tom's innovative stage techniques" were inspired by going to the movies, as his "escape from home" (xviii). In fact, the period in which Williams's film-going was at its most pronounced was later known as a cultural watershed, dubbed the "Golden Age of Turbulence" (Sklar 175), when "Hollywood's moviemakers perpetrated one of the most remarkable challenges to traditional values in the history of mass commercial entertainment" (175), with the gangster film as a major component. Furthermore, while the

. . . New Deal Administration was seeking to boost the morale of a confused and anxious people by fostering a spirit of patriotism, unity, and commitment to national values, . . . a political goal that coincided with similar tendencies within the movie industry, . . . [the] sudden turn to social realism . . . to cycles of gangster films and sex . . . [was shaped by financial concerns]. (Sklar 174)

More importantly, as Hale indicates, Williams's graphic *Nightingales* manuscript "may read like a film *noir*" (*Introduction, Nightingales* xvii), but as Feingold reminds us, the

sensational aspects of *Nightingales* “would have sat no better with Broadway-goers of the time than with the keepers of Hollywood’s Production Code” (135).

Hale (*Introduction, Nightingales*) attributes Williams’s insights not only to earlier plays such as Maxwell Anderson’s *Winterset*, but also to the first major prison movie (Clarens 50), George Roy Hill’s *The Big House* (1930). Hale also argues that “the psychological use of lighting, the contrast of dark and light suggesting prison bars, and the groups marching or chanting in unison,” are innovative examples of Expressionistic and cinematic techniques gaining in popularity at the time (*Introduction, Nightingales* xvii).²⁰ Another likely source of inspiration comes from the use of characterization and Expressionistic technique in *San Quentin*, the aforementioned prison film directed by Lloyd Bacon. Additionally, as Hale points out (xviii), *Nightingales* contains generic criteria commonly found in the earliest *noir* films, especially in light of certain mutually sinister topics, also raised by the play’s relentless accounts of prison violence, suicide, murder, and betrayal.

The Big House

The Big House was the first major Hollywood film to deal with the timely and controversial (Clarens 49) subject of prison violence and, according to Hale (*Introduction, Nightingales*), it was a likely inspiration for *Nightingales*. The main point of similarity between the film and the play is that both feature a character named Butch who is a “lifer beyond recovery who will die leading a prison mutiny” (49), although it is “the differences, not the likenesses, between *Nightingales* and the standard prison play or

²⁰ While Hale identifies these as innovative techniques, the technical directions that Williams himself stipulates in his original manuscript proved challenging to stage. Consequently, the play was only produced after “months of searching for an appropriate theater that could accommodate the original unique staging” (Garza and Townsend 1).

film that show Williams's originality" (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xviii). For example, in *The Big House*, the prison setting—more than the ineffectual warden—tests the men's character and "the concern is less with reform than with performance under stress" (Clarens 49). Economic and political issues impart a much more radical spirit of rebellion to *Nightingales*. As well, Hale points out, Williams's treatment of the prison narrative's standard components, such as stock characters and motifs (*Introduction, Nightingales* xviii), manages to be comparatively new (Clarens 49), especially as the play is surprisingly filmic in nature:

Nightingales is notably the most cinematic of Williams's plays. It is written in twenty-two fluid, fast-moving scenes called "Episodes," rather than the conventional three acts, although he later specified these as concessions to the commercial stage. At times the play seems better suited to the screen than to the stage in its quick dissolves, its opening flash forward, and such effects as the pleasure boat passing by. The ending especially—Jim jumping out of a prison window into the bay—can be realized visually in a film but is challenging to perform on stage.

(Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xviii)

In terms of content, *Nightingales*' New Deal pragmatism clearly makes a plea for institutional reform rather than for the prisoners' moral evolution, where George Roy Hill's take on the prison narrative is even "less concerned with social injustice than with recognizing an alternate society of men and admiring their resilience" (Clarens 49). As Hale suggests, *Nightingales*, in its urgently polemical concern with contemporary abuses of power, "is the most 'living newspaper' of all Williams plays, using throughout the

technique of an Announcer” (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii).²¹ Although the play excels at the serialized “love of action” of many films of the period, Williams lacks Hill’s sense of political “stoicism” (Bordwell and Thompson 29). Instead, Williams comes across as a political writer with a passionate desire to address social injustices and, in this endeavor, *Nightingales* constitutes a formal artistic benchmark. Corrupt political machinations are exposed, and the impassioned quality of the prisoners’ pleas imparts a more vividly personal dimension.

Lighting and Sound

As both the scene and pretext for the struggle, Williams effectively depicts Monroe prison through unconventional staging techniques, which include the use of dissolving fades between scenes, foreshortened speeches, and a disorienting set of incongruous images:

LOUD-SPEAKER: “Yeah, this is the Lorelei excursion steamer . . . There it is! You can see it now, folks! That’s the Island. Sort of misty still. See them big stone walls. Dynamite-proof, escape-proof! Thirty-five hundred men in there folks, and lots of ’em ’ll never get out! . . . Lorelei Lou and her eight Lorelights! Dancing on the Upper Deck!—Dancing!—Dancing!—Dancing . . . [Fade.]

[Flash forward to the end of the play. Light fades except for a spot on Eva clutching Jim’s shoes.]

²¹Interestingly, at HRHRC in 1996, along with the manuscript of *Nightingales*, Vanessa Redgrave also “found many newscuttings from 1938 about the Klondike atrocity” in Holmesburg, PA (Redgrave, Foreword, *Nightingales* ix).

LOUD-SPEAKER: Aw, there it is! You can see it now, folks! That's the Island. Sort of misty tonight. You'd see it better if there was a moon.

(*Nightingales* 1)

A daring use of lighting is characteristic of both *Nightingales* and one of Williams's sources of inspiration, *The Big House* (1930). Both share the iconographic effect of geometric bars created by the patterns of shadow, and include the leitmotif (Clarens 49) of shuffling feet (*Nightingales* 72). Furthermore, the use of lighting in both works is generally heightened, except for Williams's sparing but calculated use of the "spots" (137), and including the Gothic silhouettes of the bars, and the torture cell, as "seen through a scrim to give a misty or steam-clouded effect to the atmosphere" (137). In this respect, Williams disregards traditional staging, "as convicts—supposedly in locked cells—are brought stage front and spotlighted for key speeches" (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xviii).

Through his unique use of lighting, Williams controls the spectator's gaze. He makes use of cinematic fades which dissolve (Metz 176) into scene changes, spots, and "[s]cript directions of 'theme up' and 'fade-in'" (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii). As through the lens of a rapidly moving camera, Williams does away with "curtains [and uses] lighting to . . . enable simultaneous action on various parts of the stage" (xvii). Insightfully, and with a mind to bring framing to the forefront of cinematic technique, Vsevolod Pudovkin asks us to imagine the excited observer "of some rapidly developing scene [whose] agitated glance is thrown rapidly from one spot to another" (79). According to Pudovkin, were scenarists, filmmakers, or even playwrights to imitate these so-called glances, then a series of "rapidly alternating pieces" would logically generate

narrative scenarios, or episodes (79). The overall effect of these rapid glances anticipates various stage dynamics and suggests a scenic responsiveness to the events as they unfold.

Like other prison dramas of the era, Williams “relies on the resources of sound for attaining sensational effects” (Sklar 176). Accompanied by the ravishing music of Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, highly moving in its very simplicity, Jim leaves the ranks of his imprisoned comrades and plots with Eva in the darkened yard (*Nightingales* 148). Williams uses nondiegetic sound, including jazz music, announcements, and “offstage reporting, shouted newspaper headlines, voices of broadcasters, sirens” (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii). Such instrumental interludes or refrains are not produced by the action unfolding on stage (Metz 174), but occur instead for exclusively dramatic effect. Williams uses nondiegetic sound here as part of a quasicinematic technique of *montage*, to signal certain shifts in subject matter, and also introduces “music, from jazz to Tchaikovsky, to express the characters’ moods or comment satirically on the action” (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii). His detailed stage directions “alternately ease and exacerbate the disturbing tension of the play” through the contrasting moods created by calculated sound effects (Isherwood 90).

Music, song, and poetry are often intimately connected not only in *Nightingales*, but in prison narratives in general. As Ollie demonstrates by leading a unifying “call-response” resistance during the hunger strike, an individual’s musical aptitude helps to forge a collective sense of solidarity through a shared instinct for survival. Singing or chanting prisoners, through combining their individual rhythms, develop a common rhythm that, in turn, enhances the significance of the lyrics (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 83). Moreover, the act of singing seems motivated by the inmates’ instinct for survival.

Although Jim believes that Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1884) offers only an inadequate artistic response to the hell of prison life, given that love "is something nasty that's done in dark corners around this place" (*Nightingales* 101), it must once have offered a measure of solace to the ostracized character. Thus his failure to respond to its poetic power is more a comment on his sense of bitter isolation and frustration, than it is on the merits of Keats's "Ode." Furthermore, after Ollie dies, Butch essentially takes over Ollie's role and leads the prisoners in solidarity through song. Ollie's vocal repertoire, including spirituals, not only expresses his personal experience of oppression but also gives a voice to the inmates' collective yearning for liberation. Perhaps more importantly, however, it nourishes the prisoners' combined need to mythologize their prison experience. Significantly, Whalen's victims, not unlike many of the stock inmates in prison drama that were typecast as seemingly irredeemable criminals (Franklin, *Prison Literature* 100), express themselves by becoming writers and balladeers.

Cinematic Structure

On a purely formal level, *Nightingales* contains some of Williams's finest dramatic achievements, not only in the apprentice collection of Williams's full-length plays, but also when considering his other work as well. Its episodic structure and continuity, shaped in cinematic fashion, "construct elements of increasing interest" (Pudovkin 81), such as the repeated and ominous references to the mysterious Klondike: "[w]hat is Klondike?" (*Nightingales* 6). Such a build-up of emotional pressure insistently gives rise to the question, "what is happening at the other place?" (Pudovkin 81). Williams also uses Pudovkin's relational sequencing technique, which impresses (82)

upon the viewer the privation of the prisoners in general population in contrast to Jim's privileged (*Nightingales* 43, 47) prison existence: "[b]ut the men don't like [Jim]" (62).

Much later, when Williams mixes "fantasy, even surrealism, with realism, as in the scene where Butch has a dream" (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii), he hints at the outcome of Butch's ultimately existential choice. Rather than seeking to answer his own question—"I wonder if a guy is any good at sixty?" (*Nightingales* 25)—Butch instead follows a path that he seems destined to take: that of a criminal leader who dies as Public Enemy Number One. Once incarcerated, we may assume that any inmate's goal is, in general terms, to be totally free—from imprisonment, from restraint, from the prison environment, from society, from conventional morality—and although Jim strives to attain this level of intellectual emancipation (35), only Butch achieves his freedom, while yet in isolation, by existentially recreating his past happiness. Williams's existential approach exposes a philosophical dilemma: is Expressionism a form of protest against academic philosophy in its "flight from the 'iron cage' of reason"? (Kaufmann 12).

Historical Background and Provenance of the Script

Economic and political issues inform *Nightingales'* very structure and substance. A *St. Louis Star-Times* article in September of 1937 awakened the twenty-seven year old playwright's social conscience. It contained a report of a hunger strike at a maximum security prison in Holmesburg, Pennsylvania, where a warden and two guards were charged with murdering four prisoners and torturing at least twenty others through forced exposure to the steam of six large radiators for a sustained period. As Williams's mother described it in 1963, *Nightingales* "dealt with a prison riot that actually occurred . . . after

a group of convicts were literally burned alive while being ‘disciplined’ in an oven-hot room” (E. Williams 97).

On 9 October 1937, Williams described *Nightingales* in a letter to Holland as “a dramatization of the Hunger Strike among convicts . . . in protest against new Parole policies which have reduced number [sic] of paroles from over 1300 last year to about 240 for the nine months of this year” (*Letters* 108). The play is set squarely within an American sociohistorical context, one that Williams firmly establishes from the outset, both in his stage directions and in his setting of the play “during the summer of 1938” (*Nightingales* 1). The question of the parole of Canary Jim Allison, so labelled because he “sings” (54) to the warden, directly precipitates an explosive series of events. Jim succumbs to the warden’s physical and mental domination and, obeying the warden’s orders, withholds communications with the prison population at large, repeating “I’m not allowed to give out information” (12). Ultimately, the psychic contradictions of his predicament become too much to bear.

Williams set about crafting a script that elaborates upon the current story, after which he mailed it to New York’s Group Theater contest for young writers, including it as part of a collection entitled *American Blues* and signing himself, for the first time, “Tennessee.” The Group Theater thought Williams showed promise and convinced its treasurer, Kermit Bloomgarden, to “make a special award to the young writer” (Kramer, “Sculptural” 88). This duly impressed his future agent, Audrey Wood, and immediately piqued her interest in his work. Although three of Williams’s one-act plays were selected

from *American Blues* to receive a Group Theater prize (\$100), *Nightingales* was rejected.²²

Interestingly, Williams, in a letter to Clark Mills McBurney, emphasizes the enormous toll that the play took on him, in terms of “paying the piper” as the “strenuous work has resulted in something like nervous collapse,” adding that his “blood pressure . . . jumped up alarmingly” and that he “spent several days and nights feeling like a smoking volcano” (qtd. in Leverich, 271).

In fact, the Mummers, the troupe that had produced Williams’s two earlier prison plays, had intended to produce *Nightingales*, “[b]ut the Depression took its toll on this semiprofessional theater group and they disbanded before production started” (E. Williams 98). Early in the early summer of 1938, Williams had hoped “that Holland would decide to put on his prison play” (Leverich 270). It was, perhaps, Williams’s unflinching examination of prison homosexuality, masochistic violence, and a condemnatory portrait of institutionalized racism, in conjunction with the financial constraints of the Depression upon the troupe, that informed the Mummers’ decision to abandon the idea of producing *Nightingales*. However, Williams was undergoing great personal stress at the time; first, he had been rejected from graduate school (“I am tremendously anxious to write a creative thesis for my Master’s at Iowa but it is

²² After earning his BA at the University of Iowa, Williams returned to St. Louis to continue working on *Nightingales*. During his academic training at Iowa, Williams had written a much shorter piece, *Quit Eating* (1937), which he later refined and expanded into the full-length *Nightingales*, fashioning it into a unique protest work, at once “naïve and full of ambition” (Kanfer 22). Williams describes the circumstances of the play’s composition as constituting part of a competition in his playwriting class at the University of Iowa: the “three best are selected each two weeks and produced in what is called a ‘living newspaper’” (*Letters* 108), an arts program ultimately dismissed in the Dies Committee report of January 1939, which declared the Living Newspaper “a medium for New Deal propaganda” when Congress eliminated funds for its continuance in the new Works Progress Administration (WPA) appropriations bill (Aaron and Bendiner, *Scene* 404).

necessary for me to have work as my savings are exhausted and I can't expect any further help from my father who wanted me to remain in the shoe business" [qtd. in Leverich 266]) and, second, his sister Rose had recently been committed to a sanatorium.

Unlike *Candles* and *Fugitive, Nightingales* was not "spoken in public" (Garza and Townsend 1). It finally received its premiere in 1998, at the Cottesloe Theater in London, and has since played in Cologne, Houston, and on Broadway. More than sixty years after the play's completion, William's final draft of *Nightingales* was rediscovered by actor Vanessa Redgrave and the trustee of the Williams estate, Maria St. Just, among the HRHRC archives.²³ While she was preparing to perform in the 1989 London production of Williams's *Orpheus Descending*, Redgrave was struck by Williams's reference in the preface to the violent imagery of an earlier, unknown play. As Redgrave explains in her foreword to the published script, St. Just had provided her with a copy of the manuscript from the estate in 1993, the year before Redgrave founded the Moving Theater Company with her brother Corin. Moving Theater staged the script with Trevor Nunn at the time of the Company's residency at the Alley Theater in Houston in 1998. As the "fiendish" warden, Boss Whalen (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales*, xxiii), Corin led the cast of eighteen in depicting the violent pecking order inside the prison in this initial, highly successful, production of Williams's first full-length apprentice play. Methuen Drama in the UK and New Directions in the US each published the script (1998), replete with an admirable introduction by Allean Hale.

By comparison with Williams's previous apprentice works (Voss 218), W. Kenneth Holditch confirms that "*Nightingales* is a more finished play." Certainly, few

²³ The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, at the University of Texas in Austin, maintains an extensive collection of original cultural materials.

Broadway critics dismissed the play as an unsophisticated writing exercise; it was not seen as anything less than a fully realized drama. *Nightingales*' significance endures not only because it represents a benchmark in young Williams's progress as an artist, but also because it was written by a playwright too often perceived as unconcerned with the issues of class struggle and confrontation (despite scholarship to the contrary by Bray, Kolin, and others). The play remains a work of considerable interest for several other reasons: first, it was inspired by an actual historical event; second, Williams's character portrayals are especially intense; third, he relentlessly stages instances of brutal torture; and, finally, he blends tragedy and slapstick (the latter being an important feature of his narrative trademark in his early full-length plays).

Despite the fact that many contemporary scholars have now gained a deeper understanding of the play in the wake of Redgrave's find, the Williams scholarship taking place the world over remains, by and large, focused upon the allegedly canonized works, although it is surprising that such a vital and relevant play as *Nightingales* remained largely suppressed for so many years. This is indeed ironic, given that Williams, as a student, often felt keenly alienated from the academic community. As Williams's apprentice work finally emerges from the nondescript cloud of ambivalent critiques imposed upon a handful of his apprentice works by the professors and critics of his time, critiques levelled not only at his early apprentice plays but also at other likeminded works of protest, we have scholars and critics such as Parker, Hale, Dorff, and Kolin, to thank for the critical redemption of both sets of Williams's experimental works (early and late).

Williams would not create such an overtly political cycle of protest plays again during his long and varied career. This early and yet surprisingly mature effort seemed to

be the culmination of the protest phase of his apprenticeship, although he would continue to explore the primal battle at the root of *Nightingales*, which he had captured so incisively in this play, and which Isherwood further describes as “the eternal conflict between the cruel rulers of an indifferent world and the tender creatures, crushed but noble in their allegiance to beauty and kindness, that must try to survive in it” (90). In a press release from Houston’s Alley Theater (1999), Jennifer Garza and Lisa Townsend consider Williams a “social protest playwright who is not known for social plays” (1). As they point out, “by the time prison officials were tried for the deaths of the inmates, Hitler’s invasion of Austria and the beginnings of World War II had knocked the front page story to the back of the *Times*” (1). Despite the play’s overt political message, within the content of this dissertation, *Nightingales* serves as a fitting preparatory study for topics that would soon emerge, full-blown, in both *Spring Storm* and in *Stairs to the Roof*.

CHAPTER V

FANTASY AND BEYOND

Overview of the Fantasy Genre:

Spring Storm and *Stairs to the Roof*

A reader given the opportunity to track Williams's experiments with generic conventions throughout the five full-length apprentice works addressed in this dissertation might not be surprised to discover that both Southern Gothic and science fiction narratives have been included, especially given that his earlier experiments in the protest plays feature coal mining, gangster, and prison narratives.

However, both *Spring Storm* and *Stairs to the Roof*¹ contrast with Williams's protest plays owing to the inclusion of numerous innovative features, such as the adoption of different identities, the introduction of the supernatural, and the application of fantastic staging techniques that also include special effects (markedly "Surrealistic" lighting in *Stairs* [75], and the dramatic tableaux of Bertha's crucifixion in *Spring*).

The ambiguous endings of both of these fantasy plays, along with numerous unforeseen events, serve to inform their fantasy aspects. Under the rubric of the unexpected fall both Hertha Neilsen's suicide and Heavenly Critchfield's new and reluctant role as spinster in *Spring*, and the strangely apocalyptic appearance of Mr. E. in *Stairs*. However, *Stairs* relies more heavily upon special effects than does *Spring*. In *Stairs*, the special effects support the "dramatic credibility" (McGhee 85) of Benjamin's flashbacks, of the bizarre Carnival episode, and of Mr. E as *deus ex machina*. *Spring*, on the other hand, relies more on Gothic literary conventions in which supernatural

¹ The titles of these works are shortened and referred to throughout this dissertation as *Spring* and *Stairs*.

overtones heighten the weird and Surreal effects, transforming not only the characters' actions and motivations, but also the staging and the iconography. Other techniques used in *Spring* include absurd wordplay and grossly exaggerated imagery such as one hears in Hertha's hyperbolic dialogue and as one sees in her mock atop Lover's Leap (named "Golgotha" in the stage directions [*Spring* vi]).

Spring Storm can be fruitfully compared with *Stairs to the Roof*, which was written only two years later. Both in *Spring* and in *Stairs*, the protagonists are marked by the peculiar Expressionistic affliction that suggests—as will *Streetcar*, ten years later—that they “dissolve into an overwhelming mise-en-scène that produces emotion as landscape” (Fleche 98). In *Stairs*, we also find a sudden reversal and shockingly brutal disruption emerging from what would seem to be superficially innocuous activity: writing poetry. Further, *Spring* explores the seemingly irreconcilable struggle between, on the one hand, sexuality and its potential for perversion and, on the other, social conditioning and its potential for oppression. Indeed, both in *Spring* and in *Stairs*, the characters express a “strangely aimless and objectless sexuality” (Mücke 77) that resists the constraints of social conditioning.

In Sharon Stockton's *The Economics of Fantasy*, a study of the fantasy genre and its typical iconography, she claims that the fantasy narrative reflects the perversions of a predominantly “white male” mindset (17). Interestingly, *Spring*'s conclusion seems to consistent with Poe's famous dictum from “The Philosophy of Composition”; namely, that the death of a young woman resonates with, in true Gothic fashion, “the most legitimate of all poetical tones” (Poe 164). Arthur Shannon, in his state of intense regret, clearly shares Poe's sentiment. Yet, such a darkly romantic conception of destiny remains

at odds with other motifs at play in Williams's work. In *Spring*, for example, the beautiful but banal Heavenly faces a lonely destiny as a spinster, while the plain but imaginative Hertha, to escape a similar fate, chooses death instead. Evidently, characters that possess a defining feature—whether beautiful, courageous, intelligent, or sensitive—find themselves fated to enact the antithesis of that feature. Thus Williams's characterizations consistently manifest both ambivalence and open-endedness.

Over seventy years after the date of *Spring*'s composition in 1938, Williams continues to stand preeminent in his creation of a simultaneously Southern and yet universal vision. He imbues *Spring* both with mystery and terror, which emphasizes the elemental upheaval that the title signifies. Moreover, the emotional storm that the play unleashes finds its appropriate expression through Williams's skilful application of Gothic conventions. In the following analysis, we shall examine 1) Williams's treatment of the fantasy genre; 2) the criteria that typify this genre; and 3) the Gothic and science fiction narratives that the fantasy genre generates.

Cultural and Literary Backdrop

Of all of Williams's apprentice plays, *Spring* perhaps best foreshadows, in its subject matter, the particular exploitation of different aspects of the fantasy genre, such as a richly poetic texture, emotional ambiguity, and oblique plot, those criteria for which his work has found renown. Here, Williams enriches the conventional literary formulas that he had inherited—conceived, as Isaacs reminds us, in the “virulent[lee] homophobic” atmosphere that undoubtedly “filtered down to the top sergeants” teaching Williams's theater workshops at the University of Iowa (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xiii)—by recasting an admixture of Southern cultural traditions, together with Gothic elements.

Rosalie Moore defines fantasy as an “imaginative fiction in which no logical attempt is made, or needed, to justify the ‘impossible’ content of the story” (95). L.

Sprague De Camp draws the following interesting distinctions:

In imaginative fiction, to a much greater degree than in other fiction, the writer appeals to the reader by means of the glamour of the exotic. This may mean setting the story in the distant past, or in the future, or in other worlds. The writer may jog the reader’s emotions by introducing the startling incongruity of an exotic element, such as people from another era or planet, into an otherwise humdrum realistic contemporary environment. Or . . . cut loose from the here and now to transport the reader to times and places of limitless remoteness. (133)

Why Williams turned toward fantasy in his later apprentice works can possibly be explained on the grounds of his preoccupation with dramatic techniques. Not only was he experimenting with more concentrated techniques of characterization and genre, but he was also exploring the complex relationships that almost invariably accompany fantasy settings. Through an examination of *Spring Storm*’s introductory and concluding scenes and its narrative structure, we note that Williams does not merely limit himself in this play to an experiment in Surrealism; rather, the play comprises a single, evolutionary product of the budding fantasy genre of the period. However, only in *Stairs to the Roof* does the protagonist escape from a “seemingly impossible situation” (McGhee 63). Under such narrative circumstances, then, Williams clearly intends the conjunction of *Spring* and *Storm* in the play’s title as “bitterly” ironic (*Spring* 116). Remarkably, in both *Spring* and *Stairs*, Williams consistently shifts the audience’s perspective between the worlds of

fantasy and reality in which the characters, alternately, reside. Moreover, he does so in a way that is not unlike the literal destruction of so-called realistic theater that Antonin Artaud, Eugène Ionesco, and even Anton Chekhov had achieved through their use of Surrealistic, Expressionistic, and Absurdist techniques.

In Williams's production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, which contain a theoretical distillation of the aesthetic that Williams was developing during his apprenticeship, the discarding of realistic theatrical conventions becomes a crucial aspect of his magical or lyrical approach. Like other playwrights who experimented with Surrealism, Williams draws on Freud's theories of the unconscious, exploring the hidden and neglected areas of his protagonists' psyches. Incidentally, throughout his career, Williams set a standard for consummate craftsmanship in his Surrealistic treatments of spiritual crises within a psychological context.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 apply Jim McGhee's analytic approach, encountered in *True Lies*, to an analysis of two of Williams's full-length apprentice plays, both of which, as we shall see, belong to the fantasy genre. The first of these plays, *Spring Storm*, represents a Gothic subtype of the fantasy genre, whereas in the second play, *Stairs to the Roof*, Williams experiments with science fiction fantasy; *Stairs*' generic status can best be described as a fantasy constructed on a science fiction foundation. What constitutes Gothic and science fiction has been characterized, respectively, by Juliann E. Fleenor and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz. The two plays will also, of course, be analyzed in relation to Chandler's six criteria of genre, with which the reader is by now already familiar: narrative, characterization, topics, setting, iconography, and staging techniques.

This chapter aims to illuminate Williams's treatment of the fantasy genre, and to trace the evolution of his so-called apprenticeship as he reinterprets Gothic and science fiction archetypes. In addition, the chapter aims to reveal how Williams made use of fantasy techniques not only to create grotesque or sensational effects, but as a way of introducing transcendent and tragicomic elements. A further aim of the chapter is to distinguish modification from innovation, highlighting in the process Williams's bold departures from traditional generic criteria. The principal goal, however, is to provide a detailed analysis of the two plays under consideration, showing how he recasts the Gothic and science fiction literary narratives while importing many of the cinematic conventions of the period.

Historical Background

Spring was written and set during a critical period in American history—toward the end of the Depression and just prior to World War II—and thus, Richard Miles, Heavenly's fiancé, reminds us of “what's happening in Czechoslovakia” (*Spring* 15). *Spring* also capitalizes upon the cultural transition that marked the growth of a new literary school in the South, as expressed in the popular Agrarian manifesto, “A Southern Agrarian Takes His Stand” (Davidson). Donald Davidson's Agrarian magazine, *The Fugitive*, likewise sought to attack the “highcaste Brahmins of the Old South” (Hart 234) while, at the same time, paradoxically championing regionalism and defying “the objective restatement of Southern history and American history” in the 1920s (Davidson 194). Thus, Southern writers in the early twentieth century found a “new cause” for their “growing distrust of the scorn that was being volleyed at the ‘backward’ South” (194).

According to Frye, during transitional periods of upheaval and social disturbance, fiction may turn “increasingly from realism to fantasy, partly because fantasy is the normal technique for fiction writers who do not believe in the permanence or continuity of the society they belong to” (*Secular Scripture* 138). For Williams, it would seem that this period of transition was reflected personally as well, the upshot being his production of fantastic satire.

Williams’s characters serve either as vehicles for his social commentary or else as embodiments of particularly fantastic or Expressionistic personal qualities. *Stairs*, for example, presents us with a downright contemptuous portrait of the dry goods industry and the mundane domesticity of “little wage earners” (*Stairs* xxi). As Williams admits, his fantasy characters do not necessarily function according to a linear logic of development through sequential episodes, although, as he wrote to Willard Holland, the director of the Mummies, the conventional emphasis in *Spring* rests “purely” upon characterization (qtd. in Leverich 211). But while *Spring*, on a superficial, thematic level, may be seen as a bathetic comment upon the tendency of young adults to sentimentalize their attachments, the play noticeably falls into a Southern Gothic narrative which, as a structure, relies on supernatural, ironic, or unusual events. Unlike its European predecessors, however, Southern Gothic deploys these events not for the sake of suspense but to better reveal the social and cultural character of the American South.

Emergence of the Gothic and Science Fiction Motifs

Gothic, the South, and Southern Gothic

Gothic narrative evolved in the nineteenth century, through the British novel of manners and the American romance narrative, the latter providing a hint of the lyric

imaginary (Weston 46). In traditional Gothic narratives, such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), mercilessly punitive narrative denouements play out with inexorable logic (Conger 95). The pseudomedieval traditions of Southern and Gothic narratives, so often complimentary to one another, draw upon established literary precedents. For example, the "books and articles of George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page were of great influence" (S. A. Smith 24), as were the works of others, such as the poet, Sidney Lanier, an "ancestor cousin" (Holditch and Leavitt 6) of Williams's, and the author of *The Boy's King Arthur* (S. A. Smith 24).

Within a traditional Gothic structure, Williams combines various myths of both Old and New Souths, myths often expressed through idealized narratives. Compellingly, Williams combines the social myths and ideas of the South (S. A. Smith 2) with the conventions of the traditional Gothic plots popularized in the nineteenth century in pioneering an entirely new tradition expressly for the modern theater: the Southern Gothic.

Williams periodically exhumes the Lost Cause, a notion that continued to inform Southern narratives well into the Depression, whether in poetry, fiction, or film. As Stephen A. Smith explains, this commonly propagated myth allowed Southerners to reaffirm the alleged superiority of their culture by declaring that it had indeed been "an antebellum golden age of chivalrous gentlemen planters, magnolia scented ladies, and plantation mansions" (22). However, in *Spring*, the Critchfields, in light of their newly desperate (*Spring* 83) financial circumstances, now seem to have more in common with those struggling with Depression desperation (83) and with scarcity and want, than with

the economic abundance (Woodward, *Search* 23) that was traditionally symbolized by the plantation mansions. Mrs. Critchfield, clinging to her aristocratic airs, relies on the Lost Cause ethos by way of justifying her claim to social superiority:

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: If we'd won the war he would've [Colonel Wayne] been president of the Confederacy. He was a great friend of Jefferson Davis. Upstairs we have the very bed that Mr. Davis slept in when he visited our plantation. It's in Heavenly's room. . . . Yes, that chair is hers, too. Mr. Critchfield's always nagging me to have things upholstered, but you know I can't bear to change them when they're so rich in tradition and all. Sometime I'm going to have you look through our family papers, Arthur. Writers are always so interested in things like that. (*Spring* 135)

Such revisionist treatments of the antebellum South were so pervasive in the literary marketplace in the 1930s that it would have been easy to “overlook the occasional attempts by southern fiction writers to treat their region’s antebellum past with historical accuracy” (Watson 5). Apparently, with the aid of the “passage of time, it became easy to believe that the entire South had once conformed to the representation of the old myth,” although “the Civil War had halted the march toward an aristocracy in fact, the new vision allowed it to continue in mythology” (S. A. Smith 22). Williams implicitly criticizes the propagation of this self-serving myth. Running parallel to this aristocratic mythology was the myth of the genteel Southern woman. Ironically, the self-styled upholders of Port Tyler’s “honor” (*Spring* 132), Mrs. Critchfield and Mrs. Lamphrey, respond to one another, and to their children, with by far some of the pettiest attacks

contained in the play's dialogue. As Kenneth Holditch and Richard Leavitt suggest in *Tennessee Williams and the South*, Williams "was intrigued by an interpreting irony in the contrast between the southern woman's charm of demeanor and speech and the fact that she could be firm, decisive, even cruel" (xii).

In a generational rehearsal of *Spring's* cycles of futility and loss, symbolized by Aunt Lila's abandonment by Arthur's father, Gale Shannon, twenty years before Arthur's rejection of Heavenly, Williams seems to remind us of the South's own "missed opportunity" to "refashion a new mythology," consistent with the national dream of democracy that was moving toward post-Depression amelioration (S. A. Smith 25). Instead, the South, collectively, "turned inward and backward, determined to recreate a broken dream which would inevitably fall short in its attempt to organize and explain the events of the future" (25). The broken engagement between Lila and Arthur's father plays out once again in Arthur's brutal rejection of Hertha, and in his outright jilting of Heavenly.

The surge of interest in "things medieval was not . . . a fad that was unique to the American South," since "the cult of antique chivalry" was especially popular in both Europe and New England in the nineteenth century as a "kind of talisman" (Watson 75) of "the whole 'Gothic' revolt against industrialism" (Kettle 111). This revolt against industrialism was the principle upon which the Agrarians based their stand. According to both Stephen A. Smith and Stephen Larsen, the traditional Southern myths, formerly associated with aristocratic honor and purity, had become culturally ossified and, "when neglected [and] deprived of conscious cultivation, . . . [were] equally capable of becoming a choked and tangled garden of weeds" (Larsen 7-8).

Leslie Fiedler fittingly states that the “Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness” (*Love and Death* 29). Unsurprisingly, many narratives reconstruct the divisive symbols and traditions of the Old South to accommodate a modern psychological interpretation of mythic archetypes, such as is seen in William Alexander Caruthers’s antebellum romance novel, *The Cavaliers of Virginia* (c. 1840s), later to be taken up in a New Southern way in Meredith Nicholson’s *The Cavalier of Tennessee* (1928). Both of these works similarly display troubled characters on the social periphery (Fiedler, *Love and Death* 29). Likewise, Faulkner’s collection of outcast characters—such as the Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Absalom, Absalom! (1936), and Lucas Birch in *Light in August* (1932)—imply a palpably conflicted “history, a communicable tradition and idiom” (Hoffman 60).

The idea of “the South” offered a number of programmatic communal narratives based on fantasies of reversion and cultural betrayal, as a panegyric intended to defend and to validate a “southern culture assumed to be synonymous with a slave-owning plantation culture” (Watson 80).² Certain icons accompany this idea: the majority of the characters in *Spring Storm* make a fetish out of the purity (*Spring* 121) of the play’s young, female characters, along with the marvellous Southern ancestry (102), and the fine blood (49, 54) of certain others; thus, Williams holds the image of the Cavalier, a traditional Southern icon, up for scrutiny. Certainly, like some of their antebellum predecessors, a few of the South’s postbellum writers “were compelled to come to terms

² Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith sought to revive the symbols and professed values of the Old South, Dixon in the novels *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), and Griffith in his early films such as *The Honor of His Family* (1910), *The Battle* (1911), and *Birth of a Nation* (1914).

with their region's unspoken imperative—that no Southerner betray Dixie by questioning or repudiating its precious myths” (Cash 153). Over time, as a response to Southern culture, a distinct literary and cultural narrative emerged, based largely upon historical subject matter. According to Cash, the art growing out of this narrative was less literature than propaganda. He describes the South's “novels, its sketches and stories,” as “essentially so many pamphlets, its poems so many handbills, concerned mainly with . . . the Old South, and addressed primarily to the purpose of glorifying that Old South—the elaboration of the legend” (Cash 146).

Williams, however, like Faulkner, took a bold stand against that formidable cultural pressure. Instead, in light of the fact that “FDR's economic recovery programs never quite reached [*Spring Storm's*] corner of the South” (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xx), Williams demonstrates how Southerners and, specifically, in the case of *Spring Storm*, those in the Mississippi Delta, were “inevitably driven back upon imagination” and a “world construction bound to . . . a product of imagination and fantasy” (Cash 47).

Williams also touches on the growing question of the New South, as Port Tylerites insist on clinging to their old-fashioned myths. Some adhere to the Confederate Lost Cause and its reframing as a glorified tragedy—as propagated by Mrs. Critchfield—while others espouse the newer and “fast-developing myth of southern aristocracy” (Weston 106) promoted by the would-be aristocracy of Port Tyler. The conclusion of the play confirms Port Tyler's and Heavenly's “life-giving/taking” (109) dimension by suggesting that Dick will depart for life on a Mississippi barge, possibly to grapple with the primal power of the mighty river.

Further, Williams can hardly be accused of unequivocally defending this most “powerful and enduring of American myths” (S. A. Smith 18). Rather, he exposes it as being largely anachronistic and ill-equipped to deal with the modern challenges it was facing. Stephen A. Smith describes the sociohistorical pressures that led to the rise of a distinct Southern culture at the turn of the century and up to Williams’s composition of *Spring*:

Being frustrated by repeated and increasingly certain failure to develop its position either politically or morally, beginning to develop a definite group consciousness, and limiting its exposure to rational argument, the collective mind of the South was ripe for the development of a group culture and was in need of a shared mythology to defend itself. (12)

By the same token, Waldo W. Braden suggests that many Southerners, “already conditioned to accept . . . fantasy,” in the era after the conversion of the humiliation of the Confederacy’s loss into a national triumph, were all the more prepared to accept new myths of honor and “purification,” while “finding the present unbearable and the future unpromising, [some Southerners] retreated . . . and preferred to live in fantasy” (12).

Gothic narrative structures fit especially well with Williams’s apprentice fantasies, which are primarily concerned with the tensions between traditional social conventions and the passionate desires that seek to transcend them. In his structural approach to Gothic literature, George Haggerty identifies the “greatest problem” for early American Gothic writers as it lay in their challenge to recast “the dual, paradoxical realities,” experienced by various protagonists, of “the subjective world of dreamlike private experience and the public objective world” (Haggerty 20). DuPlessis denies the

so-called neutrality of Gothic convention. She contends that it is “purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic,” and suggests instead that “narrative structures and subjects are like working apparatuses for ideology, factories for the ‘natural’ and ‘fantastic’ meanings by which we live” (DuPlessis 3). Although many Gothic narratives “aim at [an] iconoclastic form,” when successful the Gothic operates as a “conservative, controlling function” (Weston 92) within which certain complex narrative patterns present characters as “massively blocked off from something” (Sedgwick 12).

The American Gothic, like its European predecessor and the literary tradition with which we associate it, makes use of claustrophobic spaces in order to reveal, through an examination of the psychological states of the characters, fantastic meanings, and symbolism. For example, in *Spring*, Williams applies a Symbolist or allegorist approach toward “ancestral guilt and expiation” (Drabble 443) in a manner not unlike Hawthorne’s. He investigates such Hawthornian topics as love versus freedom, enclosure versus escape, and strong women versus passive men (Weston 50). Williams also relies, as does Hawthorne, on establishing complex narrative patterns that mirror the protagonist’s complicated internal emotions, ranging from anti-climactic formal strategies (*Spring* 33, 146) to biblical prophecy and admonition (Williams, qtd. in Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* vi).

In addition, Williams synthesizes elements from the narrative of Gothic fantasy, and both the traditional Old Southern and New South narratives. He also occasionally complicates such generic recasting by drawing upon concepts from psychoanalytic theory (atavism, love-hatred), ancient mythology (Eros and Psyche), and modern legends, such as the Lost Cause of the Old South and of the Confederacy, of which “southerners had

made a religion . . . replete with unchallengeable tenets, ritual, hallowed saints, and sacred shrines” (Savage 198). For the very reason that Williams admittedly draws upon an eclectic range of resources, his fantasy vision bears a unique flourish.

Williams’s nominal ability to capture dramatic confinement and alienation, as well as the various nuances of the tenuous relationships that inform his characters, imbues the play with an atmosphere of dread, much in the tradition of Gothic English and American narratives from *Macbeth* to *Desire Under the Elms*, including the Brontës and Hawthorne. In *Spring*, Williams also suggests an allegorical and universalizing dimension in that the play contains elements—evident in its characterization, its setting, and its iconography—that resonate with biblical significance, such as the fall and the crucifixion. Williams adapts these familiar literary precedents through the use of intense and artistic characters struggling against conventional codes. Even Williams’s chosen subject matter flies in the face of such tacit conventions, however, in his depiction of the complex characterization and zigzagging moods of terror and exultation associated with his new brand of Southern Gothic (a departure from conventions associated with works such as Stark Young’s programmatic popular novel *So Red the Rose* [1934], for example).

In *Spring*, the Delta town of Port Tyler, Mississippi strives to control, largely through social manipulation and coercion, the threat to the established order that the youthful predisposition toward “rebellion” (*Spring* 94) so often poses. In classic Southern Gothic fashion, the town’s well-to-do families, through social manipulation and coercion, close ranks:

Such serious attempts at maintaining order result from that benign social phenomenon . . . which was dramatized as early as the Brontëan novel of manners. . . . [F]eelings [of terror] may develop because, paradoxically, human beings are often lost in the culture they create to civilize the bestial energies of the world as they would be in an enclosed Gothic labyrinth like that in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, or in an exposed Gothic wasteland like the icy terrain in which Mary Shelley's creature is cruelly exposed in *Frankenstein*. (Weston 93)

In keeping with the Gothic tradition of the trap as an allegorical narrative convention on its own—beyond that of mere atmosphere or setting—Williams includes images of confinement invoked by domineering parents and social constraints. The presence of deep desire or, conversely, of hatred and palpable dread, seems “to imply something [supernaturally] ominous” which must be “subsumed in the family or community that attempts to isolate itself from a larger threat” (Weston 94). Louis Rubin defines this threat as “the vast, ungovernable forces of human existence in the world [such as] consciousness of time and mortality” (*Writers* 136). Lila reminds us of the passage of time through the rhythm of her “squeaky rocker” which informs us that *tempis fugit*, even though Heavenly still believes that she has a “couple of centuries,” for “[t]hat’s how it looks when you’re young” (*Spring* 125).

The Gothic male protagonist generally embodies the prototypical “dark, handsome, proud, melancholy, intellectual, highly sensitive, capricious, introspective, isolated, and sometimes slightly mad gentleman of ancient family and opulent circumstances” (Weston 59), much like Arthur Shannon in *Spring* and Benjamin Murphy

in *Stairs* (although Benjamin claims neither an ancient heritage nor an opulent lifestyle). In *Spring*, however, Williams endows the doomed female character, Hertha, with the traditionally male protagonist's deep learning in "strange lore, and darkly ambitious of penetrating to forbidden secrets of the universe" (59). In both *Spring* and *Stairs*, the characters tell fantastic tales, much like Hertha in *Spring*; as the town's "Storybook Lady" (*Spring* 29), Hertha tells fairy tales to children, much like Benjamin and The Girl, as they exchange their highly personal fantasies in *Stairs*. In *Stairs*, Benjamin has a vision in which the high Gothic tower that dominated his college campus makes a conspicuous appearance (*Stairs* 36). Both plays also invoke such traditionally Gothic elements as deserted ruins or corridors, ghosts, and appalling legends or myths as a topical "nucleus of suspense" (Lovecraft 25).

While *Spring* employs primarily Gothic conventions, *Stairs* clearly falls into the generic category of science fiction. But while considered a science fiction play (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs*), *Stairs* deals with the same generically determined, fantasy subject matter—"supernaturalism, horror, and sardonic humor" (Hart 126–27)—as *Spring*. Whereas *Spring* deals mainly with physical and psychological horrors attributable to natural causes, *Stairs* adopts a *supernatural*, if not indeed "Surreal" narrative strategy, replete with "spectral" atmospheric touches (*Stairs* 32). In *Stairs*, Williams evokes a kind of psychological lyricism, much in keeping with his Surreal aesthetic, as a set of conventions for constructing a setting in which logic and the laws of nature have no real authority or claim to certainty, other "than one encompassing supernatural forces" (Mücke 19).

However, *Spring*'s characterization of a Southern Cavalier undermines the model of the heroic nobleman, a traditionally Gothic conceit. Instead, Williams presents us with more unconventional versions of the "valorous and immaculate hero in preposterously humble disguise," while the audience identifies with the long-persecuted female characters that undergo the majority of the terrors, and with which the audience identifies by standing outside, and resisting, the conventional "high sounding" morality (Lovecraft 25). And as we shall see, Williams moves beyond the stereotypical nobility, sainthood, and untarnished valor associated with notions of the chivalric ideal and other entitlements relating to social status, through the use of parody.

Williams's Southern Gothic characters are most often afflicted with natural—as distinct from supernatural and/or religious—challenges. The sense of objective distance and detachment that usually informs Williams's distinctive approach to characterization varies in intensity throughout the fantasy works, allowing for the lovers' intimacy in both plays and also for the satiric and political lampooning of elites, such as the bosses in *Stairs* and the town's social climbers in *Spring*. In both plays, Williams also depicts the intense suffering of the poor and the alienated, while facilitating the detached cosmic overview of Mr. E in *Stairs*.

But like the majority of Gothic writers before him, his plays emit an uncanny and frightening atmospheric power. As in the works of his contemporary, J. R. R. Tolkien, Williams's narrative absorbs religious elements through his use of iconographic imagery, an absorption achieved by creating the "sacramental ordinary" (D. Brown 119) which delineates a subtle but persistent sense of magic that transfuses the ordinary. Both *Spring* and *Stairs* reassert the ordinary in the end, with the reappearance of the pedestrian

Messrs. P, D, Q, and T in *Stairs* (*Stairs* 98), and with Heavenly Critchfield's transformation into an ordinary "old maid" in *Spring* (66).

Williams's take on the Southern Gothic narrative adheres, but warily, to the standard Gothic formula that depends upon the conventions of

. . . unerring accuracy in linkage of parts which make for faultless unity throughout and thunderous effectiveness at the climactic moment, the delicate nuances of scenic and landscape value to select in establishing and sustaining the desired mood and vitalizing the desired illusion.

(Lovecraft 58)

Williams understands the Gothic textual archetype well enough to emphasize the narrative's essential iconography, and its additional dramatic preoccupation with the psychology of fear, whereby the two full-length plays examine the peculiar "incongruities and conceits" that function as "preliminaries or concomitants" to the unexpected "denouement to come" (Lovecraft 58). In *Spring*, the collective terror serves as no mere Gothic echo, but rather as a tense expression of a cultural impasse, and a collective shudder in reaction to the unknown. Significantly, the Gothic atmosphere dictates "not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation" (Lovecraft 16) according to a number of generic criteria, including those applicable to narrative and to iconography. The field of modern American Gothic or weird fiction, as exemplified in the magazine *Weird Tales*³ paralleled and even slightly preceded the development of its more formulaic sister, the modern science fiction subgenre (Lovecraft vii).

³ In which Williams published his first short story, the "The Vengeance of Nitocris," in 1928.

In contrast to science fiction, however, which in the early 1930s had no notable past “beyond H. G. Wells” (Lovecraft vii), Gothic fiction’s rich literary history gave Williams ample material from which to develop his own interpretation. According to Lovecraft’s classificatory study of fantasy literature in general, and of the supernatural in particular,⁴ the “one real test” of the genre “is simply this”:

. . . whether or not there be excited . . . a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim. (16)

In modifying his version of the fantasy tradition for both of these plays, Williams drew on the “hereditary folklore” (Lovecraft 14) of his Delta childhood and mythologized his own experiences of “cursed” passion in the Deep South (*Spring* 33). In both plays, Williams presents us with “fathomless worlds of strange life” that seem to “pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in dimensions which only the dead and moonstruck can glimpse” (Lovecraft 14). Thus the roof of a humble shoe factory in St. Louis also opens up to an “alternate universe” (*Stairs* 98), while the night air at the Mississippi River bluffs tastes, to its characters, like “outer space” (*Spring* 28).

Smith contends that an analysis of a Southern “collective imagination” across various perspectives and disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, and political science provides the appropriate approach “for isolating mythic statements, reconstructing public mythologies, and demonstrating the interdependence of communication . . . rhetoric, myth and culture in the contemporary

⁴ A study which, interestingly, classifies generic criteria according to Chandler’s list, as applied in varying degrees to early American science fiction (and applicable to both *Spring* and *Stairs*).

South” (S. A. Smith 2). Williams utilizes purportedly explanatory myths as determining factors in the creation of his microcosmic Southern Gothic fantasy (Malin 5). However, Williams also painstakingly contextualizes these visions within a broad perspective, in order to examine them as symbolic artefacts in outdated opposition to the new economic and social forces facing Southerners during the Depression, “including the declining price of cotton” (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring*, xx).

Initially, Heavenly seems to embody the progressive, more organic Southern perspective, as she examines the old pattern of her potentially fossilized experience from the point of view of future generations, thereby anticipating the ending of the “old long lag between the Southern mind and the changing conditions of the Southern world” (Cash 377–78): “[i]t won’t matter who we got married to or whether we lived to be old or died young . . . [w]e’ll just be little marks on a piece of rock” (*Spring* 89).

Despite an ever-widening rhetorical chasm between old-fashioned Southern traditions and the reality of the Civil Rights movement of the 1940s and the 1950s, a “rejection of the old myth did not come easily for the South” (S. A. Smith 58). Ultimately, Williams’s protagonists confirm Pardon Tillinghast’s observations regarding the formation of future social patterns, in that such myths cannot occur “without past patterns from which to take a departure” (Tillinghast 19). Such mythological traditions have long endured, especially since the “first myth of the South was based on the theme of cavalier origins, the notion that the South had been settled by the scions of European nobility who came to the southern colonies” (S. A. Smith 13) and took “a certain satisfaction in comparing their civilization, based on black dependents, with medieval manners, knights on caracoling horses, and humble serfs” (Eaton 48).

Even though the narrative follows a conventional, linear arc, its setting remains embedded in fantasy. Williams reinforces a sense of paradox or impossibility through the use of self-consciously literary references, as when Arthur quotes John Donne's *Song* to Hertha: "Go, and catch a falling star, get with child a mandrake root" (*Spring* 122). Williams couples these fantasy references with references to the Agrarian tradition, while at the same time attacking a number of stereotypical antebellum characterizations, such as those of the contented slave, the demure Southern belle, and the chivalrous gentleman. Such iconographic images have long persisted in Southern narratives. In fact, the heroic characters in Southern myth "included the cavalier gentleman, who became transformed into a planter, and the Southern belle, a reincarnation of the damsel of the castle" (S. A. Smith 14). Williams repeatedly invokes the latter image in *Spring Storm*, in characterizing Hertha as "the dark-haired princess in the magic tower" (*Spring* 144). As we shall see, he also makes use of Gothic stereotypes, such as the damsel in distress or the heroic knight, only to transform the beautiful damsel (Heavenly) into a reclusive spinster-in-waiting, or the knight in shining armor (Arthur) into a callow deserter. The value allegedly most cherished by Southerners was "an exaggerated and formalized code of honor" (S. A. Smith 14), now an abandoned code that Mrs. Critchfield, above all, bemoans to Heavenly: "I wanted you to understand the responsibility of having fine blood in you" (*Spring* 54).

Lovecraft asserts that the true fantasy tale includes "something more than secret murder [or] bloody bones" (15). In *Spring*, Williams associates such iconographic imagery with the fates of the four characters involved in an ill-fated love quadrangle in the backwater town below the bluffs of the Mississippi River. These atmospheric

elements go beyond the traditional Gothic narrative within the palpably Southern narrative, rooted as it is in the cultural mythos of the Delta, which Key, in his study of Southern politics, attributes to “the home of great plantations planters, few whites . . . as well as the last vestige of ante-bellum civilization” (9–10). Williams reinterprets such familiar mythic paradigms and icons as the specter of the Old South, the anti-industrialism identified by the Agrarians, and the rhetorical significance of the Confederacy and the Lost Cause mindset, which was that:

. . . although the Confederate States of America lost the Civil War and thus its bid to secede, the South still won in the sense that Southerners believed that they—or their forebears—had fought on behalf of what was right and consequently could maintain their sense of honor. (Foster 1134)

In *Spring Storm*, Williams links the legacy of the Lost Cause and society’s more genteel expectations. In a rare moment of clarity and self-examination, Mrs. Critchfield acknowledges that what is perhaps an unhealthy obsession with Southern gentility makes her sound “cheap and crude and mercenary” (*Spring* 50). Nonetheless, she chastises Heavenly for having “thrown herself away” on Dick:

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Don’t you think that having the finest blood in America imposes on you some obligations? I’m sure that you do. It’s a question of self-respect. But it’s also a question of something deeper than that. Maybe I’m being old-fashioned. Hanging on to something that’s lost its meaning. I know that some people say so. But they’re people who never had anything worth hanging onto. You’re not one of them, Heavenly. A girl whose name is listed under five or six different

headings in Zella Armstrong's *Notable Families* and every other good southern genealogy couldn't help but feel it her sacred duty to live up to the best that's in her. The Waynes, the Critchfields, the Tylers, the Hallidays, and the Brookes. You've got them in you, Heavenly. You can't get them out. And they're going to fight you to the last wall if you try to mix their blood with ditchwater!

HEAVENLY: [turning furiously] What do you mean? (49)

This genealogical family saga serves as a metaphor for Heavenly's confusion, as when she confronts, once again, the ghosts of her family's Civil War history.

Smith traces the affiliations of the old ideology of the South with enduring forces of exclusion, noting that the "old mythology, in its manifestations as the myth of both the Old South-Lost Cause was . . . decidedly elitist" (S. A. Smith 141). In *Spring*, the elitist Lamphrey family manipulates the symbols and icons of the region's rhetorical mythology. With a mind to creating a semblance of stability, however temporary, for those who share the mythic vision, Mrs. Critchfield propagates the emergence of a purportedly viable alternative myth temporarily dominated by the exaggerated hegemony of the old mythology, public political pressure, and the often private suffering associated with social ostracism (Silver 26). Williams's ironic take on such manifestations of elitism clearly disdain the discriminatory ideology that they depict. While calling for a more socially egalitarian inclusivity, Williams pioneers the regional distinctiveness that "offered new middle- and lower-class heroes and rituals to demonstrate the uniqueness of Southern culture," one that also lays bare the alienating effects of the "caste system

suggested by the symbolic heroes of the planter and the industrialist found in the old myth” (S. A. Smith 141).

Lovecraft, Poe, and the Fantasy Genre

A plethora of works in American literature contribute to the vitality of the modern fantasy genre, a genre that commonly characterizes the “brutal intrusion of mystery” as it impacts “the order of reality” (Castex 8) and, more broadly, one that defies the reader’s puzzlement over how to make sense of seemingly supernatural occurrences not easily rationalized nor explained away. The critics consulted here, including Dorothea E. von Mücke, H. P. Lovecraft, and Jim McGhee, locate certain works within the fantasy genre according to their use of “literary events that transcend the ordinary categories of time, space, and causality” (McGhee 23). H. P. Lovecraft defines fantasy as a composite of moods evoked by unexpected events. He accounts as follows for the unpredictability associated with the fantasy genre, and its

. . . “terrible and omnipotent source of boons and calamities visited upon [hu]mankind for cryptic and wholly extraterrestrial reasons, and thus clearly belonging to spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part. (13)

Other critics, however, locate fantasy within a broader context (McGhee 25), an approach that this dissertation also adopts when discussing *Spring* and *Stairs*.

In considering how the fantasy genre has been classified, we may find it useful to examine the “negotiated consensus” of various “interpretive communities” (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159). More specifically, over a century before Williams began writing for the theater, fantasy supernaturalism, introduced by Edgar Allan Poe, heralded a new literary

dawn in America. This new movement directly affected not only the history of the fantasy genre but of “fiction as a whole” (Lovecraft 52). As Hale asserts, even as a young writer, “Poe would become a direct influence on Williams” (*TW Preacher’s Boy* 13). Williams later credited Poe’s influence in his most famous Southern Gothic work, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Southern historians such as David Potter have stated that “the South has been an enigma . . . a kind of sphinx on the American land” (Potter 15–16), and thus the Gothic South invites a fantasy treatment. Despite Williams’s relative lack of playwriting experience at this time, he experimented successfully with traditionally Gothic elements and staging techniques as capably as did Elmer Rice, Eugene O’Neill, and Lillian Hellman.

In *Stairs*, the fantastic effects occur more often than they do in *Spring*, for in *Stairs*, we find more events having indeterminate and unexpected causes (Todorov 40). In *Spring*, on the other hand, we see a sequence of seemingly innocent and irrelevant interactions and events that unfold at cross-purposes to the characters’ desires, thereby suggesting the “failure of fantasy to transform the meaninglessness of the reality the characters perceive” (McGhee 41). In the stage directions in both *Stairs* and *Spring*, Williams clearly aims to confront his audience not only with the naturalistic psychological implications of the characters’ motivations, but also with the political significance of gender and social status. Moreover, an analysis of the plays reveals that Williams sets both *Spring* and *Stairs* in a kind of neverland (an eminently suitable landscape for plays belonging to the fantasy genre).

Typically, fantasy narratives present us with “a direct reversal of ground rules,” and complex “feelings of surprise, shock, delight, and fear” (McGhee 2–3). McGhee

elaborates upon Rabkin's observations regarding inexplicable phenomena, specifying that the appearance of fantasy in literature is signalled in three ways:

- (a) by the characters that express their astonishment at the anti-expected;
- (b) by the implied author who structures the anti-expected events; and (c)
- by the narrator whose speaking 'voice' has linguistic characteristics that mark it as coming from a particular time, place, and social group.

(McGhee 3)

Williams employs elements of the first two conventions in *Spring*, while in *Stairs*, he makes use of all three.

As distinct from religious mythologies, fantasy texts merely suggest meaning, rather than imposing meaning through some form of cultural hegemony (Brigg 32). Like many of the fantasy works of the twentieth century, both *Spring* and *Stairs* address changing modes and conceptions of communication, and tap into current theories of madness and of political power; as in the protest plays, the fantasy plays reveal Williams's ongoing concern with political issues. In *Stairs*, Williams continues to trace the intimate connection between theater and politics, as did many other socially conscious playwrights of the late 1930s and beyond. In both *Spring* and *Stairs*, Williams satirizes the characters' motivations and goals and also the very conventions that inform the fantasy genre, including its Gothic and science fiction subtypes.

Unlike the protest plays, however, the fantasy plays tend to impart a fantastic gloss to the nonetheless naturalistic grittiness of the protagonists' lives. Although Williams makes us aware in *Spring* that librarian Hertha Neilson's father drinks too much, the Neilson family's sordid attributes remain in the realm of hearsay. As well,

Williams's production notes call for staging techniques that evoke an extraordinary world of grotesque and bizarre settings, which, in turn, directly reflect the individualistic protagonists' inner conflicts.

As Anne Fleche contends in her study of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and U.S. dramatic realism, Williams is "aware that the conditions of representation are not socially irrelevant" (12). She proceeds to qualify these determinants of representation as unlimited by requirements of photographic realism but as extending "equally toward the relative and the relational" (15), and, we may note, "toward" fantasy. In a similar vein, Norman J. Fedder urges us to consider that, from the start, Williams "cautioned designers against photographic likeness" (799) because he was writing for a "new, plastic theater which must take the place of the exhausted theater of realistic conventions" (Williams, *GM* 131). Both aural effects, such as those called for in both the music and the exposition of both plays, and visual iconography, such as that embedded in dramatic settings and recurring motifs, contribute fundamentally to Williams's fantasy configurations. Paradoxically, the very strangeness of the fantasy setting allows us to comprehend the plays' moral dimensions more clearly and distinctly (Buckland, *Fantasy Moral* 102).

If we consider fantasy's commonly-held narrative assumptions about the nature of human spirituality and "of what can be perceived and known" (Mücke 2), we may recognize the parallels between Williams's and Poe's penchant for exploring the psychological motivations of their characters. Conversely, the fantasy narrative undermines the various modes of logic and reason by invoking topics such as "mystery, occult knowledge, or laws that encompass the supernatural in a way that contradicts

assumptions about the natural world and human knowledge thereof” (2). Both in *Spring* and *Stairs*, Williams directs his drama against outmoded, hidebound standards of morality, celebrating a more hedonistic morality formerly associated with the aesthete or the bohemian (149). For instance, in these two plays Williams transforms and transports what would traditionally be seen as the more grotesque aspects of the human body to the level of cosmic and universal (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 318). Moreover, he links common physical traits “directly related to the sun, to the stars,” while merging his protagonists’ physical iconography with “various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers . . . [that] can fill the entire universe” (319).

Interestingly, both Williams and Poe dispense with literary conventions previously thought to be offshoots of the fantasy genre,

. . . such as the happy ending, virtue rewarded, and in general a hollow moral didacticism, acceptance of popular standards and values, and the striving of the author to obtrude his own emotions into the story and take sides with the partisans and the majority’s artificial ideas. (Lovecraft 53).

Lovecraft credits Poe with a sort of fantasy literary revival (59), and celebrates the exemplary role that Poe played for young writers of the period, “till there bloomed in the sterile America of the thirties and forties such a moon-nourished garden of gorgeous poison fungi as not even the nether slopes of Saturn might boast” (54).

Although Williams’s ambiguous endings and morally ambivalent characterization owe little to fantasy influences, his settings remain in accord with the outrageously exaggerated epic grandeur often called for in traditional Gothic and science fiction narratives. Also, Williams’s open-ended conclusion in *Stairs* sets the tone for

innumerable fantasy outcomes. For example, it comes as a shock to the main protagonists that humanity, while transplanted on “a brand-new star” (*Stairs* 93), does not reproduce as on Earth, although the omnipotent Mr. E seems unconcerned with the fate of those left behind “down here on World Number One” (95).

However, in these plays, Williams follows the traditional formula of a character-driven narrative, one that focuses on a cluster of star-crossed characters engaged in an attempted escape from cultural constraints into an illusory world of compulsive love affairs. Here Williams demonstrates the cultural origins of alienation and terror through exploring diverse taboos, whether psychological, professional, political, sexual, or moral. In Williams’s use of irresolution and ambiguity, he deviates from the fairy tale resolutions of the early nineteenth-century fantasy tradition (Mücke 2). Like Poe, Williams obliquely questions contemporary standards of morality, emphasizing at the same time the social construction of sexual conventions.

In both *Spring* and in *Stairs*, Williams develops the fantasy criteria and staging techniques that would come to define his inimitable dramatic style. As Fedder put it twenty years before the apprentice plays were rediscovered in 1998:

Williams [wrote], for the most part, in the realistic mode, but always on the borderline of the fantastic—and, occasionally, right in the thick of it. The quality of Williams’s plots—their essentially larger than life tonality—points readily beyond realism, leading him often to highly symbolic situations such as the Easter analogies in a number of plays [including *Spring*] or to outright Expressionism [as in *Stairs*]. (798)

Both plays raise questions about fantasy through the exploration of such topics as the supernatural, spiritual crisis, religion, and alienation. Thus both develop according to a fantasy narrative trajectory (although only the plot of *Stairs* follows a wholly unpredictable “suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and . . . unplumbed space” [Lovecraft 15]).

Most fantasy narratives conform to a theoretical generic model and, therefore, utilize criteria consistent with those identified by Chandler. Williams’s fantasy aesthetic traditionally combines the “pathological nature of the harmonious and beautiful” with a counterpoint of “shock and intensity, confrontation and novelty,” albeit steeped in aspects conducive to the “recognition of the familiar” (Mücke 107). Williams suits the narratives of both *Stairs* and *Spring* to the fantasy genre in particular, as protagonists in both plays reject “a stiff code of ethics,” replacing it “with a situational ethics which establishes one basic principle, usually love, as a yardstick of human action” (Oziewicz 64). In these plays Williams deftly extends the protest genre beyond its traditional, heavy-handed, didactic conventions, and his interpretation of science fiction enables him to develop a progressively more complex vision, as he came to incorporate a rapidly maturing understanding of staging elements and techniques.

Furthermore, the dislocation of space and time into an inner space, subject to the whims of the unconscious minds of both casts of characters, calls for radically different signifiers in terms of the plays’ geographical and historical settings; for example, time and space “become the mere correlatives of subjective experience and lose more and more the status of autonomous reality,” albeit temporarily (Puschmann-Nalenz 161).

Williams also taps into some of the nascent components of postmodern literature. For example, he privileges his characters' inner development, and thereby moves beyond traditional science fiction or Gothic modes, in order to explore the origins of life, space travel, and even the destructive nature of the self—according to Freud, the death-instinct, or *thanatos* (Freud, *Civilization* 79)—both in *Spring* and in *Stairs*. Intriguingly, as Todorov illustrates, the most fundamental topics in the fantasy genre involve the self or are directed inwardly—like Benjamin's inward journey in *Stairs*—and consist of

. . . metamorphosis, multiplication of the personality, collapse of the limit between subject and object, the transformation of time and space, and pan-determinism, which is . . . a superhuman power that substitutes for an unknown causality or coincidence and results in the interchangeability of physical and mental, matter and spirit, word and thing. (Todorov 139)

These fantasy topics, commonly associated with the Other, are also invariably associated with the protagonists' desires, or with their unconscious. Just as inwardly directed topics are associated with the essentially passive preoccupations of fantasy—essentially unconcerned with the Other—that exert a direct impact on the protagonists' desires, such fixations, often paradoxically, “imply an active, dynamic relation with others” (McGhee 164). Specifically, the fantasy topics “in this category are sexual desire and perversions of that desire, cruelty and violence, death and life after death” (164). It would seem, then, that Todorov's perspective on the self-and-Other as a structuring principle within the fantasy genre indeed applies to both of Williams's fantasy plays. *Stairs* can be characterized as a self-directed fantasy and *Spring*, as a fantasy orientated toward the Other.

In his stage directions for the fantasy plays, Williams also reveals his early capacity for dramatic expression through impressive landscape touches, and through Expressionistic pictorial silhouettes. Here, he eschews concrete details, preferring instead to suggest the indistinct, weird fantasies of the protagonists. In short, his work borrows from both the Gothic and science fiction conventions, thereby illustrating Williams's progression beyond the conventional narrative, into the exaggerated domain of the fantasy genre (Lovecraft 43). Both plays are primarily conceived as dramas of conflicting passion and fantasy. The epically supernatural or cosmic settings of both plays—as in *Spring's* Golgotha or *Stairs's* Heaven—afford the protagonists and the audience an opportunity for ethereal fantasy and romantic identification with the fates of the characters.

Uses of Fantasy in Spring and Stairs

The complexity of Williams's design at the level of staging, characterization, and narrative development aligns his early plays with two major types of fantasy narrative. The first encodes a predominantly alien element (the “irrational, incomprehensible event or occurrence that intrudes into the rationalist universe,” as in *Stairs*), and the second encodes a historical Other—an instantiation of history or tradition, as in *Spring* (Mücke 199). Like *Stairs*, narratives written in a proto-postmodern manner and those classified as science fiction tend to overlap stylistically, yet both make use of a controlling, outside narrator or omniscient observer (Mr. E, for example). Within the context of their shared artificial worlds, such narratives often draw upon unreciprocated motifs or else a more dystopian form of estrangement.

Despite the stock of fantasy motifs traditionally associated with the miraculous and the supernatural, few passages in Williams's early Gothic and science fiction plays are purely melodramatic.⁵ As Dan Isaac suggests, *Spring* may serve as a paradigm for Williams's later work in that it indicates the ways in which he makes use of fantastic dramatic elements to parody more familiar narrative expectations, from the time of his apprenticeship at the University of Iowa to his enrolment at the New School of Social Research. His performance-related designs emphasize fantastic staging techniques through which he combines elements of Expressionism and of magic realism. While working within the context of the fantasy genre, Williams managed to create a groundbreaking and original Southern Gothic dramatic subtype. He put an American—and, specifically, a Southern—twist on the traditional fantasy preoccupation with “the nostalgic reconstruction of a lost era,” while yet elaborating upon “the nonsynchronicity and heterogeneity of the modern era” (Mücke 17).

Interestingly, Mücke reminds us that fantasy “has an inherently transgressive” character, in that it “schematizes concerns that are otherwise censored in a larger cultural context” (Mücke 13–14). Tobin Spears, in a more broadly schematic manner, situates fantasy “in the intellectual context of Romanticism’s rebellion against rationalism and the Enlightenment” (14), although retaining the topical concern with perceived acts of transgression and their social consequences. Todorov, on the one hand, defines the subgenre of science fiction as “fantasy in the scientific mode” (Todorov 41). In a more

⁵ On the whole, his exploration of grotesque topics was far-reaching in its effects, given that *A Streetcar Named Desire* revolutionized the modern theater and established Williams as the modern father of Southern Gothic drama.

radical manoeuvre, Rosemary Jackson characterizes the subversive function of the fantasy genre as a wish to recover a particular lack in Western society:

[the] desire for something excluded from the cultural order—more specifically, for all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two decades. (76)

As Weston points out, fantasy involves the “suspension of disbelief” (23, quoting Samuel Taylor Coleridge). Thus, in *Stairs*, Benjamin and The Girl finally discover a parallel universe, displaced in space, and disappear in a “cloud of smoke” (*Stairs* 96), presumably to escape their dreary lives as a kind of cosmic Adam and Eve, while in *Spring*, Williams dooms the seductive Heavenly to wait, alone and seemingly trapped, on her family’s porch (*Spring* 148). In *Spring*, on the other hand, Williams draws less on fantastic, hallucinogenic imagery and on interior memory flashbacks than he does in *Stairs*. However, both plays focus on “the impossibility of intensifying the intimacy of a friendship, or of consuming a love relationship” (Weston 60).

The main thrust of the standard fantasy narrative, the thwarted romantic relationship, commonly begins with the reunion of an estranged couple for a short period, followed by their final separation. The separation reflects the couple’s inability to overcome the obstacles that they face (a motif prevalent both in *Spring*, with Heavenly and Dick, and in *Stairs*, with Benjamin and Helen). A sense of isolation, in both plays, dominates the primary psychological state of the protagonists. Clearly, both sets of characters find themselves imprisoned by the dissatisfaction associated with unrequited love or failed affairs. Undeniably, Williams underscores the vulnerability of his

characters' respective situations by subtly evoking certain literary references; for example, James Fenimore Cooper's threatening Gothic overtones in *Spring* (75), and the rape-fantasy twist upon the "Beauty and the Beast" fable in *Stairs* (70).

Williams develops his take on human sexuality by appealing to Western sociohistorical notions of sexual constructs and traditions, and notes the ways in which they clash with the urgency of the basic sexual instinct. In true fantasy fashion, he characterizes the protagonists' "violent break out of a state of melancholic isolation as a total disregard for the rational concerns of self-protection and self-preservation, driven by the irresistible force of an unconscious sexuality" (Mücke 60). We can distinguish Williams's aesthetic interpretation of sexual taboos from the traditional moral approach to "perversion" or, as in *Spring*, to sexual morality as generally applied to activity unrelated to reproductive behavior. Thus, while Heavenly does not seek to entrap Richard (known as Dick) by becoming pregnant, she nonetheless confesses to engaging in sexual acts in order to "hold him" (*Spring* 24). In *Stairs*, by contrast, Williams proposes doing away with sexual reproduction altogether, with Mr. E's pronouncement that "having two sexes . . . on World Number One" has made a "rather sorry mess of things" (*Stairs* 95), and goes on to suggest a decidedly biblical solution akin to Jesus' account of the resurrection, when human beings neither marry, "nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matthew 22.30).

In analyzing *Stairs* as a science fiction play, this dissertation will apply Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz's catalogued criteria of the subgenre. Puschmann-Nalenz associates these criteria with "classical" science fiction narratives in which

. . . action [is] dominant and the teleological purposeful directedness of the plot . . . the character of an active, rational and socially integrated hero, time as subject-matter, and particularly the creation of an imaginary world constituted by means of a realistic narrative [all remain operative]. (223)

According to Puschmann-Nalenz, the first wave of science fiction writers⁶ were “inspired by fantastic literature” (224), as previously suggested by Lovecraft.

The fact that science fiction has rarely been considered a “privileged” narrative structure has led some critics to conclude that “the literary powers-that-be have not wished science fiction to function with the social prestige that literature in the stronger sense enjoys” (C. Freedman 29). In *The Universe Makers*, Donald A. Wollheim contends that the “galactic civilization” concept of creating a new and somehow “improved” world for humanity, “bursting its planetary bounds and spreading out to infinity,” was a product of the zeitgeist “glimpsed more clearly in the thirties and forties” (81).

As early as the late nineteenth century, science fiction projected a “purely mechanistic universe” (Wollheim 24). While science fiction had evolved as a humble product of the combined imaginations of magazine editors, writers, and their readers, its narrative possibilities ranged from adventurous space operas to more articulate political plots.⁷ Most would now agree that science fiction existed in a relatively pure form only

⁶ For example, Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932), Philip Wylie (*When Worlds Collide*, 1932), Edgar Rice Burroughs (*Pirates of Venus*, 1934), H. P. Lovecraft (*At the Mountains of Madness*, 1936), H. G. Wells (*Star-Begotten: A Biological Fantasy*, 1937), and Stanley G. Winebaum (*The New Adam*, 1939).

⁷ The narrative arc that Williams uses in *Stairs* was commonly applied in the trajectory found in contemporary pulp magazine stories such as those in *Air Wonder Stories* (1929; 11 issues), *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* (1939–53; 81 issues), *Future Fiction* (1939–43; 17 issues), *Science Fiction* (1939–41; 17 issues), *Startling Stories* (1939–55; 99 issues), *Tales of Wonder* (1937–42; 16 issues), and *Weird Tales* (1937–42; 16 issues). Williams rose from the ranks of fantasy fandom to become a contributor to *Weird Tales* in 1928.

from 1925 to around 1965 (Sabella xvi). During this early phase of its development, sci-fi emphasized experimentation, leading both to its preoccupation with technological progress and to its “orientation toward the future” (Booker, *Dystopian* 94).

The term *science fiction* has been used to refer to the body of work that grew directly out of the American pulp tradition, which was first established in 1926 when Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories*. Anglo-American science fiction, however, also draws upon other a number of other, more diverse, sources (C. Freedman 14):

The term can be taken to include . . . the classic utopian line from More onward; a modernist and postmodernist tradition of work not actually marketed as science fiction, from Kafka and even Joyce to Samuel Beckett and Thomas Pynchon; and even such world-class epic poets as Dante and Milton . . . one might even argue that Dante and Milton, in the active interest they took in the scientific developments of their own times and places, are considerably more akin to Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke than to Wordsworth and T. S. Eliot. (15)

This chapter’s textual analysis of *Stairs* contends that, because Williams experimented with the science fiction subtype, he must therefore be counted among other “sci-fi” playwrights. With considerable insight, Mona Knapp assesses science fiction as follows:

Science fiction eludes compartmentalized definition—it shares common ground with detective stories, fairy tales . . . and thus appears well-suited to an author who progressively disdains the conventional demarcation lines between literary genres, between truth and fiction, the sane and the mad, the objective and the subjective. (131)

Although Brian Aldiss argues that only in science fiction can true Surrealism exist (72), Blish, by contrast, asserts that such iconography need not be interpreted from a Freudian or Jungian perspective; moreover, “it is not even essential that the symbols be used correctly, although most conscientious science-fiction writers try to get them right in order to lure the reader into the necessary suspension of disbelief” (Blish, *Critical Studies* 11, paraphrasing Coleridge), given that most audiences expect a certain amount of cosmic hyperbole from science fiction narratives (20). Williams even employs a dramatic *deus ex machina* device in order to achieve the play’s resolution, leaving the audience to guess at the origins of the anonymous laughter that punctuates each scene change (up to and including the play’s final scene).

Closely aligned with this ghettoization of prophetic or fantasy science fiction, claims Kreuziger, is the misguided notion that sci-fi should be distinguished from fantasy “in that it is based on ‘real’ science, as opposed to pseudo-science” (17). Since the fantasy genre may be characterized by a “willing” suspension of disbelief (Kreuziger 2, also parsing Coleridge), the extravagant extrapolations of science fiction may therefore be read within the larger genre of fantasy. As a subtype of fantasy, the science fiction narrative corresponds to the articulation of myth (Frye, *Anatomy* 49), as defined by Northrop Frye. According to Fabun, one mythic science fiction archetype in particular, not yet subscribed to by the population at large, posited that the human mind “is capable of solving all problems directed to it by the exercise of rational thinking” (46).

Some fans and critics insist on the separation of fantasy from science fiction, while still others see science fiction as having developed from the fantasy genre, which has led them to fuse sci-fi and fantasy (Bainbridge 120) into a hybrid subgenre. In *Into*

the Unknown, Robert Philmus argues that a distinguishing feature of science fiction is its “rhetorical strategy of employing a more or less scientific rationale to get the reader to suspend disbelief in a fantastic state of affairs,” while maintaining that this imaginative rhetorical strategy—rather than the use of certain topics or criteria—defines science fiction as a subgenre (vii). For other critics, science fiction may represent a branch of fantasy literature “whose speculative premise is . . . not necessarily provable” (Sabella xv). And for Doris Lessing, the use of technology in early fantasy stories laid the basis for “a rebirth of fantastic literature” (Knapp 5–6). Certainly, the fantasy aspects of science fiction were what authors such as Williams would have known of the subgenre, Reginald Bretnor asserts, because Williams would necessarily have been constrained by the period in which he wrote *Stairs*, a period that preceded both the advent of space travel and the harnessing of atomic energy (Bretnor, *Future* 267).

According to Bretnor, the emergence of science fiction as a subgenre grew out of “our failure to understand the scientific method and to define it adequately for the average individual and the average scientist” (*Future* 267). Certainly, in the estimation of many early critics, the garish imagery of the new pulp magazines, which included iconography lifted from scientific subject matter, served merely to trivialize science fiction.

Most fans of science fiction turned their vision inward, regarding the subgenre as though it were isolated from the rest of contemporary American publishing (Sabella 25). And by identifying the “future as the most exciting idea of all” (Kreuziger 26), “[e]arly science fiction not only cut itself off from the literary mainstream, it cut itself off from the social and cultural mainstream as well” (24).

According to Kreuziger, it was science fiction's experiment with such prophetic elements as "monosexual reproduction" (*Stairs* 95) that led to the narrative's relegation to a "literary ghetto, as a cult or sect, as an elect set apart from the social and cultural mainstream" (Kreuziger 13–14).⁸ As a result of such forms of ghettoization, science fiction developed a kind of jargon and a set of assumptions of its own, both unfamiliar to outsiders. In Williams's preface to *Stairs*, written from the vantage point of New Orleans in 1941, he seems to be aware of the narrative's unfashionable virtues (*Stairs* 101), but he nonetheless invites his audience to "take a look!" (xii), as if in anticipation of Freeman's claim that the most conceptually advanced forms of criticism now privilege science fiction, despite the fact that, as a subgenre, it had been "widely despised and ghettoized" (30).

Closely allied to this ghettoization of prophetic or fantasy science fiction, claims Kreuziger, is the misguided notion that sci-fi should be distinguished from fantasy "in that it is based on 'real' science, as opposed to pseudo-science" (17). However, as the pulp writer Hugo Gernsback would claim, albeit self-servingly, real science fiction was not written until "science and technology had become a decisive and determinative factor in Western civilization" (Kreuziger 15):

It was necessary, therefore, [to] re-establish the link with the earlier form of the scientific romances of Poe, Verne, and Wells, and move science fiction back into the mainstream of a literature preaching the wonders of science, the unlimited nature of the imagination, and the destiny of

⁸ Notably, Kingsley Amis (50) and others have pointed to the fact that very little sexual activity occurs in most sci-fi texts, a statement which fits nicely with James Blish's hypothesis, that sci-fi authors "cling to the genre because it doesn't require them to reveal themselves" (*Critical Studies* 70). Blish even goes so far as to state that science fiction writers generally pretend that "sexual perversions don't exist" (71).

humankind to overcome all obstacles—all told in adventurous tales, peopled with heroes with which the reader could identify, and distinct from other forms of escape in that such a tale eased “the willing suspension of disbelief.” (16)

With such positivist and progressive assumptions in mind, James Gunn reveals that earlier sci-fi writers had

. . . focused on technology itself, upon broad social patterns, upon invention, upon adventure. In the Thirties main-current science fiction writers began to narrow their aim to a single idea and the consequences of an idea carried out in its purest form to its ultimate outcome. In one sense science fiction became a Platonic fiction dealing with the ideals, even in characterization, of which the physical representations we see around us are only imperfect copies; in another sense [it became] eschatological fiction dealing with the last or final things. (214)

Science fiction only gave up its position in this literary ghetto as recently as the 1970s (Puschmann-Nalenz 10). Prior to that period, sci-fi had only rarely “been the central theme of an academic article” (14). Within the theoretical parameters of science fiction, it appears that, even by the elastic standards of postmodernity, such narratives “demand . . . borders around fictional innovation and conventional adventure stories crowned with concrete resolution” (Brigg 186). Thus, some science fiction writers “who seek to broaden the field have often been met with silence from their fellow writers or with urgings that they return to the kind of work they have done that has met with genre approval in the past” (186).

Interestingly, according to some critics, science fiction was not so trivialized in England, so that the narrative approach was adopted by such eminent writers as Aldous Huxley, Arthur C. Clarke, and sci-fi philosopher and novelist Olaf Stapledon (Sabella 27) who, in effect, paved the way for Williams's own sci-fi efforts, especially regarding his selection of topics, characterizations, and settings. Just as H. G. Wells had done in 1902, in his *Anticipations of the Reactions of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*, Williams combined social criticism with technological concerns (Sabella 190). In the style of an animated fantasy, Williams links the rise of technology to its subsequent destructive effects, both on individuals and on the collective pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, like his British predecessors, Williams engages in social satire, with which he targets such topics as war, oppression, and the industrialized workplace.

Donald A. Wollheim emphasizes the political aspects of the science fiction narrative, adducing that “[s]ocial satire science fiction becomes a means to an end but is not the end itself” (*Universe Makers* 17). Further, one finds few (if any) examples of narratives that feature a “complex social and political . . . presentation, followed by a sudden leap into the scientific fantastic” (Brigg 33). According to William Bainbridge, in *Dimensions of Science Fiction*, “as a vigorous social movement, science fiction has been dominated by hot amateurs rather than cool professionals” (Bainbridge 11). Like other science fiction writers in the late 1930s and early 1940s, such as H. G. Wells and his disciple Stapledon (C. Freedman 53), Williams understood humanity through its “soaring spirit, always trying, never quite succeeding, in conquering the limitations of flesh and the body” (Wollheim 33) quite in contrast to the technological and scientific fixations of “hard” science fiction.

Science fiction would become for “some writers . . . a philosophical meditation on the place and role of Humankind in the universe” and for a select group⁹ “a meditation on the cosmos itself” (Kreuziger 31). Additionally, according to Kreuziger, “the idea that nothing in time or space is beyond humankind’s grasp . . . sets science fiction apart from the rest of literature” (32). Some critics (Frye, *Anatomy*; C. Freedman) suggest that audiences conceive of most modern sci-fi texts in terms of the drive toward mythic totalization, not to mention toward a paradoxically protoreligious solemnity (C. Freedman 182); such categorizations may be loosely applied to *Spring*. However, *Stairs* can also be classified in terms of its humorous pop-culture satire, celebratory antinomianism, and proto-postmodern “stress on the fragment irrecoverable into any totality” (183).

Traditionally, the impulse to develop and to authenticate the pertinent insights of the unconscious mind undergirds many science fiction texts, as does a rationalist ethos. In fact, the very notion of genre retains links to the classificatory rigor of science, where new nomenclatures, jargons, and methodologies often bring about a new ordering of knowledge. The Romantic imagination in the late nineteenth century sought to challenge this mechanistic and rationalist world view, “even if the methods became increasingly more formal and abstract as the complexity of the task came home to writers such as [Virginia] Woolf” (Brigg 17).

Like other fantasy writers of his day, Williams most probably had been reading sci-fi well before the acceptance for publication of his short story, “The Vengeance of

⁹ Namely, Olaf Stapledon in *Star Maker* (1937), and Arthur C. Clarke in *Prelude to Space* (1951).

Nitocris” in *Weird Tales*.¹⁰ Some critics maintain that, in the late 1920s, works of science fiction published in magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales* concentrated largely on technological devices, such as the development of atomic energy and of space flight. By 1935, however, the emphasis had shifted to broader cultural considerations (Campbell 12). In terms of popular consumption, one notes that the number of popular science fiction magazines rose from three, in 1937, to thirteen, in 1939, to twenty-two in 1941 (Boucher 32).

Williams wrote *Stairs to the Roof* when science fiction’s “pulp” popularity—which, according to Wollheim, would quickly become “passé”—was nonetheless at its height (Wollheim 30). For his part, Williams eschewed any emphasis on scientific detail; neither did he adopt the “generally stodgy tone of the pulps” (Sabella 18). He did not depend exclusively for his audience upon science fiction fans but experimented as well with futuristic sexual and violent fantasies, interspersed, ironically, with comic moments, including the onstage personification of God (whether explicit or implied).

Science, Humanity, and the Individual

Science fiction provides an appropriate choice for this final, full-length apprentice effort, since it was a “new literature, devoted to the principle that change was continuous, inevitable and even desirable,” a literature that “found its devotees among those to whom change was not something frightening; to the young, in other words” (Asimov, *Social Science* 169). Significantly, as with later manifestations of the technological and space-obsessed age that informed postmodern sensibility, science fiction arose in the aftermath

¹⁰ Among the first magazines devoted exclusively to the fantasy genre, *Weird Tales* first appeared in 1923. It often carried tales of interplanetary or interspatial adventures, along with more occult horrors (Campbell 30).

of a democratic and industrial revolution, which was marked by the meteoric rise of mass communications (radio, newspapers, magazines), mass production, and mass transportation via air travel, and in which notions of the future were “eagerly embraced” (Freeman 75). *Stairs* differs from traditional science fiction in its presentation of personal and quirky elements of fancy, and in its focus on individuals trapped in a mechanically oppressive working environment. The individual’s plight, which dominates the narrative with its profound poignancy, contrasts with Williams’s more typical concentration upon the broader social factors that make for collaboration and community.

Williams employs the science fiction narrative to convey his characters’ crises of perception and alienation and to deconstruct the traditional hard science branch of the pulp magazine movement, thereby stressing the provisional nature of its epistemology. In *Dimensions of Science Fiction*, William Bainbridge equates Depression-era science fiction’s technological preoccupation with the traditional form of science fiction, and “speculation about technology and the physical sciences” (7). Thomas Clareson, in “The Evolution of Science Fiction,” defines science fiction in turn as “that form of fantasy which records the impact of science” upon humanity, both “as individuals and as a species” (97). However, instead of extrapolating from hard theories of science and technology, Williams envisions an alien universe, offering an alternative rationalization of natural laws (*Stairs* 93, 95). Moreover, Williams suggests that “Human Courage” will live on in this new universe, after the ostensible failure of Mr. E’s first “great experiment” on “World Number One” (namely, Earth): “[i]nstead of exterminating the human race, I send it off to colonize a brand-new star in heaven” (*Stairs* 95, 97).

However, whether epistemologically hard or soft, most forms of science fiction consider “radical political alternatives” (Bainbridge 220). According to Bainbridge, the broad principles of science fiction fall into three categories:

The main ideologies of science fiction are really three general dimensions of transcendence. Each tells the reader how to rise above the mundane problems of material existence. From the astronomical perspective, all directions are “up.” . . . A cluster of various impossible worlds, fantasy is also the dimension of aesthetics and free imagination. Although its fictional worlds cannot be attained and its characters cannot be emulated, it is not wholly escapist. The magic by which fantasy lives is, after all, magic created by the author. (220–21)

To read science fiction merely as a literature of scientific extrapolation essentially reduces sci-fi—but not necessarily the overarching fantasy model—to escapist literature since in science fiction, according to Kreuziger, reason “does not destroy faith, but grounds it” (76–77). Williams’s fantasy “invention of wondrous worlds” (Bainbridge 130), where lovers fly off into the ether like angels to disappear before the stunned eyes of former bosses and co-workers (*Stairs* 97) makes this type of fantasy different from the imprisoning site of the Gothic. Interestingly, Philip K. Dick calls traditional science fiction Faustian due to the fact that various forms of fantasy iconography, such as alien technologies or interventions, often carry the precocious protagonists into the beyond (Dick 2).

The Hero in Science Fiction

Intriguingly, Fletcher Pratt maintains that “a large portion of science fiction characters are not individuals at all, in the sense that they react to certain stimuli in a manner different from the immense majority of their fellow humans [and] tend to become [average] types” (Pratt 79). Some critics complain that

. . . the process of averaging has been carried altogether too far, that science-fiction characters are ordinary to the point of being boring, [and] that if science fiction is to get the most out of its enormous resources, it must learn to present character with greater realism. (79)

Nevertheless, Pratt goes on to identify the existence of a “Superman” preoccupation in the fantasy narrative, and to characterize it as a “cult within a cult” that

. . . represents the mythology of science-fiction, the age-old desire for gods to walk the earth and control the whirlwinds, and a certain amount of reader identification with those gods, the noblest and most powerful human beings. (86)

Typically, the heroic protagonist or adventurer “discovers the secret means to deliver the world from slavery, disease, poverty, and/or political stagnation” which, in part, “originates from the shift in science fiction which makes the idea of the heroic figure” (Kreuziger 36).

Indeed, the protagonist’s irrepressible “desire to know” eventually encompasses both space and time and, more importantly, the future, although “the desire to know does not necessarily bring about that knowledge” (Kreuziger 46). John W. Campbell states that if “knowledge is power, then only by having more power in the hands of the wise and

understanding can we protect ourselves against the fanatic and thoughtless” (17). By contrast, salvation is the process of achieving identity; put simply, “knowledge saves because it gives an identity” which transcends the ontological dichotomy (Kreuziger 83), since “to relinquish control is the pre-condition (the necessary, but not sufficient condition) for the coming of the new” (216).

Science Fiction’s Postmodernist, Freudian, Dystopian Critique

Annette J. Saddik posits that Williams’s “prefiguring of a new postmodern American identity under capitalism” made *Stairs* “a pivotal play for 1941” (*Blueprints* 67). According to Günter Ahrends’ definition of *postmodern*, *Stairs* could be considered as a proto-postmodern text:

Contemporary postmodern short fictions are based on the idea that reality is not an objective measure, but a projection of subjective experience. The definable place, the chronologically ordered time-sequence, the character that exists independently of the author’s experience and the plot based on causality are abandoned as categories of a perception of reality.

(Puschmann-Nalenz 226)

In Williams’s playful use of science fiction criteria in *Stairs*, these conventional elements are recast through such narrative devices as irony, pastiche, distance, and parody. Coincidentally, science fiction and postmodern narratives both move “in the direction of the dissolution of an irreversible, continually progressing time concept” (105). As in *Stairs*, the typical means of expression in science fiction texts includes “flashbacks and chains of associations that connect the different levels of time” (106). Ironically, many postmodern narratives parody aesthetic evaluations in general, while also displaying a

playful attitude toward literary customs and expectations (an attribute that such narratives often share with science fiction). Additionally, the celebration of transformation and novelty are common to both kinds of narrative.

Stairs made its appearance more than a generation before the rise of postmodernism. However, its use of anonymous generic markers (such as *The Girl*) and fantasy-driven elements to communicate the experience of individuals caught up in a media-driven, industrial, and rampantly consumerist society prefigure the dislocations, distortions, and fractures of the mass-produced psyche of postmodernism. According to Carl Freedman, the question raised by postmodernism and, specifically, by postmodern art (189), should not be considered without “also raising the more fundamental question of the general situation of art in the era of postmodernity” (189). Freedman further maintains that a study of postmodernism necessarily entails a historical context, which, ironically, has been “discouraged by postmodernism itself” (189), an irony that is also, incidentally, evident in *Stairs*:

The point here is that the totality that must form the ultimate object of genuinely critical thought—the world capitalist system—becomes increasingly hard to conceptualize as it becomes increasingly comprehensive and unchallenged. It is not only that, consequently, the postmodern destruction of historical memory places special obstacles in the path of historical (and so of dialectical) thinking. It is also—and this is perhaps the most deeply artificial tendency of the postmodern—that postmodernity, even while rendering the very category of totality difficult to grasp, renders itself into an increasingly smooth, self-sufficient, and

perfectly rounded totality so that it becomes harder and harder to find a point of purchase from which to launch any . . . critical theory. The most obvious (and in my view the central) example is the current lack of any properly postmodern strategic model that would concretize for our era the Marxist concept of revolution. (Freedman 192)

As if anticipating the neo-Marxist and ontological models of knowledge represented by Louis Althusser and Foucault, it would seem that Williams characterizes his subjects—for example, Benjamin Murphy, The Girl, and other characters—as “direct products of prevailing ideologies” (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 55).

One such ideological approach applies, in particular, psychoanalytic study as a theoretical model. *Stairs* investigates the additional consequence of the “application of psychoanalytic concepts in both critical and popular contexts” in the late 1930s—and noted also in *Spring*—with “an increasing emphasis on sex, gender, and sexuality, in keeping with the theories developed by Freud” (Coudray 83). Williams explores both the drives of the unconscious mind (including transference and repression) and the conscious unity of his subjects (Freeman 11). In addition, Benjamin involves the audience in the trials of his own personal mindscape as it plays out onstage. Williams stresses the psychoanalytic aspect of Benjamin’s fantasies by unfolding, or projecting, the protagonist’s unconscious mindscape onstage, in striking Expressionistic style; like the Expressionists, Williams seeks visual means to express the disillusioned, tortured state of the protagonist’s psyche (Cook 118).

Doris Lessing posits that, as in Expressionist art, inner and outer space in science fiction function as “reflections of each other” (Tiger 221). Through a rich inner life of

fantasy, Benjamin tries to mediate the outer world of his experience, as his troubled psyche seeks escape from the various forms of bureaucratic oppression that entrap him. In opposition to the moral constraints operative in contemporary discussions of sexuality, Williams's lyricism associates his youth with classical antiquity as in a primitive age of almost childlike simplicity in which Glee Clubs still sing *Alma Mater* "under sunny skies in harmony with nature, rejoicing and unashamed in their physical beauty" (Mücke 179). Nevertheless, such innocence only occurs in the fantastical imagination of Benjamin Murphy (*Stairs* 34).

Carl Freedman notes similarities between certain unbounded aspects of playfulness common to both fantasy and postmodern works. For example, the science fiction audience/spectator/reader often falls victim to a practical joke, or "a vexing game, in which absurdity and knowledge, play and seriousness mix" (Puschmann-Nalenz 151). We may note similarities between such works and Williams's ludic, experimental playwriting at the New School of Social Research, which plays fast and loose with the notion of verisimilitude, characterization, and additional hallmarks of realism.

Like Aldous Huxley and other purveyors of British science fiction of the period, such as John Wyndham, Clarke, and Stapledon, Williams shows that technology—or, at least "scientism" (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 48)—can too easily become an oppressive tool of the establishment (49). Williams loosely bases *Stairs*' dystopian critique upon a popular mode of analysis which made use of the agit-prop and protest elements that were pervasive in the Marxist-inspired literary movements of the 1930s. The widely acknowledged economic and political motifs that served to articulate the sense of misery and oppression of the Depression in the United States led, in part, to the advent of

fascism in Europe. However, Williams's particular take on science fiction extends beyond his awareness of global ills to his recognition of the violent conditions that occur under capitalism (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67).

Be that as it may, Saddik argues persuasively that *Stairs* also lacks a clear “espousal of Marxist ideology” (*Blueprints* 67), in its muted call for Brechtian reform and in its lack of doctrinal or overtly didactic elements. As she notes, Williams does not care to develop programmatic solutions (67), yet he exhibits a nonetheless Brechtian sense of the alienation brought about by social conformity and technological complicity. Williams also draws on Brecht's distancing devices, such as deliberately failing to identify or to evoke the audience's empathy for certain characters. This is especially evident in *Stairs*' iconography of identity transformations or suppressions. Both Mr. Gum and Warren B. Thatcher, characters that oversee both Benjamin and The Girl as their respective bosses (*Stairs* 12), strive to control their underlings with coercive language, stultifying atmospheres (3), and a call for uniformity, in order to prevent the expression of strong emotions. Human behavior is further modified and mechanized (75) in a number of ways, as stipulated by Mr. Gum, Mr. Thatcher, and Mr. E, in order to enforce maximum productivity:

GUM: Even your hair—rebellious! I remember the morning you first came here to look for a job. A fresh young college boy, clean looking, alert, ambitious. Maybe a little too smart in your use of the language, but I figured that would wear off in time. I said to myself, “Here is a possibility for the Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers. Give this boy an office job so he can get the necessary background—

then put him on the road where he can put to use these more individual characteristics of his. . . . [The bell at the front of the office sets up another harsh clamor. Workers return from their lunch. Gum stares dumbly at Murphy and Murphy stares dumbly at Gum.] (13)

In a Freudian turn, Williams seems to suggest that civilization “obtains mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city” (Freud, *Civilization* 123–24). Likewise, the aggressive encroachment of the technological onto the human presents a classic science fiction motif (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 149).

In *Stairs*, the conflict between the compulsions of instinct and the demands of society come with devastating consequences, one of which is the introduction of rigorous behavioral constraints embodied in the new science of ergonomics, such as the close supervision of workers as they clock in and signing off, and the other, the introduction of assembly-line labor methods as applied even in the office (in the fashion of *Metropolis* [1927]). For example, Mr. Gum assigns Alfred and Johnnie the task of following and monitoring Ben’s activities. Mr. Gum further enforces the authority of the Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers through intimidation, authoritarian pressure, and the stigmatization of any behavior that might deviate from the consolidated norm. Williams makes this clear in his stage directions:

There is a glassy brilliance to the atmosphere: one feels that it must contain a highly selective death ray that penetrates living tissue straight to the heart and bestows a withering kiss on whatever diverges from an accepted pattern. (*Stairs* 3)

As in many traditional science fiction dystopias, conformity in *Stairs* enforces passivity.

Benjamin complains:

BEN: What chance does anyone have to develop “individual characteristics” in a place like this? I’m not a great social thinker, I’m not much of political theorist, Mr. Gum. But there’s a disease in the world, a terrible fever, and sooner or later it’s got to be rooted out or the patient will die. People wouldn’t be killing and trying to conquer each other unless there was something terribly, terribly wrong at the bottom of things. It just occurs to me, Mr. Gum, that maybe the wrong is this: this regimentation, this gradual grinding out of the lives of the little people under the thumbs of things that are bigger than they are! People get panicky locked up in a dark cellar: they trample over each other fighting for air! Air, air, give them air! Isn’t it maybe—just as simple as that? (13)

Williams further emphasizes the degraded condition of mass culture by juxtaposing his contemporary view of the drabness of the status quo with the public—but nonetheless flamboyantly brilliant—culture that he presents, as embodied here in the play’s Carnival scene, as one in which men are transformed into beasts, and clerks into heroes:

A carnival occupies a section of the public playgrounds. It is like the set for a rather fantastic ballet as the play progresses further from realism: if necessary, by Ben’s increasing intoxication and the exaltation of love in *The Girl*. At stage right is a booth containing a

perpendicular roulette wheel of a sort, surrounded by the usual assortment of prizes: a beautiful Spanish shawl or mantilla and brilliant cheap jewellery among other articles being touted by the barker. Immediately adjoining this is a little box stage with brilliant red and gold silk brocade curtains: the footlights are burning, the curtains closed. Beneath the stage there is a placard that says: PETIT THEATRE PRESENTS "BEAUTY AND THE BEAST."

PERFORMANCE: MIDNIGHT. (*Stairs* 70)

To gain yet another perspective on the topsy-turvy carnival setting, with its "light, repetitious music . . . sometimes fast and sometimes slow" (70) we may turn to Bakhtin, who finds similar manifestations in the antique and medieval debates between winter and spring, and between old age and youth (*Rabelais* 434), to be characteristic of the beginning and end of a symbolic metamorphosis (434):

During the Renaissance all these images of the lower stratum from cynical abuse to the image of the underworld, were filled with a deep awareness of historic time, of the change of epochs in world history. . . . [T]his element of time and of historic change deeply pervades all his images of the material bodily lower stratum and lends them historic coloring. . . . [T]he dual body becomes a dual world, the fusion of the past and future . . . in the image of the grotesque historic world of becoming and renewal. Time itself abuses and praises, beats and decorates, kills and gives birth; this sense of time is both ironic and gay. (435)

Williams distinguishes between the features that either separate or unite different groups. Saddik reminds us of Williams's awareness of the ways in which capitalism, "while an individualist economic system, ironically ends up enslaving the individual" (*Blueprints* 69). However, from the time of Wells onward, the main current of social concern in science fiction has remained staunchly liberal. Moreover, despite its preoccupation with a highly individualist and, ultimately, superhuman type of figure, it was broadly egalitarian; in fact, many liberal assumptions had gone underground and had become clichés, to the detriment of logic and imagination (Blish, *Critical Studies* 58). Whereas Taylorism or Fordism espoused an almost collectivist ethic of scientific management, mass production, and affordable technology, yielding up slogans that fed the collective zeitgeist of America during the 1920s and 1930s, the fascist movement in Europe promoted force, autocracy, and even genocide (Stockton 48). By the same token, in *Stairs*, the materialistic authority of the play's social institutions effectively suppresses the individuality of Benjamin and The Girl, until Mr. E frees them in what some might consider an arbitrary and even irreverent fashion, since it mocks a spiritual solution, in that the concept of heaven never comes up: "the play does not seriously espouse religion as a viable alternative to the problems on earth" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 74).

The Languages of Oppression

Interestingly, the couple's awareness of their heavily scrutinized liaison forces them to hide with the other "wild of heart kept in cages" at the zoo (*Stairs* i). In contrast to the poetically rich and evocative discourse of the couple in love, Williams reserves the play's banal, cliché-ridden language for its authority figures. When Mr. Gum mocks

Benjamin's artistic aspirations in order to make Ben "realize the enormity" of his actions (12), he goes wild:

MR. GUM: A what? An artist?—So you're an artist are you?

BEN [wildly]: I didn't say that! You're putting words in my mouth!

[Alfred giggles.]

[Ben continues, turning desperately.] Make that ape stop giggling! [He seizes Alfred by the collar.] Stop that giggling, you ape! [Ben chokes him, forcing Alfred down to his knees.]

ALFRED: Help, help, help, Mr. Gum! (11)

Williams subtly displays an insidious, authoritarian dominion over the play's white collar workers by exposing the audience to a stream of deadened and officious language throughout:

THATCHER [sharply]: The weather stripping concern! What is the matter? Why do you look so blank?

GIRL: What was the name of the weather stripping concern?

THATCHER: I can't remember the name of the weather stripping concern. But surely you do.

GIRL: I'm dreadfully sorry—I don't!

THATCHER: Is it because you're so acutely concerned about the collapse of modern civilization that you can't think? . . . If you could remember! A very useful thing, a memory! Yes indeed! What's those things in your hands?

GIRL: Papers!

THATCHER: Papers, yes, papers! I didn't suppose they were sheets of aluminum plate! (17)

In addition, The Girl desperately attempts to address her boss's emotional detachment but he continues to ignore her:

GIRL: I'm sorry about my dress.

THATCHER: Your what?—Your dress?—Why? Is something spilt on it?

GIRL: No.—You don't like pink. You have an allergy to it.

THATCHER: What? Really, this sounds a little bit fantastic!

GIRL: I know it does. But don't you remember? The day I applied for the job I had this pink dress on. You laughed and said, "I'd rather you didn't wear pink!—I have an allergy to it!" (18)

Thatcher senses vaguely that a vital aspect of his life also remains unexpressed and thus, freed from a genuine sense of self-awareness and, thus, of any responsibility, he engages openly in sketchy affairs:

THATCHER [into the phone]: Sent my office girl out. I've had three in the last three months and all of them fell in love with me. I have a dreadful suspicion that this one is on the verge of declaring her passion. Why don't you?—I know you do.—I've got to see you.—Tell him whatever you please, but meet me tonight. Tonight at the "Care-free Cabins" on Highway 60. I love you. (16)

In the workaday world, passionate expression amounts to an act of transgression and, as a consequence, The Girl fears that her expression of love for her boss in the form of a letter will make her vulnerable, as well as result in the termination of her employment.

Accordingly, she seeks to return to the office building under cover of darkness in order to retrieve the letter. Here, Williams establishes an emotionally sterile work environment that discourages self-expression, let alone the espousal of subversive concepts and ideas. Williams also alludes to the masculine bias of Benjamin's workplace. Like the World Controller in *Brave New World*, Mr. E vigilantly monitors science and asexual reproduction (*Stairs* 95) after the fashion of a controlling mad scientist (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75).

Williams does not cater to a specific type of audience in these unique full-length apprentice plays, and yet his pervasive cynicism somewhat undercuts the play's social commentary, even as his iconographic renderings of science fiction fantasy metes out a proto-postmodern emphasis on playfulness. Indeed, the

. . . characterization of science fiction as a popular literature . . . allows for a critical appropriation of science fiction . . . as a literature set apart, i.e. distinctive because it is "something entirely new" and, as such, the genre appropriately ushers in a new, postmodern age. (Kreuziger 95)

Stairs' Utopian Critique

Despite the forms of oppression that remain with us even today, *Stairs* will no doubt receive increasing attention, although it embodies an optimistic or quirkily utopian form of science fiction (Wollheim 90). Although the play cannot be deemed pure or hard science fiction, it will undoubtedly be treasured both by Williams's fans and fans of sci-fi alike, since Williams pioneered a softer, more fantasy-oriented form of the narrative. Furthermore, according to Kreuziger, the "science" in science fiction appears, more often

than not, for strategy's sake, and to lend a provisional measure of credence to an otherwise fantastic state of affairs (Kreuziger 117).

In *Stairs*, Williams intensifies the use of fantasy and the unexpected in order to create and to maintain a state of ambiguity, a state that he pushes much further than in *Spring*. By intensifying the use of fantasy elements, Williams creates a nightmarish, grotesque vision in which the very humanity of his self-absorbed characters undergoes distortion. The fantastic, science fiction–inflected events of *Stairs* ultimately provide a formal framework for the narrative.

In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Darko Survin posits that science fiction is defined by the “dialectic between estrangement and cognition” (7–8). To this end, Williams creates a troubled fantasy world in which an estranged Benjamin denies the reality of his mundane existence, and thus performs a critical interrogation of the latter (C. Freedman 17). Williams intends for the audience to respond with detachment at the point when Mr. E transforms Benjamin into a cosmic patriarch—the father of untold millions (*Stairs* 93)—which frees *Stairs*, as a non-traditional science fiction narrative, from having to account for “its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world” (C. Freedman 17). Williams deploys science fiction criteria throughout the play, though few scientists would acknowledge the depiction of the space flight upon which the conclusion depends as a valid theoretical option. Arguably, Williams's form of Expressionism relies more heavily upon estrangement than cognition (Survin 7) in that, like Brecht, Williams employs fantasy elements alongside alienation techniques, and concerns himself with social or

political ideas at ironical odds with such utopian flights of fancy (although Williams stops short of proffering his audience political solutions [Saddik, *Blueprints* 67]).

Nonetheless, in *Stairs*, the popular science fiction concepts of “space travel, conquest, galactic empires, and struggles against the unknown” are fitted by Williams into a larger political framework, which imbues them with a more profound subjectivity (Kreuziger 48). Williams evokes Benjamin’s routine existence “in order to enforce not only cognitive but critical Marxian estrangements of Western capitalist society with regard to such fundamental issues as war, love, commerce, and mortality” (C. Freedman 22). Leslie Fiedler’s characterization of science fiction’s golden age and its enthusiastic reception may ascribe too much to its sub-literary pulp heyday but, according to Kreuziger, Fiedler’s main point is well taken: science fiction was born, grew up, and continues to thrive outside the literary mainstream (Kreuziger 10).

Interestingly, and especially apropos of *Stairs*, Frye characterizes science fiction as “a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth” (*Anatomy* 49). Although this analysis approaches science fiction as a subgenre offering a transient mode of escape and disengagement from the ills of a monotonous, numbing and bureaucratically mechanical society, we discover that mythic romance tendencies are not, on this account, any less poignant. Plainly, a positive utopian critique is implicit in the very ability of Benjamin and The Girl to keep the vigorous resources of their fantastic imagination intact, and resistant, against such a gray and relentlessly pedestrian, conformist social backdrop.

This analysis also takes into account the ways in which Williams moves beyond traditional science fiction conventions by adapting and transforming these conventions to

suit his own artistic ends. More than any other of his full-length apprentice plays—or, in fact, of any other play in Williams’s extensive catalogue—*Stairs* corresponds to the conventions of the science fiction subtype that emerged from the fantasy genre.

Kreuziger helpfully isolates the literary conventions of science fiction as follows:

the vision of the new age, and closely associated with that, the understanding of the writers and the readers and the literature itself as vehicles for the mediation of its coming;
 a period of crisis or transition;
 the dream of an achievable perfect human society, symbolized by the utopian city;
 the re-writing of the past and/or appropriation of it through mythic history;
 the fashioning of a future history;
 extraordinary voyages to distant lands;
 plausibility devices, formerly dreams and ecstatic visions, now time travel and parallel worlds;
 the longing to make contact with the Other; and
 the story’s end which recapitulates and gives meaning to all that came before. (134)

Although *Stairs* shows a greater affinity with science fiction than any of Williams’s other plays, Mary Ann Corrigan, in “Beyond Verisimilitude,” asserts that the play anticipates the kinds of content and techniques that would later appear in *The Glass Menagerie* (376). No other full-length or one-act apprentice play presents quite the same eerie, other-worldly atmosphere as *Stairs*, in which many scenes take place in a world situated

somewhere between death and birth, where all regrets have lost their relevance and where new possibilities or desires have yet to find any adequate footing. Williams references a number of cosmic topics and icons:

VOICES:—We the living, exist in a sliding moment of time which is called reality. What is reality? Does anyone know?—Every theoretical model of the universe beginning with Einstein's, has made the radius of the universe thousands of times greater than the part now visible.—One hundred thousand times greater than that part now visible.—One hundred thousand times ten thousand light years is a billion light years, a distance that would stretch across the whole universe now visible to astronomers.—Ah, but we live in an *expanding* universe, a universe that exhibits a mysterious passion for growth!—Yes. It would stagger the imagination to conceive of what may ultimately become the full extent of things described by that important little verb “to be.” [Ben claps his forehead and leans back against the stone pediment of the statue. There is a sudden crash of brass and roll of drums. Silence. Then a distant choral singing. Pause. Pale blue spectral light appears in the Gothic archway nearby. Into this radiance of recollection steps the lovely, slender figure of a girl in a senior's robe.] (*Stairs* 32)

Williams ends *Stairs* with his by-now distinctive ambiguity, a narrative manoeuvre through which he avoids participating actively in a critical debate for or against the utopian narrative solution, stopping short of depicting prospective human life on “that new star!” (95). He maintains the traditionally paradoxical science fiction depiction of

utopia as “the homeland where no one has ever been but where alone we are authentically at home” (C. Freedman 65).

Beyond appealing merely to the conventional denouement that ends in marriage, Williams supports the achievement of a fuller, more self-actualized existence. By treating Benjamin’s quest for self-knowledge with comic irony—the stairs to the roof point to a beyond that we merely glimpse—his pursuit ends only in frustration and in failure. Here, Williams plots an unusually satiric rendering of industrial capitalism, exploring and manipulating generic criteria typically associated with science fiction, such as the dichotomy of technology versus nature, social oppositions and contrasts, the outsider as the hero of rebellion, the caricature of the American way of life, and the “guided tour for the unfamiliar visitor around this Brave New World” (Puschmann-Nalenz 178).

In the end, the play’s paradoxes correspond “to the dialectic of immanence and transcendence that constitutes utopia, and, ultimately, to the inescapably dialectical, contradictory nature of post-Kantian and post-Hegelian reality itself” (Puschmann-Nalenz 65). Thus, the model of a subjective transcendence, as proposed by Descartes and Kant, had since evolved into the alienated transcendence faced by contemporary society in the inauthentic and fabricated nature of its own structures (Kreuziger 157). This points both to the nearness of God’s promise and its perpetual inaccessibility, a crisis occasioned by the rise of a potential apocalypse within the narrative, in which seeks to be resolved with an overwhelming urgency (162). In *Stairs*, this impending crisis, as described by Mr. E, finds its resolution:

This funny little clown of a man named Murphy has suddenly turned into the tragic protagonist of a play called “Human Courage.” Yes, the

wonderful, pitiful, inextinguishable courage of the race of man—has played me for a sucker once again. In the middle of my laughter—I suddenly cry. What do I do? Rectify the mistake, as planned, by fire and everlasting damnation? No. Quite the contrary. (*Stairs* 97)

Notably, the concept of utopia was at first rejected by science fiction as too “political . . . because such plots deal with the present in terms of a critique of it” (89), and cannot be projected infinitely into the future. However, the utopian plot typically becomes the main structuring motif of the science fiction narrative when a character, such as the omniscient Mr. E, can “pronounce on structuring human society to achieve the optimum culture” (Kreuziger 29).

In effect, Kreuziger states, science fiction transposes utopian civilizations isolated in space to utopias isolated in time. Just as in the typical literary utopia, in which the so-called “perfect world” cannot be readily accessed other than by accident or chance, so also, in science fiction, utopias remain inaccessible save for the intrusion of a catastrophic event, or by some disruption in the normal flow of time (Kreuziger 100). However, some critics would consider the prospective utopia offered by Mr. E as “not utopian in a strict sense because it relies on divine intervention” (102). Williams also avoids what Kreuziger considers to be the organizational flaw of most science fiction utopias, premised upon linear and reductive conceptions of time, change, development, and history, since they undermine the essential plot structure of such narratives in favor of the mere extrapolation of existing technological trends (105). In Kreuziger’s estimation, the central flaw of science fiction utopias is that they cannot account for the limits of rational extrapolation, since the symbolic manifestation of this flaw lies in the

narrative's "inability to confront the fact of death" (106). Furthermore, he maintains that utopian science fiction narratives in particular, for all their power and insight, cannot account for the fundamental nonexistence of such societies, and thus storylines seek to disguise this lack in veritable fantasies of immortality, whether personal, racial, or cosmic in nature (106).

Karl Mannheim sees the rise of the utopian narrative as having occurred at that point in history when the millennial hopes of a post-apocalyptic rebirth "became identified with the oppressed peoples of society"—that is, when the concept of the millennium became not only desirable but perceived as achievable through human effort (Kreuziger 107, quoting Mannheim). Williams makes use of a singularly distinctive narrative attribute—that the millennium is both historical and achievable, and that it is conceived through the resolution of conflict—even though the requisite human effort may include the destruction of the earth and the "extermination of the human race" (*Stairs* 97). Thus Mr. E aims to establish World Number Two:

When utopia (the desired human state of perfection) does become the whole of this world, it adopts . . . the "whole magico-religious paraphernalia." It becomes a secular ideology tending toward belief; it singles out a chosen class to be the bearers of this hope for a new age; and it fabricates a "great chain of humanity," as told and retold in narratives of crisis, vengeance, and catastrophe, or alternatively, in utopias of promise, renewal, and new dawns. (Kreuziger 110)

As in many early science fiction works, Williams presents his audience with a succession of both endings and beginnings. In this way, he makes use of a narrative

technique pioneered in the pulp magazines of the late 1930s, as identified by Lois and Stephen Rose in *The Shattered Ring*, and which they insightfully describe as a historical concept which “stresses the narrative unity of judgment and redemption” (Rose and Rose 91).

Contemporary Relevance of Williams’s Fantasy Plays

Since the rediscovery of his apprentice plays, Williams has received more recognition as an experimental playwright, but critics usually offer only a cursory acknowledgment of Williams’s science fiction or fantasy origins (M. A. Corrigan 378). Upon first reflection, *Stairs* lends itself to a contemporary (c. 1940) style of science fiction fantasy, a style with a marked reliance upon proto-postmodern techniques. These techniques gradually become evident in the attention given to the ironic complexity of characterization and setting, and in Williams’s surprisingly progressive and self-conscious experimentation with the science fiction fantasy elements of space travel. They are likewise present in the representation of futuristic and non-traditional methods of human reproduction, as well as in the characterization of cosmic overlords (Puschmann-Nalenz 209). Nevertheless, science fiction primarily serves as the pretext for a dystopian exploration, or as a kind of conclusive master trope for Williams, and merely occasions his critique of modern bureaucratic and business society, rather than becoming a rigid form of generic classification with set codes and procedures in its own right.

Taken together, *Stairs*’ decidedly self-reflexive aspects might be viewed as a valuable expansion of Williams’s generic experimentation. In *Stairs*, the narrative itself becomes what it signifies, in that, although it contains a system of signs through which the playwright transmits his message, the audience gradually discovers the essential

ambiguity of such signs, which results in a lack of determination that “equally characterizes both text and plot” (Puschmann-Nalenz 59). Thus *Stairs* incorporates, in an eerily postmodern fashion, a fragmented, fantasy style that directly reflects disparate topics. Williams also modifies the dialogue of *Spring* and *Stairs*, especially through the development of an incantatory rhythm in the expression of the intensity of his characters’ intense emotions. These are mostly effected in the plays’ Expressionist technique through the use of repetition, and the uncanny emotional distortions derived from incongruous, yet highly iconographic, imagery.

In *Stairs*, Williams’s experimental plot, with its numerous fantasy interludes, heightens audience interest even as it defies expectations. Primarily, Williams demonstrates a political concern with the “little wage earners of the world” (*Stairs* xxi) and their mundane lives, although his fantasy subplot belies this supposed tendency toward the mundane. Moreover, Williams occasionally tears away the veneer of the assumed quiet desperation of the poor to reveal an abundant inner life brimming with fantastic lyricism and vigorous working class aspirations. Nonetheless, these flashes of lyricism are necessarily muted, transient, and all too prone to brutal deflation.

According to Fredric Jameson, the postmodern movement has been linked to late industrial capitalism (*Towards* 322), and to the influence of such radical thought and philosophy as Deconstruction theory. The influence of radical thought and critical philosophy has grown exponentially, precisely to account for the failure or deconstruction of traditional narratives to give meaning to our daily lives. We are currently forced to examine our erstwhile dependence on humanist systems of representation, language, and thought. Traditional narratives, based on the coherence and integrity of the personality,

are consistently confronted with the actual breakdown, or erosion, of communal support and empathy that once invigorated them. As Robert Scholes explains in *Structural Fabulation*, fantasy “is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront the known world in some cognitive way” (29). As if to reflect this uncertainty, Williams’s work goes against the grain of the conservative traditions of science, probing its origins within the conventional popular fiction format and effectively incorporating ironic and satiric postmodern elements while rejecting formal acts of narrative closure. He likewise disregards linear narrative structures, incorporating instead Expressionistic episodes of fantasy and grotesque humor, thereby challenging the pedantic approach to science and technology evident in many science fiction texts.

As in Aldous Huxley’s *After Many a Summer* (1939), in which the protagonist’s scientific pursuits are “detached from human social and domestic life as an activity, yet affect its practitioners” (18), Williams’s foray into science fiction exemplifies the narrative precursor of middle-ground science fiction: *Stairs* focuses more on character relationships than on the intricate details of a scientifically-engineered utopian denouement. Through the character of Benjamin Murphy in *Stairs*, Williams (along with other well-known writers of the modern period, such as Graham Greene, George Orwell, and D. H. Lawrence) focuses on the alienation inherent in the stratification of modern man and on the individual’s troubled relations to society.

As depicted in the majority of Williams’s full-length apprentice plays, most characters outside the family unit serve as vicarious members of the audience, in that

their perspectives are meant to stand for ours.¹¹ The Girl in *Stairs* serves such a function, drawing the audience's attention to the strange behavior of Benjamin Murphy, which serves as a reminder that the plotline remains far from either removing, or from satisfying, our initial romantic expectations for the couple. In truth, the inconclusive tease at the end of *Stairs* supports the denouement in *deus ex machina* fashion: by offering a source of help for the severely oppressed couple comes from an otherwise detached, voyeuristic character that shoots them into the far-off world of their godlike creator.

Especially in light of the persistent notion that a measure of quantitative credibility somehow effects the narrative in the majority of science fiction texts, Williams plays with his audience's suspension of disbelief. In a surprisingly chaotic, postmodern fashion, he refuses to observe the more naturalist conventions of Depression-era science fiction, by eschewing a view of space travel (or of futurism) based on scientific criteria. As in certain pulp science fiction-type characterizations, an unmistakable mode of obliqueness also manifests itself in Williams's character markers. However, across the "vast body of science fiction writing there has been a general tendency to treat characters as ciphers, using the hero . . . and many other stereotypes drawn from the well of popular literatures ranging from science fiction's own tradition to . . . the romance" (Brigg 20).

Narrative Structure and Iconography

In *Stairs*, Williams chooses to incorporate science fiction iconography to create a play including elements of science or space fiction (30), indicating an experimental evolution of his former style of fantasy drama, as in *Spring Storm*. The general narrative

¹¹ The most obvious example of Williams's development of the outsider point of view appears in *Fugitive Kind*, with its collection of alienated misfit characters intruding upon the lives of the Gwendlebaum family.

pattern in the fantastic plays—*Spring* and *Stairs*—appears to be nonlinear, with the action occurring in a series of shocking scenes, rather than progressing in a conventional fashion. In revelatory passages of dialogue, topics are picked up in new conversational threads, after which the characters revisit the initially controversial topic. This pattern, reminiscent of free-form jazz, usually invokes the original subject. Both plays also display recurring motifs of entrapment, creating patterns of fantastic ineffectuality and vivid Expressionism, complete with role-playing scenarios, and suggestions of madness and confusion. Williams also uses an Expressionistic “parallel set-and-situation construction” (McGhee 67); in *Spring*, Hertha’s excruciating emotional agony crucifies her upon her personal Golgotha, while in *Stairs*, Benjamin’s Wonderland (*Stairs* 91) surroundings are, at times, the product of his imagination.

As Williams indicates in his “Random Observations,” *Stairs*’ foreword,¹² he had come to perceive something which cannot be expressed within his former literary frameworks: “[v]olcanic eruptions are not the result of disturbances on the upper part of the crater; something way, way down—basic and fundamental—is at the seat of the trouble” (*Stairs* xxii). Notably, in both *Spring* and *Stairs*, Williams reinforces this notion of the inexpressible through prescribing fantastic, dazzling, visual and aural effects for the climactic scenes in each play, which lend support to his innovative narrative structures. In *Spring* Williams strives for a sense of realism in the auditory impressions produced; sound derives directly from the action unfolding onstage. However, in *Stairs* he uses sound effects to boost the fantasy effect of the play’s Surrealism; offstage audio effects, such as disembodied laughter and music, hint at the presence of a mysterious,

¹² It is the only extant foreword by Williams included in the full-length apprentice plays.

omniscient observer.¹³ These fantastic flourishes and techniques evoke the requisite state of ambiguity which designates the fantasy genre (Todorov 33). In addition, such methods expand into a call for the veritable metamorphoses of certain characters—in *Spring*, for example, Hertha becomes a Christ-like figure—and a flouting of logic and causality (*Stairs* 96).

In contrast to the spectacular Surrealism of *Stairs*, *Spring* makes ironic use of conventions of cause-and-effect. Williams even makes structural use of the scientific principle of the experimental search (Brigg 26), through which Benjamin Murphy strives to come to terms with his present existence. This raises questions concerning how Williams approaches the new scientific and technocratic reality of pre-First World War America, and the search for meaning “re-enacted in this ‘new’ world” (26).

Williams puts a proto-postmodern spin on *Stairs*’ dystopian fantasy by emphasizing the fundamental scepticism of his protagonists. Although he achieves, in *Stairs*, a more florid Expressionism than in *Spring*, he presents his ideas in an experimental, heuristic manner. Despite Williams’s flair for providing convincing detail in his portrayals of the “petty wage earners,” the “little people,” and “the wild of heart that are kept in cages” (*Stairs* 35, v)—characters all struggling during the Depression—he amplifies even mundane conflicts within the “surreal” (75) narrative structure of science fiction fantasy. It is difficult to imagine that a young writer in search of a commercial success (Hale, *Introduction*, *Stairs* x) would take such deliberate risks with genre, as he most certainly does in *Stairs*. But nonetheless, within the broader context of science fiction fantasy presented here on an epic scale, he locates episodes of traditional,

¹³ Williams employs many of the foregoing fantastic methods noted in *Spring* and *Stairs* in the one-act apprentice works as well.

protest-style verisimilitude, achieved in this case through the use of real war imagery taken from recordings of “frontline radio broadcasts” (Hale’s footnotes, *Stairs* 38):

H. V. KALTENBORN: . . . was described as being in a sea of flames: very little damage was done to military objectives but the civilian population suffered terrible casualties. The sky at midnight was a blazing inferno. Wave after wave of dive bombers swooped down upon the already blasted metropolis. The whole residential section was laid to waste. Helpless women and children by the tens of thousands—

(*Stairs* 38)

Thanks to the intercession of the all-powerful Mr. E, the fates of many of the characters in *Stairs* actively confront the dialectic of chance versus determinism. Keeping in mind Williams’s radical take on an intergalactic final solution, it seems unlikely that that technology will impact human behavior for the better, and although the lovers succeed in escaping their mechanized, mundane worlds, *Stairs* is not a “strictly humanist play, since the triumph of the individual occurs in such an unlikely and even comic way as to cancel out any real possibility of triumph” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75).

In this science fiction fantasy, while still holding out a number of dramatic possibilities for the genre, Williams altogether drops the concept of technology as savior, resorting instead to a satirically cosmic miracle. Williams defies Wells’s hard rule regarding technological and/or scientific plausibility in supernatural narratives, and includes multiple “fantastic assumptions” (Blish, *Critical Studies* 104) such as space flight, monosexual reproduction, and alternate “Worlds” (*Stairs* 95), rather than providing his audience with just one narrative resolution. In this way, Williams boldly

disregards the seemingly paradoxical science fiction convention of “believability above almost any other form of expression” (Blish, *Critical Studies* 105), to which even the “hardest” science fiction writer “has only the most dubious claims because not one science fiction story in several thousand involves anything closer to science than minor technological innovations” (107).

The generic parameters established both by Rabkin and Todorov are consistent with Chandler’s criteria (in *Semiotics*) in accounting for the ways in which fantasy operates. Indeed, unlike the plots of such fantastic authors as Poe and Verne, Williams’s narrative avoids a logical, causal sequence that ends in an expected fashion, and with an implicitly established climax. In Williams’s fantastic, full-length apprentice plays, unexpected action and dialogue combine to create an ironic, contrasting, and analogous set of narrative episodes, running the gamut from the conventions associated with the Gothic to those of science fiction. Todorov notes the unexpectedness of fantasy—in this case, Benjamin’s rich fantasy life—that calls an audience’s attention to the “180-degree reversal of our usual anticipations [by] creating that hesitation regarding cause,” which Todorov helpfully identifies “with the appearance of the fantastic” (McGhee 215–16).

As though in response to an audience’s hesitation in ascribing a cause to the actions of the protagonists because they possess no effective frame of reference—just as when a character such as Mr. E suddenly appears on the stage in a puff of smoke, or when characters simply fly off—Williams includes enough didactic material (*Stairs* xxi) to effect a fluid transition. The dramatic storyline often strains the limits of credulity, not because the devices and events of the play cannot be explained scientifically, but because the whole structure, as seen in the unfolding of the story, is rendered all but impossible

according to the temporal structures that undergird many of “our traditional modes of storytelling” (Kreuziger 132). Given Williams’s insistence that he cannot entertain any preconceived notions about how a play will resolve itself, the open-ended structure of the plot creates a forum of freedom in which fantasy flourishes.

At last, Williams’s fantastic plots supplant the natural laws of time, space, and causality, and exploit Expressionistic techniques that consistently challenge audience expectations. He further challenges the contradictory notion of the self as a consistent and coherent entity. Instead, “a character with discernible limits is replaced by the bits and pieces of a fractured whole” (Rosemary Jackson 52). Fantasy also “reverses established literary ground rules” through the introduction of the unexpected (Kreuziger 126). Kreuziger elaborates upon Rabkin’s thesis that fantasy makes possible startling new perspectives: “[t]he desires of fantasy, particularly regarding time and its passage and measurement, always exceed the desires of evolutionary humankind and are the mirrors revealing the true nature of those desires” (127). Evidently, the topics of self and Other, according to Todorov, implicate us in a dialectic of alienation and despair, which tests the power of human identity, idealistic vision, and redemptive sexual desire to offset the forces of cruelty, violence, and death. This dialectic of death and desire runs throughout both *Spring* and *Stairs*.

Williams extols the advantages of writing as an apprentice, noting that the theatrical powers of perception, and of the “intensity of feeling . . . exist more in the beginning than in the later stages” of a writer’s career (*Stairs* 101). In both of these full-length, apprentice fantasy plays, we see a fearless talent at work, awake to the transformation of dramatic conventions and set upon remolding audience expectations,

whether through his novel use of sets, lighting, and auditory effects, or through the Expressionistic and symbolic devices that support and intensify his fantasy settings, iconography, and staging techniques. This is not to suggest that recognizing a negotiated consensus (Chandler, *Semiotics* 156) of fantasy conventions, or adhering to a convenient set of generic criteria, will obviate the difficulties of staging these plays, as Hale's interpretation of *Stairs* in performance has shown (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs*; Hale, *Scholars*). Nonetheless, this examination and acknowledgement of Williams's use of ambiguous and unexpected narrative structures, his focus upon the genre of fantasy and the subgenre of science fiction, and his inclusion of Expressionist devices, demonstrate the ways in which a particularly radical and "fresh" perception (*Stairs* 101) works toward transposing and recasting the generic inheritance, creating in the process a unique vision of the weird and decidedly unexpected nature of contemporary urban life in late Depression-era America.

CHAPTER VI
SPRING STORM

Williams's theatrical interpretation of the Gothic narrative's Southern subtype in *Spring Storm* offers a modern twist on the tradition, and foreshadows his later and more popular, canonized works, such as *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (1955) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). In 1937, he began working on the play in the Theater Department at the University of Iowa (Isaac, *Spring* xi). There, he honed and crafted what would later become his trademark exploration of the "dark and complex truths unavailable to realism" (Chase xi).¹ In *Spring Storm* (as in *Candles to the Sun*), Williams creates complex portraits of sensitive young characters that, literally and figuratively, remain trapped within a marginal social niche that they desperately seek either to penetrate more deeply, or to escape.²

In this Southern Gothic play, Williams displays his renowned ability to construct complex plots, plots that parallel the characters' cognitive processes and that are "accomplished through . . . narrative repetition" (Weston 7). Like Williams's other Southern narratives, *Spring* sustains a substantially Gothic literary inheritance, revealing the era's dramatic collusion of "psychological patterns or traditions . . . coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of . . . our innermost biological heritage" (Lovecraft 13). *Spring*'s narrative focuses primarily on the protagonists'

¹ Although Williams retains his social conscience within the context of this class-conscious fantasy play, Isaac nonetheless asks, "[w]here, [William's] fellow students must have wondered, was the social protest?" (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xiii).

² Williams revisited the play in 1943, "as a film story treatment" for submission to MGM (Williams, qtd. in Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xiv). But a producer at MGM "nixed the script" because, "[o]bviously, a story where a young unmarried woman has sex with her boyfriend for a year and doesn't get pregnant would violate Hollywood's coded mythology for sex and consequences" (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xiv).

relationships and their impermanent pairings, and the play's structural parallels and dramatic motifs provide a psychological index with which to evaluate the protagonists' motivations and achievements.

The Southern Gothic Narrative

Williams claimed to have first fallen in love with “the folly and the fantasy in the southern temperament” (qtd. in Holditch and Leavitt 64) in the Mississippi Delta. From 1915–18, Williams lived in the locale that most “resembles” Port Tyler: Clarksdale, Mississippi (Curley 234). He temporarily lived in, and frequently visited, Clarksdale and the surrounding area, which accounts for the haunting Southern ambiance in *Spring*.

Williams's paternal grandfather, Walter Dakin, served as the pastor of Clarksdale's St. George's Episcopal Church for fourteen years (1917–33). Hale reports that Dr. Dakin's “enthusiasm for Greek scholarship was the single most important literary influence from grandfather to grandson” (Hale, “The Preacher's Boy” 13), an observation borne out in *Spring*. We learn that, in “those early years in Clarksdale,” Williams “absorbed . . . a southern character and a southern mystique, which, along with his sexual orientation, were the most important influences upon his writing” (Holditch and Leavitt 49–50). In the Preface to *Battle of Angels*, Williams recalls the early days of his youth: “[i]t seems to me those afternoons were always spent in tremendously tall interiors to which memory gives a Gothic architecture, and that the light was always rather dustily golden” (qtd. in Holditch and Leavitt 37). The Clarksdale area also prompted many of the place names that would recur in Williams's Southern plays (39), and which he would use for the first time in *Spring*, such as the Sunflower River, Friar's Point, and Moon Lake.

According to Kenneth Holditch and Richard Leavitt, “[Williams] was aware of and unflinchingly portrayed the South’s flaws, like Faulkner, loving it even as he hated it” (17). In fact, Williams’s characters, almost consistently, display this same admixture of love-hate and ambivalence. For example, *Spring*’s tepid poet (*Spring* 25), Arthur Shannon, expresses anxiety toward the “expanded role of women in plantation society” and, by jilting the town beauty, Heavenly Critchfield, and likewise rejecting the eccentric Hertha Neilson, he displays “the fierce determination of the region’s self-styled planter-aristocrats to protect their privileged position from the attacks of an implacably hostile outside world” (S. A. Smith 101): “I’ve got to be off by myself for a while” (*Spring* 147).

That Williams could have developed such an avowedly “tangled” (qtd. in Leverich, 263) and complex interpretation of the Southern Gothic tradition even before renewed interest in the subgenre had occurred—an interest shared later by Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, and Katherine Anne Porter—further evinces Williams’s ability to stake out new dramatic ground well in advance of others.

Adapting a fantastic genre that reflected his own particular interests, at the same time Williams exploits narrative conventions to test and to revise the prevalent myths of the South. As Kimball King remarks, Williams’s incorporation of classical myth (e.g., Eros), in the manner of Faulkner and Walker Percy, indicates that “he shares with those writers a belief in the South’s metaphorical importance—a doomed civilization with a universal message of warning, then despair, and finally, hope” (628).

Williams combines some of the more basic elements of traditional Gothic narratives, such as a traditionally female dread of powerful forces—forces usually issuing from a masculine subjectivity (Weston 77)—and turns such forces toward the typically

modern anxiety about the perceived ravages of time's inevitable passage, in order to expose the gender-related confusion and oppression elicited by society's more genteel expectations. Furthermore, Williams pillories the vestiges of "Southern Virtue . . . proclaimed" in Clarksdale from "the housetops [to be] superior, not alone to the North's but to any on earth, and adducing Southern Womanhood in proof" (Holditch and Leavitt 87).

King finds the way in which Williams deliberately challenges the prescribed roles of the Southern mythos, rather than exonerating them, even more remarkable. In strongly challenging the status quo, Williams succeeds in reinterpreting the Southern myths themselves. In his study of the values of the New South, Paul Gaston views this challenge as essential, given the new and undeniable realities to which mythical visions eventually must succumb:

Myths are something more than advertising slogans and propaganda ploys rationally connected to a specific purpose. They have a subtle way of permeating the thought and conditioning the actions even of those who may be rationally opposed to their consequences . . . The history of their dynamics suggests that they may be penetrated by rational analysis only as the consequence of dramatic, or even traumatic, alterations in the society whose essence they exist to portray. Thus, the critique and dissipation of myths becomes possible only when tension between the mythic view and the reality it sustains snaps the viability of their relationship, creates new social patterns and with them harmonizing myths. (Gaston 26)

In *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers makes an interesting distinction between the classic Gothic narrative, which advances the play's action "by inciting and causing physiological sensations through the devices of fantasy and the supernatural" (90), and the characteristic narrative of the Southern Gothic.

The latter subgenre often explores ironic or unusual topics, not so much for the sake of suspense as to investigate underlying social realities and to reveal the cultural codes of the American South. For example, in *Spring Storm* Williams uses ironic plot twists by way of offering a psychological exploration of "the cultural confinement and the persecution of women" (Weston 133). He depicts the protagonists' struggles in the context of Port Tyler's constricted society, especially those of the female characters who suffer through especially trying situations: "girls . . . act so silly . . . because we're scared inside" (*Spring* 66), an anxiety that Arthur seems to share:

ARTHUR: We talk about things so frankly in Europe. I forgot that your southern Puritanism might rise up in arms at anything too boldly expressed. (31)

Williams establishes intricate structural parallels from the outset of the play, through the contrast between interactions among four young people—Dick, Arthur, Heavenly, and Hertha—at a church picnic. Each set of characters plays off the other in eerie sequence. The unions among the four involve the composition of a problematic love quadrangle. We soon learn, however, that this quadrangle excludes Hertha, given that both Dick and Arthur fervently aspire to marry Heavenly. Moreover, the conflict between Hertha and Arthur revolves around the question of whether Heavenly still holds Arthur in her thrall:

ARTHUR: I loved her a long time ago. When we were in grade school.

HERTHA: That long ago?

ARTHUR: Yes. It doesn't sound possible, but it's true. I was terribly shy and one day she laughed at me. After that I couldn't go back to school anymore. They had to send me to Europe.

HERTHA: Because she laughed at you?

ARTHUR: Yes. I thought I'd forgotten about it. But now I'm beginning to see she's been in me all the time, laughing at me—and everything that I've done since then has been a sort of desperate effort to—to . . .

HERTHA: To compensate for her laughing at you?

ARTHUR: Yes, that's it!

HERTHA: But now that you do understand it, you ought to be able to get away from it. (32)

Romantic and economic reversals abound, and since the desires of the multiple characters drive the play, the “trajectory of seduction needs to be understood in its departure from a traditional erotic program” (Mücke 22). To this end, the order or sequence in which desire occurs determines the critical turning points in the narrative, “whenever a perceived reality is portrayed as the product of a dangerous or risky desire” (35). Thus, just as Arthur once desired Heavenly—to compensate (*Spring* 32) for her childhood mockery of him as a sissy (17)—so does Williams lead his audience to believe that Hertha's desire for Arthur will rescue her from her fated status as Port Tyler's youngest “cranky old maid” (113). Ironically, after turning toward Hertha, Arthur summarily rejects her:

ARTHUR: Haven't you seen a drunk man before? Sure you have. Your father, the Terrible Swede, as they call him. He comes home polluted on Saturday nights, so I hear. Makes a big scene, throws things, calls you names. . . . Don't you understand? I don't want you! (123)

Each character rues having articulated “a demand or a wish in the first place” (Mücke 35). For example, Heavenly questions her desire for Dick and rejects his proposal, and, in a weak moment, replaces him with Arthur. Meanwhile, Dick rejects Port Tyler, opting at the end to leave the conventional security that it stands for. Arthur, for his part, rejects both Hertha's and Heavenly's proffered love, while Hertha rejects the dignity and independence which spinsterhood might offer her (according to Birdie Schlagmann, the senior librarian). As with Hertha's imaginary Storybook Lady, Arthur's artistic aspirations only reveal him as a failed poet: “I know my limitations” (*Spring* 25). Arthur—ironically named—even assigns a pathetic romantic significance to his relationship with Heavenly:

ARTHUR: I wanted to give you this.

HEAVENLY: What is it?

ARTHUR: A book of modern verse.

HEAVENLY [in a tone of final despair]: Oh . . .

ARTHUR: There's just a short passage I marked last night.

HEAVENLY: Oh.

ARTHUR [fumbling in an agony of embarrassment through the pages]:

Here it is. (68)

Like many of the characters in Williams's more mature plays, the weight of Southern history falls heavily upon Arthur's shoulders, as does the legacy of its social and racial divisions, including "its rituals and taboos [that] often make self-determination and moral choice unachievable" (King 629). Arthur's limited autonomy plays out in the end like a Gothic mystery; a mystery, however, in which the generic conventions of fairy tale fantasies have been radically transformed (*Spring* 13). Instead of the conventional, fruitful happy ending, the spring storm brings an abrupt end both to Arthur's goals and his sense of self-determination:

HEAVENLY [desperately]: You're a coward. You're running away.

ARTHUR [dully]: Yes. That's a habit of mine. (147)

Hopelessly Entangled Characters

Other features of Williams's Southern Gothic include his frequent quotations from and allusions to works with a Gothic sensibility or to works that feature Gothic imagery (a practice, in fact, Williams would continue for decades to come). And, as in the protest plays, Williams uses character types, experimenting with conventionally Gothic psychological studies of personality. Borrowing from psychiatric theories based upon the Freudian analysis of the unconscious mind, Williams nonetheless defies predictable archetypes through narrative conventions of characterization, setting, iconography, and staging techniques. Likewise, his Gothic language invokes images of unexpected, fairly shocking violence. Madness, social ostracism, and suicidal impulses stalk the female characters, as does the omnipresent threat of punishment for unsanctioned, "disgusting," and "horrifying" (130, 140) displays of rebellion.

Williams's tragic introduction of Hertha's demise into the narrative irrevocably transforms the play's romantic potential, and effectively ousts Arthur from his privileged position in Port Tyler, notwithstanding his family's calculated grooming so that he might take over their branch of the Planter's State Bank (23). The role of conquering heroes in the Gothic narrative includes rescuing damsels in distress. Unfortunately, like Dick, such heroes "often do as much harm as good" (Weston 104). When Arthur, at the party given by the Lamphreys in his honor, fails to seduce Heavenly, he turns his attentions to Hertha. Cruelty and bitterness drive him to reject Hertha just as Heavenly had rejected him, causing him to "massively block" (Sedgwick 12) Hertha from the love he knows she desires from him, and to thereby transfer his pain to her which, in turn, destroys her (Freud, *Civilization* 77). In the end, Arthur flees the spectral image of a bloodied and broken Hertha: "[w]e were inside those boxcars, we were the ones that killed her" (145), he cries.

Following Dick's departure from Port Tyler, Hertha finds herself caught up in the Gothic "romantic triangle and plays out the role of the sentimental heroine who, once dishonored, must die" (Weston 121). In Hertha's suicide, Williams provides us with a cause of death typically reserved for dishonored Gothic and fairy tale characters (Weston 76). The characters, seemingly trapped by Williams's plot reversals, acknowledge both their neuroses and "monolithic social obstacles" (King 630). Yet Williams sympathetically, albeit ironically, charts the narrative trajectory of his fatally disenfranchised protagonists. For example, on the play's surface, the love relationships appear to move toward romantic fulfillment, until sexual betrayal triggers a set of dramatic and, ultimately, tragic reversals. Thus Hertha's reaction pushes the play beyond

Gothic romance into the realm of tragedy, while her suicidal act heralds a form of social death (Weston 136) for Heavenly:

HEAVENLY: You're throwing me over—you want me to be like Agnes Peabody next door—a front porch girl! She sits on the front porch in her best dress and the men walk by in the evening and tip their hats and keep right on walking. People remember how she went out all the time with a boy that's left town. Now she just sits on the porch waiting!—waiting for nothing, getting to be an old maid!—That's what you want to happen to me! (*Spring* 103)

The concept of idealized femininity that emerges from traditional Gothic models dovetails with that of the traditional Southern feminine ideal, since submissiveness remains a key character trait in both traditions. According to the Southern narrative mythos and the European Gothic text, women, “[in]sofar as it is humanly possible,” must obey “the dicta of parents and society” (Conger 93).

In contrast, following Dick's departure, Heavenly plays the aggressor, with Arthur paradoxically maintaining a reified position as a love object, whose physical resistance Heavenly must overcome: “[c]ome over here and be quiet” (*Spring* 146). Dick, on the other hand, views his relationship with Heavenly in purely pragmatic terms, for unless she agrees to follow him and to live “on a river barge” (105), she presents an obstacle to his freedom. Ironically, Heavenly's initial and unequivocal offer of sexual initiation overwhelms Arthur: “I gave you every chance last night an' you started to read mode'n verse” (98). The comment raises further questions about Arthur's virility:

“[s]ometimes it hurts a man to be close to a woman—just so close and not any closer than that” (94).

Williams exposes the hierarchical order which, in the traditional Gothic narratives, punishes indiscriminately both the good, submissive woman, “rewarded with . . . sanctification,” and the bad, assertive woman (124) punished, in Port Tyler, by ostracism (94). Indeed, in *Spring*, we see how Southern myths, divorced from their antebellum context of gentility, “have degenerated into a grotesque parody of their classic versions” (Turner 237). Hertha initially appears to seek an intensity of experience beyond sexual fulfillment. However, when she confesses her erotic desire for Arthur, he rejects her. Heavenly expresses doubt about Arthur’s wish for physical intimacy, to which Arthur protests: “I knew a girl in London when I was going to school there and she was terribly dissatisfied with things . . . [w]e had a love affair” (*Spring* 31). Interestingly, we commonly find such ambivalence toward female desire in depictions of “the male hatred and fear of woman’s . . . ‘otherness,’ [an ambivalence that] lies at the root of . . . the Gothic” (Stein 124). In a similar vein, Hertha revels in the vital and storm-charged atmosphere around her before being tragically held to account for her presumptions regarding Arthur’s affection:

ARTHUR: That wind’s too cold!

HERTHA: I like the taste of it.

ARTHUR: What does it taste like?

HERTHA: The edge of outer space. It’s got the cold flavor of stars in it.

(*Spring* 28)

The fantasy genre's distinctive call for an "intensity of experience" (Rutland 4) also makes itself felt in "the long dialogues and explanations in which the tiniest modulations can have a pretentious significance," although "the characters themselves realize this very seldom" (Frye, *Henry James* 15). Instead of assuming a Vestal (*Spring* 144) role in the castle in the air that Arthur first envisions for her, Hertha throws herself in front of a freight train. Bizarrely, as her various curses defeat her royal prerogatives, she resembles more the weird witch (34) than she does the dark-haired princess (144). Her Storybook Lady imaginings also evoke occult imagery, along with that of fairy tales, and she acknowledges that the tales she feels compelled to offer as a public service (24) provide her both with a means of defiance and a retreat into fantasy. In fact, Hertha's relentlessly predictable existence and prescribed social position limit the fulfillment of her desires, such that the fantastic mysteries that occupy her mind offer only a limited measure of solace:

HERTHA: The Storybook Lady—that's me! Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings, ten o'clock at the Carnegie Public Library. Have you ever heard what happened . . . when the handsome young prince went to look for adventure? [They both laugh.] Oh, I don't mind that part of it. I like to make-believe as much as the kids. It's the old women I can't stand, the ones like Mrs. Lamphrey who's so afraid that you'll forget that your mother's a seamstress and your father's a night watchman at the lumberyard who gets notoriously drunk every Saturday night.—Oh, they're very sweet to me, call me darling and send me flowers when I'm sick, but they take every precaution to see

that I don't forget my social limitations—Did you hear Mrs. Lamphrey remind me about Susan's little pink blouse? Size forty-eight?—Know why she did that? She's worried you didn't know that my mother took in sewing. She's worried about you and me—she thinks I'm trying to captivate you or something! [She laughs.] Of course, things like that are only *amusing*, that's all! (24)

As the children's familiar Storybook Lady, Hertha expresses a commitment to a “re-sacralizing’ of the world of everyday experience” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Oziewicz xi), although her own desires and aspirations remain frustratingly at the level of fantasy. Like many modern fantasy writers, Williams “aspires to reveal the mystery in the ordinary” through his characters and, in this way, to “envision a spiritual reality” (xiv). Williams often invokes supernatural imagery through the use of colorful dialogue, as in the haunting appearance of the “monster rat” (*Spring* 127, 129) that Aunt Lila credits with having interrupted her suicide attempt.

According to Irving Malin, modern American Gothic narratives tend to include weak characters for whom love symbolizes “an attempt to create order out of chaos, strength out of weakness” (Malin 5). Instead, such complex narrative grotesquerie “simply creates monsters” (5). We see a prescient example of Arthur's weak character in his monstrous behavior toward Hertha (Williams, qtd. in Isaac, *Introduction*, *Spring* xi). Malin indicates the ways in which such weaknesses eventually extend to a sort of “ambivalence” (Malin 5) of the kind expressed by Arthur in his “love-hatred” toward Heavenly (*Spring* 72). Even Hertha senses his ineffectuality and jokes about their “anti-climactic” affair (33, 146). Thus Williams forgoes the major love scene—the stock motif

of many Gothic dramas—and interrupts Dick and Heavenly’s tryst with a slap (19). Despite this, Williams divorces his fantasy characters from any single ideological agenda, such that the theories his characters collectively profess make up a wildly eclectic array: Heavenly’s bourgeois outlook, Dick’s independent philosophy, Hertha and Arthur’s tortured concerns with the “exthetic” (10, meaning aesthetic), and Mrs. Critchfield’s crass materialism.

At first, Hertha exhibits an almost messianic sense of self-importance, even as she establishes, on the bluffs with Arthur, her role as Port Tyler’s Storybook Lady. Almost invariably, she exhibits an energy that verges on gleeful enjoyment: “[y]ou see I can’t get over the idea that it might be possible for somebody—sometime—somewhere—to follow a straight line upwards and get someplace that nobody’s ever been yet” (26), an enjoyment that Arthur cannot help but deflate later on in the play. When she surprises him with a sexual response to his overture, he retorts, “I didn’t know you were like that!” before adding, with finality, “I thought you were different” (123). Hertha, as the more imaginative of the two, is convinced that she possesses the power to impose her worldview upon others so that the exterior world that “poses as reality no longer seems real” (Mücke 25), a delusion that Sigmund Freud called *Realitätsverlust* (loss of reality due to neurosis or psychosis).

Appreciably, with *Spring*, Williams begins to lead the way in his dramatic interpretation of Freudian psychoanalytic theories, exploring, through his characters, numerous examples of compensation (*Spring* 32), sublimation (166), the instinct for self-destruction (93), and eros (93), that he would continue to investigate in his masterworks.

Twenty years later, Malin would state that writers of the new American Gothic employ Freudian principles—“consciously or unconsciously”—in their explorations of the family dynamic, and unsurprisingly, “[r]elationships are distorted” (8). We note how this play’s desperate (*Spring* 83) Critchfield family, with their “disordered bourgeois patterns . . . is suffocation itself” (Malin 8–9).

Just as he does in his protest works, Williams portrays, in his fantasy plays, both the intensive class struggle, and an attendant, feudal-like reversion to primitivism. Tensions between the constraints of individualism and the collective good make for penetrating and paradoxical explorations of the Southern Gothic characters’ quest to belong to a community, while maintaining a distinct sense of individuality. Their painfully ineffectual attempts at reconciliation manifest further in the futile dreams of marriage and conventionality that Mrs. Critchfield envisions, and in which she instills in Heavenly.

A sense of disconnection often manifests itself in the motif of wanderlust, which finds even the deeply rooted character of Heavenly dryly noting that all those caught in the imploding romantic quadrangle ultimately yearn to leave Port Tyler: “[y]ou’re speaking symbolically about the Gypsy in you or something” (*Spring* 11).

Arthur invokes atavistic emotion (65) both in his pursuit and ultimate rejection of Heavenly. Interestingly, Arthur plays a passive role, and exhibits an anxiety (142) that borders on hysteria (144), traditionally coded as feminine. His preoccupation with his own hysterical psychic state alienates him, and thus he identifies more readily with Hertha, another character trapped in a similarly alienating existence (145). As a child, when taunted by Dick and Heavenly—“Artie, Smartie, went to a party! What did he go

for? To play with his dolly!” (18)—Arthur found refuge in fantasies of *The Wizard of Oz*. Similarly, Hertha, speaking of her young Storybook listeners, acknowledges to him that she likes to “make-believe as much as the kids” (24). A shared fear of mockery and unreciprocated affection initiates a complex pattern of paranoia and self-doubt for both pairs of would-be lovers, with tragic results. Both share a longing for a relationship, but the fear of intimacy overwhelms their desire:

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Hertha Neilson? That girl’s peculiar!

LILA: Is she?

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Yes! She paints very odd pictures.—Wears her hair in braids like a schoolgirl when she’s easily twenty-eight or thirty.

LILA: Anything else wrong with her?

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Indeed there is. Her father’s a drunkard and her mother takes in sewing.—You can imagine the Shannons allowing their son to get himself mixed up with that kind of trash.

LILA: Well, they’re both artistic, and Heavenly isn’t. (42-43)

In contrast to Arthur’s jealousy and rage toward both Heavenly and Dick, Arthur appears to treat Hertha with a predominantly benign reserve. He painstakingly explains his passionate “love-hate” attraction to Heavenly in Strindbergian terms (72). August Strindberg, like Arthur, also appears to have “experienced a fateful attraction to a spirited modern woman bent upon maintaining her independence and realizing her individuality” while “his deepest longings were for a woman he could totally possess and subordinate to his need for inner security” (Gassner x). Williams characterizes Heavenly as a

“physically attractive . . . pure southern” belle (*Spring* 5) who must be “brought to her senses” by her planter suitor (137). As Aunt Lila explains,

LILA: . . . Just grab her and make her stay here. And make her like it.

Heavenly’s no angel, in fact she’s a regular little hussy. I think she

likes you better’n you think if you treat her like she needs to be

treated—Here, she’s coming! Let me get out of here quick! (137–38)

Heavenly’s trusted Aunt Lila recognizes Arthur’s need to take a firm stand with Heavenly, so that the young woman might be “led to accept her natural place in the southern system” (Watson 100), as Mrs. Critchfield hopes.³

And so, Heavenly’s social training overrides her earlier, more impulsive, sexual transgressions with Dick, thereby changing the course of the play. She admits that if Arthur hadn’t made love to her, she would have indeed met Dick at Friar’s Point in order to marry him (*Spring* 141). Mrs. Critchfield’s parental authority and Heavenly’s headstrong nature initially clash. Ultimately, however, this war of egos culminates in Heavenly’s rejection of Dick. Heavenly patently attempts to sublimate her desires for Dick by clinging (146) instead to Arthur: “[w]hen you kissed me just now, I could have believed it was him, Dick” (146). Williams implies that Heavenly suffers “a fate worse than death,” and indicates that she will continue her half-life as one of the dreaded front porch girls, in ornamental obsolescence (10), “sitting out there forever on the front porch in our best dresses!” (66). Both Dick and Arthur, acting out their own self-important quests, sallies, or retreats, will abandon Heavenly, just as she had feared. Arthur explains

³ Much as the cult of celebrity continues to fascinate today, the inhabitants of Williams’s New South, most of which earn a modest living, remain fascinated with the reputedly grander lifestyles of the bygone planter-aristocrats. Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), an epic tale of the Deep South, explored this fascination, which continued well into the era of the New South (c. 1886 and beyond).

the psychological implications of his love-hatred (72) for Heavenly in terms that are similar to those that Malin employs in his characterization of the alienated modern protagonists of the New American Gothic. Such characters resent and seek to destroy the object of their affections, “but at the same time they want to communicate with them” (Malin 15):

ARTHUR: The reason I hated you was that I loved you.

HEAVENLY: *Loved me?*

ARTHUR: Yes.

HEAVENLY: I don't see how that's possible. You couldn't love anyone that you hated. (*Spring* 71)

In fact, as Bakhtin reminds us, destructive topics of mockery and abuse are almost entirely associated with bodily and grotesque imagery (*Rabelais* 319), albeit transmuted here into an ineffectual kiss that serves only to remind Heavenly of the greater virility of her other lover, Dick.

In death, Hertha symbolizes the perversion of the Southern tradition of chivalry, as she faces betrayal at the hands of the play's travestied version of the Arthurian Cavalier. Williams clearly finds Arthur morally deficient, if not degenerate, and denies the character any measure of courage whatsoever. Unlike other examples of martyrdom in the full-length apprentice plays under consideration, such as the selfless acts of Birmingham Red (*Candles*), Jim O'Connor (*Fugitive Kind*), and the Queen (*Nightingales*), Hertha's martyrdom saves no one. Now running scared, Arthur opts to leave town rather than to marry his once-beloved Heavenly. Although Mrs. Lamphrey feigns an understanding of Heavenly's plight—"I don't blame you for finding [Dick]

irresistible [because] he has that—that sort of—primitive masculinity that’s enough to make a girl lose her head” (*Spring* 21)—Heavenly falls into the social hiatus that the older women predict through their collection of barely veiled threats (94). In her study of narrative strategy (*Writing Beyond the Ending*, 1985), Rachel DuPlessis describes such ideologically-construed ostracism in the case of nineteenth century Gothic heroines as

. . . [a] distorted, inappropriate relation to the social “script” or plot designed to contain her legally, economically, and sexually . . . [because of the] energies of selfhood, often represented by sexuality, [which are] expended outside the “couvert” of marriage or a valid romance. (15)

In contrast, Heavenly’s defiance assumes the guise of a markedly scandalous code of behavior, reserved for the secondhand (*Spring* 53) or damaged (45) character that, as Williams suggests, ultimately enters the outcast state which Hertha kills herself to avoid. Thus, Heavenly’s fate, and her earlier sexual gambit—swapping Arthur for Dick—plainly demonstrates that Williams does not seek to construct a romantic narrative in the tradition of the antebellum romance narratives (Weston 45), among which Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936) remains the best known example. Curiously, the University of Iowa Theater Workshop, under Elsworth P. Conkle, rejected the play “because of Heavenly’s weakness as a character” (Williams, qtd. in Isaac 1999, xxi).

Despite the fact that Williams roots the plot of *Spring* in a seemingly romantic landscape, he shows us how the emotionally distorted perceptions of the four lovers—“I want to get my hands on something hard and tough that fights back, like the river!” (*Spring* 101)—dominate the action. Apparently, even the repressed once Miss Schlagmann shared these overblown perceptions:

MISS SCHLAGMANN: . . . I've been through the same thing. It's a sort of emotional crisis that all of us have to go through that don't get married and haven't the courage for anything else. After a while it gets better. You find out that you can put those feelings into other things.

(116)

And, for her part, the pragmatic Aunt Lila advises her niece by way of the following confession:

LILA [She offers Heavenly a light.]: Here. Smoke your cigarette.

Cigarettes are made for moments like these. Girls didn't smoke 'em back in the days when I had my big romantic catastrophes. I used to be out in the hayloft and stuff my mouth full of straw which wasn't nearly so nice. (127)

Williams further discourages the sort of romantic interpretation often associated with the Gothic with the deflation of Heavenly's "shocking" character traits (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xxi), which reveal a racist streak, her sexual cynicism, and an instinct for general antagonism. Having succumbed to her budding sexual interest, and in defiance of traditional conventions, Heavenly soon submits to the mercenary view of sexuality promoted by Mrs. Critchfield, a view that contains all the elements of a typically Gothic, enigmatic, and frustrating mother-daughter conflict (Weston 46). In *Spring*, in short, Williams shows both generations to be ultimately conventional and, thus, morally suspect.

Significantly, regarding the Gothic, seemingly supernatural, personal transformations in *Spring*, the foreboding, eerie aspects of the extraordinary natural

settings overshadow the action, at times, even to the exclusion of other, more Expressionistically substantial, milieus, in order to evoke more effectively the individual protagonists' psychological crises. For example, Williams effectively dashes Heavenly's lurid fairy tale hopes and expectations—"I'd been reading *The Sheik*—I wanted to be pursued an' captured an' made a slave to passion!"—upon "the station platform" (*Spring* 12), not far from where Hertha dies. Williams further contextualizes this Southern Gothic fantasy by adding ironic touches of humor and the grotesque. Beyond Hertha's and Heavenly's casual asides, the most reflexive references to the Gothic narrative come courtesy of the play's grotesque blocking device, "a heavy father or similar type" (Rutland 4). Here, Heavenly's mother further epitomizes both "an obsessive theory of life," and a "blind devotion to a fetish object" (4):

MRS. CRITCHFIELD [A loud crash is heard upstairs]: Oh Heavens, what's that? [She pauses nervously, recovers and smiles.] Heavenly must be romping with the dog! What were we talking about? Oh yes, of course. Books! I have a cousin who writes them. Had one published. I forget what the name of it was. [Another loud noise heard above.] Oh, yes, *The Stroke of Doom*, that was it! A mystery novel based on the most remarkable coincidence that actually took place. [The noise continues.] Seems to me the setting was somewhere in Europe. Or was it Africa? Oh, no, it was Australia! And just think, Cousin Alfred was an invalid—he'd never been out of Mississippi in all his life! He got his information, every bit of it, out of the Encyclopedia Britannica. (*Spring* 135)

In the end, Arthur sabotages his chance of achieving genuine fulfillment with the sensitive and intelligent (21) young woman who cares for him. Williams's study of Arthur's alienation remains structurally consistent with the psychoanalytical model of repression, as demonstrated by the skewered intensity of his feelings and the "reversal of affect" (Mücke 71); namely, the perverse and tortured fantasies that Arthur ultimately projects upon the young women vying for his affections. The "disruptive encounter" at the core of this typical fantasy narrative generates, for Hertha, "a heightened sensibility—the result of overstimulation or intense irritation that produces pleasurable pain, or painful pleasure" (130). Arthur's cruelty toward Hertha temporarily frees him emotionally, such that he can now court Heavenly in grim earnestness, although his uncalled-for act of cruelty effectively undermines their union. Finally, Hertha invites only Arthur's disgust (*Spring* 123), while a relationship with Heavenly comes to emblemize Hertha's suicide: "[w]henever I touched you now it would be like dipping my hands in [Hertha's] blood" (147). Freud argues that delusional persecution anxieties may be understood as a final defense against homosexual fantasies (*Psychoanalytic Notes* 63) and, indeed, as suggested earlier, Williams calls Arthur's masculinity into question at fairly predictable intervals:

ARTHUR [choked]: . . . I don't know. I'm in a state of confusion! [He crosses the room a few steps.] I guess you think I'm a pretty queer sort of person. I am. I was brought up in a school for problem children, I've never had any normal relations with people. I want what I'm afraid of and I'm afraid of what I want . . . (*Spring* 69).

Later, Heavenly questions Arthur's sexuality:

ARTHUR [pausing]: We're being childish, both of us. Deliberately
hurting each other . . . I've had an affair myself with a girl in London.

HEAVENLY: One of those intellectual affairs? . . . That's sort of hard to
imagine. (73)

And Arthur admits, once again:

ARTHUR: I don't know. Everything that I've done since then has been by
compulsion. If you only knew the heroic effort it took for me to ask
you to the country club that first time.

HEAVENLY: Your voice sounded funny over the phone.

ARTHUR: I had butterflies in my throat. At lunch I kept dropping the
silver. (*Spring* 71)

Unlike Heavenly but, fascinatingly, much like Eliot's treatment of Philomela in "The Fire Sermon" (*The Waste Land*, 1922),⁴ Williams portrays the once-meek Hertha, the former victim of Arthur's fickle fantasies, as compelled to transform, "like the soul cleansed in purgatory and then taken back into the bosom of God, a vessel for the expression of transcendent meaning—as force and horror" (Stockton 33):

[The wind rises again with great force. There is lightning and a rumble of
thunder.]

ARTHUR: Hertha. Come down from there! It's starting to rain—the
storm's breaking!

[She waves to him gaily from the summit.]

⁴ Incidentally, Williams lifts the play's "early working title" (Isaac, *Introduction*, *Spring* viii)—"April is the Cruellest Month"—from the opening line of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, evoking nature's fertility betrayed by the forces of sterility and perverse wilfulness.

HERTHA: Look Arthur! There's three of us now! We're putting a curse
on the town. [She laughs wildly.]

[Lightning outlines her figure between the two dead trees. There is a
crescendo of wind and thunder—] CURTAIN (*Spring* 34)

In the tradition of Gothic works, Arthur soon confesses to Heavenly that he has adored her since childhood, after which, in keeping with the overarching fantasy conventions, his jealousy and anger toward Dick becomes “quickly transformed into the feeling of being persecuted by unrequited love” (Mücke 71). He nonetheless believes that if Heavenly only loved him, “then maybe [he] *would* be alive” (*Spring* 97).

Unsurprisingly, the play's various characters address Arthur's repression with an attitude of ambivalence and mistrust: “[Arthur] doesn't seem quite human” (129). Williams takes pains to emphasize the ways in which symbolic forms of autonomy and self-respect seemingly elude Arthur: “[i]t's a wonder the light doesn't shine through me like it does through a cloud of dust in the road” (96). At the very moment that his relationship with Heavenly should lead to intimacy—both rivals, after all, suddenly disappear—Arthur flees in disgrace, admitting “I've always run away from things that I've wanted” (98).

Having suppressed his long-held attraction to Heavenly, Arthur misses the opportunity to connect with her sexually in the manner that she desires, while he continues to fear her childish ridicule and censure, should she revert to her original, mocking nature. His emotional response to Heavenly, and his arch comments regarding her unconscious cruelty (90), derive from his emotional immaturity. Given his past experiences as the butt of Dick's and Heavenly's ridicule, Arthur's sense of oppression at Dick's hands reveals a form of defensive anger that stems from the unremitting

obstruction of his love for Heavenly: “[y]ou could give me back what you took away from me—that afternoon when you laughed at me in the recess yard!” (97). Moreover, the lonely character expresses his disappointment regarding Heavenly’s expectations, and that he remains unworthy of the fulfillment her name inspires.

Both *Spring* and *Stairs* feature social elements that reveal a grotesque, even bathetic, sense of human limitation.⁵ Williams’s treatment of character relationships both in spatial and in temporal terms emphasizes the metaphorical entrapment of his protagonists. He explores the Gothic preoccupation with each individual character’s perception of his or her own limitations through patterns developed from specific romantic conventions of the European and American Gothic romance (Weston 56). He combines these with modernist techniques derived from the cinematic arts, so as to portray “the individual’s frequent losing battle with self or world” (56), as in Hertha’s case, although he also hints at what may seem, on the surface, to be unreasonable moments of optimism and epiphanic awareness (such as Heavenly’s expression at the play’s beginning).

Many fantasy narratives introduce a potential loss of innocence that coincides with a retreat from adulthood (Mücke 75). In *Spring*, specific psychological limitations betray the characters’ essential immaturity. For example, Mrs. Critchfield “lifts her hands to her lips with a breathless gasp, then her face puckers grotesquely and she begins to cry like a child” (*Spring* 77), while Hertha “smiles raptly like a child” when Arthur kisses her (122), and Williams takes pains to characterize Arthur as “awkward as an adolescent”

⁵ The dominant topical concern in *Spring* comes to bear upon parents versus their rebellious children. Such subject matter anticipates Williams’s later development of the Southern Gothic genre in *Summer and Smoke* (1947) and, even more innovatively, in *Night of the Iguana* (1961).

(61) throughout the play. Mrs. Critchfield doggedly ignores the budding complexities of Heavenly's sexuality, just as she needlessly worries her family with groundless concerns regarding the health of the Critchfield patriarch. Heavenly, through her immaturity, reflects Port Tyler's closed-minded, head-in-the-sand approach to human desire. In order to hold Dick (54), she enters into a premarital affair with him, an affair that loses its gloss after Arthur proposes: "[i]nstead of marrying Dick and living on a lousy river barge, I'm going to marry Arthur Shannon and live in the biggest house in town!" (141). But her prematurely intimate relationship with Dick ultimately seals her fate as an outcast "front porch girl" (*Spring* 66).

A vicious circle of futile recollection and consistent dysfunction echoes the terrors that ultimately beset Hertha, as she reels from her respectable position as the town's Storybook Lady and librarian, into a despondent suicide. Williams's portrait of Hertha's desperation contains moving passages of psychological realism that undermine her more fanciful associations with both the hopeful fairy tale (Mücke 66) and the fantasy narrative:

HERTHA: [She turns and sits down rigidly at the desk.] . . . Maybe I'm losing my mind.

MISS SCHLAGMANN: Don't be absurd!

HERTHA: Lots of girls do at my age. Twenty-eight. Lots of them get dementia praecox at about my age, especially when they're not married. I've read about it. They get morbid and everything excites them and they think they're being persecuted by people. I'm getting like that. (*Spring* 114)

Heavenly's self-assured beauty contrasts with the stale reality of Hertha's working class origins. Williams points out in his stage directions that the "important thing about [Heavenly] is that she is not only physically attractive" and "fiery tempered," but also "disarmingly sweet" (5). However, her limited vocabulary and her designation by her own estimation as an ignoramus (63) also suggest her staggering limitations. Williams problematizes Heavenly's so-called vulnerability and plays with the belle characterization (5) through addressing the social implications of defiant behavior for non-conformist Southern young women. At first, Heavenly embodies a hopeful escape from such kinds of social confinement, but Williams finally reveals these very limitations in her abandoned status as "front porch girl":

HEAVENLY: Like old maids' memories, that's what it reminds me of!

[She sniffs the cloth delicately once more, and then smoothes it thoughtfully on her lap. Suddenly she raises her face to Arthur's with a look of startling intensity.] I'd rather die than be an old maid! [Pause for emphasis.] . . . All the boys go No'th or East to make a livin' unless they've got plantations. And that leaves a lot of girls sitting out on the front porch waitin' fo' the afte'noon mail. Sometimes it stops coming. (66)

Denied the opportunity to marry as a result of her mother's misguided conditioning, Heavenly now submissively waits for a suitor that may never arrive. In her study of the New Southern Gothic's aspects of fantasy, Marie-Antoinette Manz-Kunz notes that characters in Southern Gothic narratives find themselves relegated to increasingly confined physical spaces (60), as does, for example, the unloved bride in

Poe's *Ligeia* (c. 1840). Williams also leaves his audience wondering whether Heavenly will remain attractive to potential callers (*Spring* 5), given her confinement to the family's front porch as victim of a virulent ostracism (94). Once again, Williams ends the play by exposing the ambiguities and inconsistencies of his conflicted characters.

However, lest we take the final scene to be one of outright pessimism, Williams also imbues the play with a sense of mystery, and of conflicting cultural identity. Although for Heavenly and Hertha spinsterhood represents a fate worse than death, Williams portrays Aunt Lila and Miss Schlagmann as caring and thoughtful, and their maturity contrasts sharply with the self-absorbed immaturity of the main protagonists.

Sex, Suicide, and Southern Society

Williams's use of romantic irony serves to deflate both his characters' social aspirations and his audience's expectations. In *Spring Storm*, as in *Fugitive Kind* and *Not About Nightingales*, Williams satirizes the social elite. In one example, the family name of the leading planter, Lamphrey, associates the members of that family with a species of parasitic fish—eel-like, with a sucker mouth (*Random House Webster's* 218)—that feeds on the bottom of the Mississippi River. Williams also reveals the petty concerns of the status obsessed matrons of Port Tyler, and the cattiness with which they establish their self-serving social norms. For example, at a formal spring party, the chaperones (*Spring* 82) speak in hushed mock-censure while fixating upon Heavenly's scandalous behavior and tenuous social predicament. They also speculate about Heavenly's sexual relationship with Dick, as Mrs. Dowd, the society columnist, grows restless:

MRS. ADAMS: I've warned Henry.

MRS. BUFORD: Annabelle and John Dudley dropped her in high school.

They say she's so uppity and independent that—

MRS. DOWD: Mrs. Lamphrey!

MRS. LAMPHREY: Yes?

MRS. DOWD: Such delicious punch! (85)

Mrs. Critchfield also takes Heavenly to task, causing the younger woman to flee the Critchfield family home, a venue that, in its own way, oppresses the characters in much after the fashion of the cabin in *Candles to the Sun*, the rooming house in *Fugitive Kind*, and the jailhouse in *Not About Nightingales*. Here, however, the house represents a staid, shabby-chic prison of ancestry and tradition rather than an environment of outright privation. Clearly, through the bourgeois décor of her home and its numerous trappings of mainly sentimental value, Mrs. Critchfield aspires to establish a niche in the social hierarchy of Port Tyler, collecting and displaying as she does a few essential articles, including her beloved heirloom furniture and “a large military-equestrian portrait of a Civil War hero hung prominently on the wall . . . in a position that seems to command the whole room” (35). Incidentally, although Mrs. Critchfield would desire nothing more than to help Heavenly make a home for Arthur, he lays his “lovely white panama hat” (134) beside the photo of her late great-grandfather only temporarily (perhaps since both images are closely linked to the romanticized and mythologized South).

Williams also manipulates the delusions of heroic fantasy traditionally associated with medieval Cavalier imagery by ascribing a frontier mentality to the play's party-going elites. In their closing of ranks, they strive to ostracize Heavenly for her perceived social transgressions. The inner circle of conservative matrons (13) serves a regulatory

function for the controlling, “carceral” (Foucault, *Discipline* 93) community, parodying the tradition of the “refined, sheltered, helpless Southern lady” featured in the plantation literature of the Old South (Weston 83). As Williams explains in a letter to Willard Holland (whom he hoped would produce the play in 1938), the figurative prisons in *Spring*, from which only Dick successfully escapes, stunt the development of the “four lives . . . leading them into a tangle of conflict and ugly relations” (Williams, qtd. in Leverich, 263). These metaphorical prisons are more than “inert . . . dark, abandoned region[s]” (Foucault, *Discipline* 93). Instead, they constitute social “forces” that engage actively in “coding [and] sometimes recoding” human existence (93), as Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*.

A major topic in the case of *Spring* pertains to the set of hard and fast rules of behavioral etiquette enforced by the town’s matrons. These rules invite comparison with the kinds of persuasions and coercions prevalent in actual prisons, rules reinforced by the “cherishing of an ideal dream world in the past [which] was both a reflection of the Southerner’s capacity for unreality and a cause of . . . continuing reluctance to face the realities of the modern world” (H. T. Williams 2). Significantly, after Heavenly’s “horrible confession” (*Spring* 130, 140), Mrs. Critchfield reveals her tough pragmatism through her quick recovery:

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: You don’t have to be an old maid . . . There’s precious few girls that get married nowadays without having had one or two love affairs in the past. (53)

Sexuality and Social Mores

In *Spring*, Williams opts to register sexual instincts in and through the protagonists' "desperate but failed attempts at communication," as they attempt to break out of a melancholic, seemingly insurmountable, fear of social isolation (Mücke 72). As if to confirm the damaging consequences of obsessive Southern codes in the regulation of sexual relations, Heavenly and Hertha both internalize and express a typically paralyzing, Gothic dread (in this case, of spinsterhood). Thus does Heavenly, the young woman left behind in the wake of the destructive quadrangle, ultimately adopt the same "deadened" look as Miss Schlagmann (*Spring* 119). Yet both Miss Schlagmann and Aunt Lila have made their own effective compromises with the fate that Hertha and Heavenly dread. To this end, Williams demonstrates that a measure of dignity and endurance persists despite the overwhelmingly Gothic aura of pessimism and horror. For the most part, Williams interprets the darker and equally powerful sexuality of the Gothic narrative, where pain remains undiminished and the emphasis falls not on pleasure but on "decay rather than growth, terror rather than tranquility" (Lovecraft 53).

At the end of act 2, scene 2, we begin to grasp the depths of Mrs. Critchfield's failure to realize the powerful extent to which Dick has tempted Heavenly to join him at Moon Lake until, tragically, her daughter abandons the family in order to elope. Heavenly's disillusioned, "moony" behavior is also reflected in the Lake's name:

[A terrible silence. She is heard running upstairs calling her daughter's name above. Arthur stands waiting in nervous misery till Mrs. Critchfield re-enters the room. She is completely unstrung by Heavenly's shocking flight, but with the invincible spirit of Colonel

Wayne, she resolves to carry it off as bravely as she is able, giving Arthur her most brilliant smile, a little tremulous at the corners.]

(*Spring* 76)

Heavenly loses, along with her maidenhead, her status as a marriageable lady (Onstott 375). Heavenly's mother acknowledges the loss of her teenaged daughter's virginity, the most precious attribute of a young, unmarried woman, and makes a pathetic attempt to save the family honor: "stand here in front of your great-grandfather's picture and beg his forgiveness for the first disgrace that's ever come to this name" (*Spring* 54–55).

However, later on, with Heavenly's new suitor, neither womanly decorum nor forbearance restrains Heavenly in any conventionally genteel manner: "[w]hen you're making love to a girl you should always be quiet because there aren't any words good enough to say what you mean anyhow" (141). By contrast, she rejects Dick's offer of marriage in an immature fashion. Williams depicts the conflicting, and decidedly complex, nature of Southern matrimonial traditions in terms of gender politics, while acknowledging that for the men, the satisfaction of their sexual desire carries less blame than it does for the female characters that may indulge in such affairs. On the other hand, Port Tyler's mores call for the censure of female lust in keeping with the traditions of the Old South, where "[c]arnality was presumed to be repulsive to the chaste wife," who ". . . submitted to her husband's embraces without enjoyment, with resignation, if not under protest [because a] lady not only possessed no passions but took no cognizance of them" (Onstott 375).

According to the town gossips (*Spring* 131, 85), what allegedly transpired in the cabin adjacent to the gambling houses and bars on the banks of Moon Lake stands in

stark contrast to the strict mores—and, indubitably, the repressed fantasies—of the matrons at the lawn party. In any case, at the beginning of the play, we suspect that all four lovers, for various reasons, will continue merely to skirt the edges of their small town's society (Friesen 7). For example, Dick and Hertha are relegated to outcast status due to both their poverty and to their eccentricity, Heavenly through her promiscuity, and Arthur through his unmanly shyness (*Spring* 32).

Spring was devastatingly (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xii) rejected for “its strong sexual content” (Curley 234). Williams recalls the criticism from both the workshop's students and Professor Conkle, with whom he otherwise had a good relationship, as a rejection that “struck with particular force” (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xi):

Hardly a favorable comment.—Conkle hesitated when I asked him if it was “worth working on”—and said, “Well, if you've got nothing else”—Yes I was horribly shocked, felt like going off the deep end. Feared that I might lose my mind. I don't believe the play is that bad—its virtues are not apparent on a first reading—but I think it would blossom out on the stage. . . . Of course it is very frightening and discouraging to work on a thing and then have it fall flat.

(Williams, qtd. in Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xi)

Traps and Confinement

Consistent with the Gothic tradition, *Spring* relies for its narrative cohesion on a series of emblematic traps.⁶ Such structural constrictions prevail in cultures undergoing

⁶ Traps which, as Foucault states in *Discipline and Punish*, prisoners conceive of not only as institutional discourse and rules, but also as both impermeable walls and figurative spaces (93).

significant transitions, and thus such cultures cling, all the more desperately, to a “disappearing social coherence” (Lytle 173).

Williams makes reference to domestic entanglements and to the wider context of matrimony, considered here as carceral, or prison-like. Dick shares with Heavenly his jaded view of marriage, citing, as an example, a view that virtually parallels Benjamin Murphy’s humdrum marriage in *Stairs to the Roof*:

HEAVENLY: Oh! You don’t want marriage?

DICK: Not the kind that ties ropes around people . . . Listen to those whistles blowin’. They’re getting’ out now. Pretty soon they’ll be settlin’ down in their overstuffed chairs to look at the evenin’ papers. Gettin’ the news of the day . . . Ain’t that somethin’ for you, you bastards, you poor beer guzzlers. Tomorrow you’ll wake up at half-past six with alarm clocks janglin’ like hell’s own beautiful bells in your ears. The little woman will get her little fat shanks out of bed an’ put on the coffee to boil. At a quarter past seven you’ll kiss her good-bye, you’ll give her a cold, eggy smack on the kisser. She’ll tell you to remember your overshoes. Or to stop at the West End butcher’s for a pound o’ calves’ liver . . . And they call that *livin’* down there.

(*Spring* 15)

The fantasy plays’ humdrum view of traditional marriage contrasts sharply with Dick’s far more vital, racially-integrated depiction of “life on a river barge” (105).

Williams takes up the traditional American Gothic symbolism of both economic and physical entrapment. The confining houses and oppressive gardens in *Spring*

correspond to literary descendent of similar venues in American Gothic narratives, such as Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* (1851). These milieus function to "depict the ambivalence and entangling restriction of family or culture, even as each protects its own" (Weston 95). Arthur, a displaced Southerner returning home from a cultural tour of Europe (*Spring* 32), gets caught up in the double-bind of enclosure and exposure generated by the Port Tyler community, in relation to which he feels disconnected and disdainful: "I get so bored with those people" (23). He clearly grapples with the Gothic "fear of confinement and an equally inhospitable world" (Weston 124). Like a well-to-do Frankenstein's monster, the product of a Southern Gothic nightmare rife with conflicting messages and social impasses, Arthur hopes to escape being persecuted for his perceived crime (*Spring* 146) by fleeing, only to eventually wander among strangers (147).

Blocked Intimacy, Wasted Potential

In Port Tyler, naming an intimate desire or confessing a secret constitutes a dangerous act, as Williams indicates through an ironic treatment of the town's enshrinement of "family honor" (132). The simple act of Hertha and Arthur speaking openly of their feelings for one another takes on a perverse, accusatory tone: "I'll call the police!" (123). While Arthur and Hertha both share similar aesthetic predilections and a transparent intimacy, in accordance with the discreet values of their shared highbrow sensibility—"Stravinsky, Beethoven, Brahms . . . matinees, recitals"—they find that, instead of bringing them closer, the attendant outmoded values of such intellectual pretensions (120), serve only to alienate them from each other, their families, their friends, and the town itself.

When Arthur senses the Storybook Lady's urgent need for human contact, he denies their union in a notably cruel manner. The following agonizing exchange takes place at the town library, after hours:

HERTHA: You kissed me.—It isn't Heavenly Critchfield you're in love with, it's me! Isn't it, Arthur? It's me! [She smiles raptly like a child.]
[Arthur is shocked out of his drunkenness and repelled by his own action and by Hertha's unexpected reaction to it.]

ARTHUR [in confusion]: I didn't know what I was doing. I'm sorry. [He goes back a few steps.] I'd better be going. (123)

Arthur ultimately confirms his own sense of alienation when he leaves Port Tyler in self-imposed exile for "killing" Hertha, admitting that for him, being with strangers effects "a sort of—catharsis" (147).

In this play, as in the overarching fantasy genre, "sexuality appears as an individual's most intimate secret, one that wants to be communicated but is also barred from conscious access" (Mücke 75). As Williams makes clear, passionate expression only disrupts Port Tyler's genteel social veneer. Although Aunt Lila acts as an independent role model for Heavenly, with her own "dividend from the compress stock" to spend any way she wants in her retirement (37), Mrs. Critchfield reveals a familiar form of exasperation—this time toward her own sister-in-law—regarding Lila's failure to marry Arthur's father twenty years before:

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Lila, dear, I want to ask you as a special favor to me to please desist from making those sarcastic remarks about Arthur Shannon and his parents, especially when Heavenly's around.

LILA: Why, I scarcely mention the Shannons! I haven't for twenty years!

(40)

Williams remains wary of granting pat resolutions to the problems posed by his characters' desires. Heavenly's and Hertha's frank expressions of female desire defy the popular dramatization of the topic at the time. Encouraged by Mrs. Critchfield to pursue Arthur instead of Dick, Heavenly discovers with satisfaction that "she doesn't need Dick to pull the trigger of her desire, because desire is located in the body and not in the mystical in-between area of a relationship" (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* xxiv). By allowing the expression of desire both to Hertha and Heavenly—the latter, an openly sexual "little hussy" by Lila's account (*Spring* 147)—Williams dramatizes the predicament of two women confined by social convention, thereby calling into question the problematic social convention of the chaste Southern belle.

In the play, one protagonist often traps or encloses another (Foucault, *Discipline* 93), in a form of carceral—and incarcerating—desire. Either the objectified victim of desire gives in (as Heavenly does), or faces destruction "under the weight of memory and tradition" (Weston 56) as a vestal (*Spring* 63, 144), in Hertha's case. Desire cannot be contained, any more than it can be freely, and lastingly, expressed.

Williams's psychologically crippled, alienated characters often turn to various forms of artistic expression for solace. In an example of wasted potential, Williams renders Aunt Lila's detachment from her family in figurative fashion. She cloisters herself with the family radio to listen and to read the Symbolist poetry of Sara Teasdale:

When I am dead and over me bright April

Shakes out her rain-drenched hair

Though you should lean above me broken-hearted
 I shall not care
 I shall have peace as leafy trees are peaceful
 When rain bends down the bough
 And I shall be more silent and cold-hearted
 Than you are now! (from "April," qtd. in *Spring* 44)

Williams defines Hertha as the "most sensitive and intelligent person in Port Tyler," and a character that possesses an "original mind with a distinct gift for creative work" (*Spring* 21), qualities that serve as liabilities within the stiff cultural confines of this small Delta town. Her obvious talent (25) manifests itself in her extreme sensitivity. She manifests this hypersensitivity in her abhorrence of the music being played at the party, in her avoidance of the jovial crowd at the church picnic, and in her aversion to the librarian's proffered comfort and advice. In true Gothic fashion, *Spring's* artistic protagonists, Arthur and Hertha, exhibit "morbid interiority and aesthetic hypersensitivity" (Mücke 81), in contrast with the mainly exuberant, gregarious, and self-possessed disposition of their childhood friends, Dick and Heavenly. The music from the party poses a threat to Hertha's protective fairy story (*Spring* 24), her mindscape of stories and fancy—"[i]t's the season for green things and frivolity and—" (33)—but it also points to the external world of Port Tyler, with its exacting social standards to which Hertha fails to measure up. However, the artistic inclinations of Aunt Lila, Arthur, and Hertha only seem to dictate the terms of their outcast status ("[y]ou've got a lot of talent and you're wasting it here" [25], Arthur warns Hertha).

As in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Spring* raises disturbingly direct “questions about hearth and home, sex roles, family loyalty, and the power of eros” (Winchell 163).⁷ Williams again prefigures a new mode of American Gothic, but with his own unique psychological elements.

Eros

The statue of Eros situated beside the Lamphreys’ arbor assumes a certain prominence in the iconographic Greek revival décor of the play’s plantation garden, through which Williams references the inevitable perversion that takes place when the planter class seeks to draw upon classical and medieval mythology in order to “defend and validate” a culture “synonymous with [the] slave-owning plantation” (Watson 80).⁸ Williams calls for a new fantasy mythos for the whole human race, rather than for “historically privileged racial or religious community” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Oziewicz 66), for whom an inevitable stroke of doom (*Spring* 135) approaches.

In addressing the play’s mythological background, we note that in passages from Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* pertaining to Eros’s ironically insufficient capacity for desire, Aphrodite’s jealousy of Psyche’s mortal beauty causes her to conspire with Eros, her son, in order to enslave Psyche. Psyche, however, does not resist, although her malicious siblings succeed in sparking her natural curiosity about Eros, a mysterious figure that has yet to reveal to her his divine beauty. While Eros sleeps, Psyche attempts to glean his true

⁷ Albeit with one crucial gender reversal: while Blanche’s young husband commits suicide after she reveals her revulsion, in *Spring* Hertha does so after Arthur expresses the same cruel sentiment (“— you *disgust* me!” [*Spring* 123]).

⁸ Thus, in pointedly associating Jackson, the Lamphreys’ Black servant, with the statue of Eros (*Spring* 82) beneath which he rests, Williams may well have been referencing the immutable legacy of chattel slavery. In fact, the following popular quotation by twentieth-century historian, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, lampoons the pretensions of the planter class. Phillips notes wryly that, on Southern plantations, “Caesar and Cicero were more often the names of Negroes in the yard than of authors on the shelves” (110).

identity and thereby to dispel the mystery of his divine nature. During her attempt to do so, she awakens him to her presence with a drop of hot lamp oil. Although Eros loves the beautiful Psyche, he withdraws from her as punishment for her revelation of his identity. Ultimately, as a result both of a series of heroic actions on Psyche's part—braving as she does Aphrodite's persecution—and the emotional awakening of Eros, they are happily reunited on Olympus. In the case of *Spring*, a kerosene lamp—recalling *Candles*—in the Critchfield family's parlor illuminates unexpected passageways through Williams's drama through its unsteady glimpses into the past, while glimmers of lightning herald a stormy outcome.

Arthur explains that the classical significance of the Little God (95), symbolized by the statue of Eros, owes but little to any of the traditional concepts of love or honor associated with the classical period. On the contrary, Arthur describes Eros as firebreathing (98), and as “cruel—reckless and destructive,” complete with thunderbolts (95): “[p]eople think he's a chubby little fellow with dimples and curly locks—but they're fooling themselves because he's really a monster!” (95). In short, through Arthur, Williams demonstrates the ways in which myths are either inaccurately or reductively interpreted into self-serving alibis. As Simon Goldhill maintains in *Love, Sex and Tragedy*:

The Greek word most often translated as “love” is *eros*. But “desire” is much more accurate in most cases. *Eros* is a passionate attraction for another person . . . not love in a Romantic or Christian sense. In a sexual context, it is most often described as a sickness, a burning and destructive fire, which is not wanted by the sufferer at all. . . . For Aeschylus, the

tragic poet, “*Eros* destroys and perverts all the yoked bonds of society,” and for Sophocles, “*Eros* drags the minds of just men into injustice and destruction” . . . That *Eros* destroys is a general truth which tragedy displays to the citizens of the city. You can cherish “love,” but you should always beware of *eros*. (48–49)

Williams identifies this erotic “love-hatred” (*Spring* 72), which “hails from the pit!” (74), with an element of Gothic, daemonic dread (Buckland, *Fantasy Recovery* 22).

Accordingly, Heavenly transforms into a vampy rebel (*Spring* 94), to whom Arthur delivers his copy of Humphrey Hardcastle’s “Apostrophe for a Dead Lover”—which, to her, “sounds so’t of spooky” (68).

Freud in the 1930s

We must recall that, during the 1920s and 1930s, Freud’s sexual theories were widely considered to be groundbreaking.⁹ Thus, using the statue of Eros, Williams makes an allusion to the currently popular Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations of Greek myth. Williams draws deeply on the psychoanalytic tenets popular during that period. One such tenet holds that if an individual’s unified, human sex drive does not manifest itself in a normal way, then the resultant, inherently chaotic, drives would degenerate into “radical perversion” (Mücke 12). However, in Gothic literature “the dividing line between the normal and the pathological is arbitrary, and most of all an issue of convention” (11). As Louis Althusser posits, it is owing to the construction of a certain

⁹ Interestingly, Chantal Bourgault du Coudray posits that Freud claimed to have discovered “the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied,” but that he credited the poets and the philosophers before him with “discovering the unconscious” (Coudray 94). Even prior to Freud, some people argued that while social Darwinism seemed to “advance notions of the inexorable progress of civilization,” it also implied the “possibility of degeneracy, or atavism; if humanity had evolved from the animal kingdom, it was conceivable that it could regress in the same direction” (Coudray 40).

social order that particular ideological fancies proliferate, wherein “the real relation” invests “in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will (conservative, conformist, reformist, or revolutionary)” (234).

Williams adapts Freudian theories in a surprisingly flexible and innovative way. Like Jean Carr and Mary Anne Ferguson, he questions the Freudian myth of women’s passivity. For traditional Gothic female characters, passivity and acquiescence are tantamount to accepting rape, and to denying their basic need for knowledge (Carr and Ferguson iv).

Despite Freud’s conviction that “biology is destiny”—or, perhaps, because of it—he sought to put to rest the sharp distinction between the “normal and the pathological” (Mücke 12). Freud would later argue that many supposedly perverse features of sexual behavior constitute normal sexual behavior, a notion that led him, ultimately, to dismiss the notion of a unified, normal sexual drive, thereby spawning a theory of traumatic neuroses (Freud, *Civilization* 77). In *Spring*, some of these very symptoms are exhibited and, in some cases, even insightfully recognized, by Williams’s characters. Moreover, the feverish fantasies and neurotic dreams of the characters are shot through with Freudian elements. Both couples in Williams’s star-crossed love quadrangle display a marked familiarity with the instinct for self-destruction, and with the related Freudian jargon (*Spring* 28, 72). In due course, Williams deconstructs the conventional role of the dishonored heroine of the Gothic narrative with a characteristically modern twist and, instead, urgently stresses both Heavenly’s and Hertha’s ambivalent attitude toward the notion of any predetermined biological destiny.

Freud offered the *thanatos* (death) instinct as justification for his theory of female “masochistic repetition compulsion” (*Beyond Pleasure*), a theory that remained popular well into the 1930s. In *The Myth of Women’s Masochism*, Paula J. Caplan parses Freud’s explanation of “instinct”:

People are born with two basic instincts—Eros and Thanatos, or the life and death instincts. Eros includes the energy that drives humans to struggle to survive and reproduce; Thanatos is the drive to return to the previous inanimate state, the state we are in before we are born. Any behavior that seemed to be creative or positive was said to be a manifestation of Eros, and any behavior that seemed self-defeating or self-destructive was said to be the manifestation of Thanatos, a drive—in a sense—toward death. Freud suggested that when people continually put themselves in situations that bring them sorrow and pain, their death instinct is at work. (32)

Fascinatingly, the recurring topic of sublimation in *Spring* often elicits a socially sanctioned form of fetishism that absorbs or substitutes for the initial intensity of experience. Hertha, a painter with a measure of local renown, longs to die from painting in a storm, much like post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne (*Spring* 29). However, she rejects such sublimation outright, readily admitting her “morbid or sordid” fascinations (111), and similar apparitions of supernatural correspondences fade into little more than a topic of conversation: “[s]omebody must be walking over my grave . . .” (57).

Arthur’s hysterical reaction to Hertha’s suicide (145), and his implication of Heavenly in Hertha’s death—“[w]e were inside those boxcars, we were the ones that

killed her” (145)—owes much to Freud’s model of “paranoid symptom formation” (Freud, *Psychoanalytic Notes* 63). For example, with respect to the Heavenly/Arthur/Hertha triangle, as well as to the expression of a combination of love and hatred on the part of diverse characters throughout the play, such as Dick’s tortured display of feelings toward Heavenly and vice versa, the characters repeatedly fail in their attempts to procure a traditional romantic solution through an ineffectually “delusional re-molding of reality” (Freud, *Civilization* 32).

American Gothic Psychology

Instead of relying solely upon the fictive allure of occult sensationalism, Williams selects more basic, earthly elements of the Gothic, such as those associated with complicated love relationships, to convey the less fathomable aspects of human psychology. In Malin’s estimation of the topics common to the American Gothic narrative, “the psyche is more important than society or, if this is a bit extreme [then] the disorder of the buried life must be charted” (5). Similarly, the characters in Williams’s Southern Gothic fantasy must contend not only with intricate cultural and social forces, but also with equally complex human entanglements. Some, like Hertha, succumb to psychological defeat while others, like Heavenly, hope for the best, even when confronted by desolation and loneliness. Heavenly’s insight into, and grasp of, Arthur’s psychology could be considered emblematic of the play’s driving imperative to lay bare often unacknowledged, and even inadmissible, emotional truths:

HEAVENLY: I don’t know anything about Strindberg, but it doesn’t
 sound practical to me . . . You mean you still—?

ARTHUR: Yes. More than ever.

HEAVENLY: [crossing to the sofa]: I don't believe you. What you want is to have your revenge. Once you got me you wouldn't want me anymore. You'd leave me cold. (*Spring* 72)

The play's volatile love quadrangle swiftly implodes with tragic and unexpected consequences, suddenly transforming the "pure" Southern belle into a seductress (5, 146), and injecting an air of hopeless ineffectuality which deflates Arthur's Cavalier image and pretentious familial grooming. Dick, the town's dirt-encrusted underdog, rejects Port Tyler's social conventions (99) by leaving. Hertha, the "dark-haired princess in the magic tower" (24), awakens with a kiss from Arthur, only to submit to a horrific death. Such inversions, however, coming from the pen of a playwright like Williams, produce little surprise, for he displays a virtuosic ability to attend to modern Gothic's serious aim; namely, as Judith Wilt argues in *Ghosts of the Gothic*,

to remind those caught in its plots of larger powers, of finer transmutations located in places outside—or inside—the scope of everyday life, located in places apparently abandoned but secretly tenanted, places apparently blank but secretly full of signals. (295)

For example, Williams links Arthur's psychological makeup to his socially traumatizing experiences within Port Tyler, and to his studies at Oxford and the wide spectrum of literature and the arts (*Spring* 120) to which he received exposure. Despite his background, however, Arthur finds himself unable to effectively express basic desires: "and me with my intellectual pretensions, my fancy education, and my father's money—what did I get?" (120). On the other hand, rather than acting as a catalyst to her

daughter's self-actualization, the play's Terrible Mother, Mrs. Critchfield, curtails it (Weston 179).

Bodily Functions and the Grotesque

A sense of systematic degradation and chaos, and the effect of myriad forms of entropy, permeate the entire play, while touches of tragicomic dialogue mark the conclusion of each scene (six in total). The characters often express themselves in passages of morbid humor—“[i]f you caught your death of cold the kiddies would blame it on me—they'd say I killed their Storybook Lady” (*Spring* 29)—even as they engage in physical confrontations such as slapping and grabbing (19, 137) each other.

Like that of modern supernatural horror, the grotesque mode “had its beginning in Gothic fiction” (Weston 62). Williams makes use of the informing concept of the grotesque and the criteria of the Gothic to dramatize the dominant tendencies within the human character, and takes up a mode generally associated historically with the American Gothic and, therefore, with the Southern Gothic as well (Wilt 15). Sherwood Anderson was the first to exemplify the grotesque or damaging effect upon the human psyche, not only of social pressures but also of the motivations, individual compulsions, and truths of each protagonist, in the first chapter of *Winesburg, Ohio*, entitled “The Book of the Grotesque,” a compendium of psychological portraits.

Traditional American Gothic narratives often focus on both psychologically and physically grotesque characters, although individual writers depict such crippling afflictions in myriad ways. In *Spring*, Heavenly and Hertha manifest typically grotesque compulsions as a result of their shared instinct for self-destruction (*Spring* 93). In a startling turn, Heavenly comes to embody the fate that she fears most after Hertha's

death, while Mrs. Critchfield, Mrs. Lamphrey, and even the “dumpy” Mrs. Asbury (13), clearly exhibit a “grotesque” form of self-interest, nepotism, or narcissism (Malin 20), which distorts their perceptions.

In a scene consistent with the fantastic grotesquerie of Williams’s brand of Southern Gothic, we note that the nude statue of Eros presides ironically over the Lamphreys’ lawn party, a constant reminder of an essential part of imagery representing the functions of the human body, especially those of the “lower body stratum” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 153). Chiefly, Williams reinforces this pattern throughout the play—“Dr. Gray . . . never says anything except, ‘How’s your bowels!’” (*Spring* 59)—and he does so, once again, during the indulgent festivities on the Lamphreys’ lawn.

In another example, Williams connects bodily functions and supernatural curses. Despite Oliver Critchfield’s indigestion or nervous stomach (58)—repeatedly referred to as the “curse of the Critchfields” (56, 76)—he enjoys drinking whiskey with his daughter, Heavenly. By contrast, Hertha’s seemingly playful abuses and curses initially display a pagan aspect (confirming her membership in a “weird sisterhood” [33]). However, her oaths finally play a significant role in reinforcing her struggle against cosmic terrors (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 352), such as mortality, during her frustrated quest for an intensity of experience (Rutland 4). Hertha also focuses repeatedly on disconcerting and unconventional topics, such as mockery (*Spring* 33) and madness (123). With the use of imagery depicting various forms of gluttony—“[s]he needs to run some a’ the lard off that carcass of hers” (14)—including those of excessive drinking, and persistent thirst (87), Williams renders grotesque the various bodily functions (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 281). Finally, Hertha becomes grotesquely transformed into an emblem of dismemberment,

crushed—like Saint Catherine of Alexandria, one might say—under the wheels of “fifty-seven boxcars” (*Spring* 144).

Religious Symbolism

In his influential essay, “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien identifies escape as a psychological strategy on the part of the reader. In *Spring*, the characters longing for escape express their desire for a return to humanity’s intended status in Paradise with all that this involves, including immortality, which Tolkien deems “our oldest and deepest desire” (67). The effect is similar to that of catharsis, an effect that fairy tales allegedly have on children (Puschmann-Nalenz 162).

Eschewing dogma, Williams explores instead his concern with the symbolism of religious orthodoxy, a concern that would later preoccupy Southern authors such as Flannery O’Connor and Allen Tate. In *Spring* he breaks new ground with a female embodiment of Christ, martyred when the young librarian/professional storyteller rejects the dismal, unromantic fate of the spinster, after Arthur cruelly rejects her:

HERTHA [blind with inner brightness]: Arthur! Now I can tell you!—I love you! I love you. So much that I’ve nearly gone mad! Oh God, why didn’t you know? Why didn’t you know? [Slowly she extends her hand toward the shaded light on the table.] Arthur! Take me out of here, Arthur, some place where we can be together. [She turns the light off].

ARTHUR [Moving away from her]: No, I don’t want you, Hertha.

HERTHA: Arthur! (*Spring* 123).

Williams makes use of Christian imagery “primarily to demonstrate its importance as a ritual deeply affecting the actions of his characters” (Young 135). He makes further use of biblical symbolism when Dick seeks, like an errant Moses figure, to part, or to catch and tame (*Spring* 102) the high waters of the Mississippi River, here a yellow sea beneath an amber sky (27). Hertha’s attack upon the social hierarchy also takes into account questions both of religious hypocrisy and the injustice of being created unequal in the beauty stakes:

HERTHA: [She presses her hands to her temples.] Why doesn’t God have a little mercy on people like me? You go to church, Miss Schlagmann, you teach Sunday school. You ought to know. Why doesn’t God have a little mercy on people like me? Ask Him that the next time you go to St. George’s. Tell him He shouldn’t give homely girls the same feelings that He gives the pretty ones. Tell Him that. Tell Him that it isn’t fair to let the homely girls fall in love with men that don’t care!

(115)

Hertha’s forlorn complaints are not simply self-pitying. In fact, Williams stakes an entire Southern code of manners, beauty, and decorum upon her suffering (116).¹⁰ He demonstrates that a bitter Hertha refuses to settle for the sublimation (116) integral to the old maid (114) existence that inevitably awaits her. She rejects the sublimated life modeled for her by Miss Schlagmann and refuses to cling to any substitute for a meaningful relationship. In a bizarre turn, Miss Schlagmann attempts to bolster Hertha by

¹⁰ Incidentally, her remarks seem to anticipate Kenneth Burke’s denunciation of the negative effects of white Southerners’ adherence to “the incentives of organization and status” that arise from the “cult of good manners and humility” and that, in turn, spawn “secular analogues of ‘original sin’”: “to the extent that a social structure becomes differentiated, with privileges, to some that are denied to others, there are the conditions for a kind of ‘built in’ pride” (Burke 70).

comparing Hertha's trials to Christ's: "He went through moments like these that you're going through—when He suffered and doubted and—prepared His soul for climbing up that hill and being nailed on a cross between two thieves!" (116).¹¹ In this bathetic comparison, Hertha assumes the role of a false Christ, an innovative move on the part of Williams in an era of evangelical revivalism heralded by the Fundamentalists at Bob Jones University (Sherill 218).

To this end, Williams emphasizes the desolation of the lifeless, darkened trees as they emblemize Hertha's barren fate: "[s]he . . . stood between the two dead trees and said she was one of them now" (*Spring* 121). Unfortunately for Hertha, she is now, figuratively speaking, dead wood in Port Tyler. In a sketch based on the Golgotha Scene at the end of act 1 (Williams, qtd. in Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* viii), Williams concretizes Hertha's inner turmoil by recasting this female character in the traditionally masculine role of the Golgotha sacrifice (*Spring* 116), thereby heightening the painfully stigmatizing effect of Hertha's "magenta-streaked" (27) passion. He heightens the illusion of inevitability even further by alluding to the passing of wild geese:

[If possible a faint honking should be heard as the geese pass over.]

HERTHA: They're going up north to the lakes—Why don't they take me with them?] (28)

What Burke identifies as the Southern principle of unobtainable perfection (entelechy), Williams evidently establishes as having been harmfully internalized by the sensitive and intelligent Hertha (21). Compulsively, she seeks Paradise (26), despite

¹¹ Coincidentally, Malin observes that, in the American Gothic that emerged in the 1960s, "the Christ-figure . . . plays a significant part" (Malin 33).

Williams's demonstration that "such efforts at perfection might cause the unconscious striver great suffering" (Burke 70):

HERTHA: I want to reach the top [of the bluffs] . . . I'm going to wait till [the sky is] just the right color and then I'm going to go up the rest of the way—and then you'll probably hear me shouting "hello" to God! I hate living on a flat surface. . . . You don't know how bad it is until you get up on a high place like this and see how your spirit expands. . . . Don't you see how it's filling up the whole sky?

(*Spring* 22)

In *Spring*, Williams details the pervasive and harmful effects of social stratification in the Delta barely seventy years after the Civil War. He acknowledges the disturbing reality of social, racial, and gender inequity in the South; in fact, the oppressive hierarchy of Southern life becomes the playwright's principal subject (King 635). Later Southern Gothic writers would mine such sensational topics as extreme morbidity, or even sexual sadism. For example, Heavenly's encouragement to Arthur to get drunk points in the direction of the increasingly sadistic manifestations of destruction (*Spring* 95) that would mark later incarnations of American Gothic narratives. Yet, in *Spring*, he moves beyond pure sensationalism to challenge traditional mores, by demonstrating how generalizations about both sexuality and racism withstand even rational, unbiased forms of moral inquiry (Kant 5).

With his apprentice plays, Williams began what would become a sustained commitment to the attack of racism, first, by voicing his "views against prejudice, frequently and consistently" (Kolin, *Civil Rights* 3) and, second, by dramatizing the

struggles of the Black characters in his plays. Black servants in Williams's drama, including *Spring*, often "morally surpass a dominant, corrupt white establishment" (3). Williams shows how the Black characters face oppression as a result of a belief on the part of the white establishment that they live "closest to nature" and, hence, are less civilized (Yacowar 4). This perception is reflected in Mrs. Lamphreys' shrill call to Jackson to "[w]ake up!" from his slumber beside the harbour (*Spring* 82). It is also reflected in Dick's racial characterization of "life on a river barge" (105), and in Heavenly's racially arrogant derogation of the Black experience.

Ironically, when Heavenly attempts unsuccessfully to dominate Dick in act 3, scene 2, she prevails upon Jackson to give her some whiskey, an act that eventually contributes to her ostracism. Williams parodies the demands of the elites in his use of Freudian parapraxes (slips of the tongue), as when, borrowing Jackson's vernacular, Mrs. Lamphrey gives "obstructions" (*Spring* 87) instead of "instructions." Williams expressly links the reality of Black obstruction and repression to the injustice of hierarchical domination.

The use of racial slurs clearly exposes the social pretensions of Heavenly, Mrs. Critchfield, and Mrs. Lamphrey. However, in a somewhat humiliating scene, a distraught Heavenly wrests the whiskey bottle (87) from Jackson, the Lamphrey family's Black servant, saying "I'll do the mixing myself, you might put in too much" (87). Here Williams counters the fantasy text's typical characterization of the female protagonist, in general, and of the Gothic heroine, in particular, as "characterized by her passivity" (Stockton 13), despite the fact that the institution of slavery remains "inextricably linked to the South's view of women as pliant and submissive creatures" (Watson 86).

Of even greater significance, Williams's emphatically Southern mythological subtext of enchanted debutante balls and the rise of noble Cavaliers traces its referents to the legacy of slavery, and to its insidious ideological counterpart, white supremacy, thereby resulting in a grotesque cocktail of jealousy, sexual rivalry, and betrayal, over which preside the stately ghosts and witches of a spectral aristocracy. Jackson and Heavenly are assigned the task of being equally "in charge of the punch," as decreed by the Lamphreys (*Spring* 88). As such, these two characters mutually embody forms of material wealth in the planter economy: Heavenly finds herself thoroughly objectified, as the beautiful young socialite courted by the party's guest of honor and two other beaux, while Jackson's attendance suggests the Lamphreys' upper class status, as his subjugation remains crucial both to the Lamphreys' identity and to "the triumph and justification of their history" (Lipsitz 218). Perhaps for this reason, Ozzie, who works as a maid for the lower-class Critchfields, offers only a "yes'm" and remains offstage in the dining room and the kitchen, although we hear her startled outcry before a crash of broken china (*Spring* 57). As Isaac asserts, "Mrs. Critchfield once refers contemptuously to Dick Miles as 'that triflin' boy,'—a verbal device for transforming him into a 'white nigger'" (*Introduction, Spring* 1999, xxii), given that Mrs. Critchfield has also referred to Ozzie, as a "trifling nigger" when Ozzie breaks the china (*Spring* 57).

Here, Williams' satirizes how the social system not only degrades Jackson, the Lamphreys' "white-coated Negro servant" (82), but also, in turn, the play's white characters. As the presumed property of the town's elites, Jackson functions as a symbol of racial stratification and an ornamental (10) marker of status (much like the statue of Eros above the fountain). Thus, the tableau of the Black servant "asleep, seated directly

beneath the statue of Eros” (82) in the darkened garden encapsulates not only the subject of Gothic entrapment but also references the historical reality of slavery in the South. A further suggestion of oppression and objectification rests in the cold stone statue, as an unyielding embodiment of male beauty and an aesthetic holdover that suggests the Gothic revival architecture associated with the Old South of gentility and slavery.

Heavenly’s threat to Jackson, made to discourage the latter from “snitching”—“I’ll get Dick Miles to skin you alive!” (88)—evokes the more sinister aspects of Black domestic servitude in the American South during the Depression. Conversely, Dick freely flees the offer of white collar employment in the cotton office offered by Oliver, Heavenly’s father—“Mr. Kramer’s promised him something” (47)—since for him, it amounts to indentured servitude.

Throughout *Spring*, Williams plays with the gendered hierarchy that was “inextricably linked to the South’s view of women as pliant and submissive creatures” (Watson 86), a view that was also “linked to the region’s obsession with the southern belle’s sexual purity,” even as the so-called threat of miscegenation “made it necessary for the region to trumpet ever more insistently the idea of racial purity, a purity symbolized by the untainted southern lady” (86).

The Morbidity of the Gothic Setting

Williams’s Gothic subject matter often shocks and horrifies, and not for the traditionally supernatural reasons, but rather due to the distinctly Southern social conventions and myths that he explores, which oppose or block the protagonists’ private plans and fantasies. A shared, even communal, desire for a sense of belonging serves as the chief catalyst of the action in *Spring*. For example, instead of acting as a collectively

pathological agent with a villainous, overtly xenophobic agenda to destroy the ostensible upstarts (Malin 161), the community of Port Tyler moves to expel those selected protagonists deemed offensive through gossip (*Spring* 41, 59, 73, 83, 131), ridicule (33, 69), and ostracism (94).

Williams endows the Deep South in *Spring Storm* with a specific measure of Gothic space by assigning Port Tyler the marginality of a borderland, a gray area between imagination and actuality. He echoes this fantastic sense of exile by populating the town with ambiguous and often indistinctly portrayed characters, sometimes presented, like the grotesques in Sherwood Anderson's short story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), as shadowy (*Spring* 97) caricatures of their former selves. The play's characters encounter personal, seemingly ever-present threats to their values, to their standards of living and to their peace of mind.

Furthermore, Williams sets the stage for betrayal on the Lamphreys' lawn, while the well-to-do social set comprising Port Tyler's matronly gossips agree, almost unanimously, upon Heavenly's ostracism as a form of punishment for her open sexuality. Thus, we see how the concept of the extended family of the community at large as a conscious agent of social coercion, realized here by Williams so graphically, "is validated in southern literature by the many communal representations of point of view" (Weston 113). At the end of the Depression, as the sounds of war grew, "the fascist menace had suddenly become as much a threat from without as within," while Roosevelt sought to maintain "standards of conduct helpful to the ultimate goal of general peace" with the live broadcast of his fireside chats (Leverich 269). Public radio still offered its customary comedy hours and Sunday-night sermons, but it also was beginning to play "the dominant

role in the new war of nerves: the tense, elliptical broadcastings of CBS commentator H. V. Kaltenborn, in particular, transfixed the listener,” according to Leverich (269). As Tom Wolfe has observed, all the “cultural notions of the South are confined to . . . the Sunday radio” (Wolfe 106). In this incidental respect, Aunt Lila’s obsessive radio fandom illustrates Waldo W. Braden’s theory that Southern orality is based not only on Southerners’ oral tradition, but on their many experiences as radio listeners (Braden 11–12).

In *Spring*, Dick reports the news of the approaching war, while Aunt Lila gets her “emotional workouts” from the Village Rhymester radio show (*Spring* 44). Mrs. Critchfield hopes to contain Heavenly’s rebelliousness within the social parameters of Port Tyler, and relies on conventional methods to do so, despite her repeated attacks upon Lila in the older woman’s capacity as a good listener:

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: . . . You practically never go out of the house anymore. All you know is what Agnes Peabody tells you over the phone . . . What is that sob-stuff you’re listening to? . . . Please use the earphones! [She switches off the radio.] Sentimentality is something that turns my stomach. (38, 44)

Spring centers upon domestic rituals while yet incorporating Gothic settings in which occur complexly intertwined relationships, sometimes linked, albeit morbidly, with prominent figures from the past. In one respect or another, all of *Spring*’s characters must confront the Port Tyler community’s “double-edged power”—to “ignore and to know all” (Weston 125) while within the city limits of a community that extracts punishment from

its citizens based on the defiance of its mores, a community that is unforgiving both of defiance and rejection.

A few of the play's female characters seek fulfillment outside Port Tyler's traditionally Gothic, domestic, and cloistered environment, finding solace in whatever limited outlets the community offers them. Through her compulsive storytelling, Hertha represents a link between a "tradition of intellectual knowledge" (Weston 142) and the students that attend her performances at various schools. That Hertha, in death, should be relieved of her mundane, almost perfunctory, persona—newly empowered as it is in Arthur's fantastic imaginings—owes much to *Spring*'s use of Gothic literary conventions which alternately question and circumscribe the autonomy of its female characters. Williams grants a measure of potency to Hertha's curse through her "designation as an enigmatic persona who is also an instructor" (141), and to her allusions to magic towers (*Spring* 24, 144) and weird sisters (24).

Williams imbues his Delta town with an innovative twist on the "moonlight-and-magnolia" (Watson 5) mythic narrative of "southern chivalry" (*Spring* 64, 119), and he gives the play a decidedly modernist ending that is both ambiguous and ambivalent. In a similar vein of grotesquerie, Williams presents a microcosmic view of larger cultural relationships through which to carry out experiments in the techniques of modern drama. These include the judicious integration of emotionally-charged narrative vignettes, which, in turn, serve to dramatize a domestic and social setting, couched in the familiar Williams ambivalence, as a wilderness that both nurtures and is "society's most basic instrument for imposing closure on its individual freedoms and narrative control of an individual's own story" (Porte xviii).

Family

Williams develops a set of conflicting romantic and familial relationships that challenge some of the key facets of Port Tyler's traditionally Southern, hierarchical social structure. The primary conflict sets Heavenly against Mrs. Critchfield, with the headstrong and rebellious daughter adamantly resisting her mother's attempts at to indoctrinate her into an acceptance of the pretensions associated with Southern honor. Heavenly opposes her mother's decree that she marry the rich and high-born Arthur in order to save her "secondhand" (*Spring* 53, 141) reputation while, at the same time, redressing the family's "desperate" financial situation (83). Not only is the play's most representative Southern belle not so "heavenly" as her name would suggest, but she pushes Hertha, her rival in love for Arthur, to self-destruction with the aid of the oppressive weight of gendered codes that promise scant prospects of happiness for women in the South.

The play's initial conflict stems from Dick's perceived unsuitability as a match for Heavenly. Dick proves himself as a loving, honorable, and even ardent suitor for Heavenly's hand in marriage, but his lack of both "ancestral" (102) and financial qualifications places him at a disadvantage. Both his family background and job prospects prevent the Critchfields, the Shannons, and the Lamphreys from acknowledging him as suitably honorable and courageous. In addition, Mrs. Critchfield fears that her daughter will mix the family's "fine" blood with Dick's "ditchwater" (49) genetic pool. Her concerns echo in the class divisions that, to her, noticeably debase and marginalize poor whites, such as Dick and Hertha's father, widely considered either

uneducated, lazy, or even degenerate (Watson 28), as she proceeds to characterize Dick as “[o]ne of those congenital loafers” (*Spring* 41).

Clearly, Williams emphasizes the town’s social divisions across rigidly stratified class lines, with Blacks comprising a perceptibly defined, altogether separate, caste—a caste which Heavenly fears joining but with which Dick remains tangentially associated—and thus, Williams demonstrates that if the “Southern dream of hierarchy and order failed to satisfy disenfranchised women and blacks, it also failed . . . young males like the artist himself” (King 643).

However, both Hertha and Heavenly internalize Port Tyler’s bigoted mentality. Hertha’s suicide “saves” her from a humiliating fate as the outcast “old maid” (*Spring* 53, 66, 115), for she is clearly incapable of taking Miss Schlagmann’s advice about surviving “emotional crises”: “[y]ou’d better take a week off” (114, 116). Both Heavenly and Hertha live in dread of spinsterhood and thus, by social definition, ostracism. Williams euphemizes Hertha’s “bad” blood in *Spring* to delineate ties of kinship, to anticipate the social rupture that such “bad” genealogies bring about (147), and to emphasize the hereditary ties that inextricably bind Heavenly to her family, and to their Confederate past.

The heirloom portrait of Colonel Wayne develops into a symbolic stand-in for a fifth, ever-present, family member, as well as a key figure in the transition from the antebellum model of order. Williams leads the audience to wonder whether this familial legacy of honor will somehow save Heavenly, despite her “fallen” state, brought about by the loss of her chastity. Williams also explores the implications of the New South’s model of outmoded honor through the pall of Hertha’s suicide and Heavenly’s ostracism,

while Heavenly's femininity carries all the force of a "natural yet highly developed" instinct (5). However, unlike pure animal instinct, material and financial concerns temper Heavenly's desire. Her substitution of Arthur for Dick points to her capacity for emotional opportunism. Heavenly's fluctuating and flighty desire becomes the driving force that defines her as an individual.

Like Port Tyler's forbidding natural landscape and inscrutable familial relationships, the Critchfield family home, haunted as it is by the spirit of the Confederate dead, confounds both Mrs. Critchfield and Arthur alike, as they both search vainly for Heavenly, although she has already left to meet Dick: "Heavenly, dear . . . [w]here are you dear?" (76). The front porch of the Critchfield home, once the threshold to another world, turns, instead, into a dead end. This, at least as far as Heavenly's social life is concerned, for it is the place where she decisively loses Arthur and ends up staring blankly into a rather desolate future.

The spatial delineation of human limitations and of entrapment includes atmospheric effects often associated, in the Southern Gothic fantasy, with the legacy of slavery and racism. Williams differs from the European tradition in that he discards the external Gothic paraphernalia, most notably the architecture and environments, although he suggests such architecture in stage directions which call for the "Gothic outline of a university quadrangle" and that of a "Gothic archway" (*Stairs* 31, 32) in *Stairs*, and with the description of the Carnegie Public Library, the barren bluffs, the sinister Devil's Icebox grotto, and the statue of Eros enclosed in the deserted arbour in *Spring*. Yet Williams continues to explore the far-reaching implications of unfolding sexual entanglements by noting their effects on each protagonist's struggle for identity and

independence. At a symbolic level, he registers such interactions with the natural landscapes in which they occur.

To situate his heavily plotted sexual entanglements, Williams chooses modern American settings. In linking the Gothic narrative penchant for the exploration of such intersecting topics as gender, deviance, and power to the settings and conventions characteristic of the American Gothic, Williams succeeds in creating innovative narrative patterns. Williams's fantasy plays do not simply add on Gothic effects. Rather, he transplants traditional Gothic imagery into an American geographic and historical locale, so as to frame and to thereby contextualize the play's dramatic space.

Perhaps Williams makes the greatest use of Gothic conventions in creating the play's settings. Primarily, in his affinity for place, thoroughly explored in a recent study by Holditch and Leavitt (27), he frequently recreates special Gothic effects. Through these Gothic spaces and through Williams's integration of his Expressionistic staging devices into the action, such as the use of the spinning cyclorama at significant moments in the play, Williams continually modifies the conventions of European Gothic (Weston 3) for American drama. The intimidating and disorienting weirdness of the bluffs and the hypnotic lure of the tourist cabins at Moon Lake (*Spring* 92) hint at the human and moral limitations of his characters, as well as the suffering and emotional bondage of love and desire (Weston 9).

The Carnegie Library

The Gothic setting of the Carnegie Library, with its private nooks where lovers go to "neck" (*Spring* 113), metamorphoses into the stifling locus of Hertha's incarceration. As Nina Auerbach has shown in her study of Victorian fantasy, some instances of Gothic

terror are based upon “the institutionalization of mediocrity, a tyranny of the normal” (20). This same tyranny oppresses Hertha, and it manifests itself physically when she finds herself trapped in the library, unable to attend the garden party, and when the kissing couple taunts her:

[Hertha opens the book—Music comes through the opened windows from the Lamphreys’ party. Hertha closes the book, rises quickly and shuts the windows. She returns slowly to the desk. After a moment, Miss Schlagmann comes out of the door marked “Stacks.”]

(*Spring* 110)

The Bluffs

Even as an apprentice playwright, Williams makes use of typological references in a fluid, unmapped manner that continues to resonate through an otherworldly affect of evocation and suggestion. For example, in *Spring’s* Golgotha scenes, Williams uses the natural Gothic setting to “suggest dark undertones of meaning . . . a landscape of nightmare . . . an allegory of horror, where the meaning of events is inscrutable” (Porte 30). At the edge of both realms—on Moon Lake and upon the Golgotha bluffs—Williams blurs the border between comfort and terror. From the moment that Hertha urges Arthur to join her ascent, and up to the moment that they cross over into an apparently otherworldly limbo atop the cliff, the pair confronts a spirit-expanding vista (*Spring* 22), which transforms into a third character attending ominously upon them.

As Holditch and Leavitt indicate, Williams’s native region of Clarksdale boasts a unique part of Mississippi’s terrain, dominated by a ridge overhung by rocky bluffs. Likewise, the dark, isolated natural projections above Port Tyler serve as the dramatic

middle ground between the conventions of the town and the freedom symbolized by the Mississippi wetlands, as Williams indicates when, in the first scene, both couples desert the church picnic. Also, Williams initially depicts the bluffs as the site of Heavenly's sexual temptation and subsequent fall from social grace.

Williams contrasts Arthur and Hertha's physically dangerous, isolated location—" [w]e'd better get down from here before we're blown down" (29)—with Dick and Heavenly's more idyllic trysting place, a cabin on Moon Lake, "where all dreams begin and are shattered in Williams's plays" (Pease 839). Heavenly and Dick, the play's primary couple, clearly assume their title in terms of the local social standards of the parochial Delta town: "[g]oodness, you are the exclusive Mr. Somebody!" (*Spring* 17). Moreover, Dick continues to be the object of Arthur's envy, just as Heavenly continues to block Hertha. Certainly, Williams sets the couples up for comparison throughout the play, even to the point of doubling the images of Arthur and Heavenly before the Critchfields' mirror. Here, once again, Arthur becomes the butt of Heavenly's ongoing scorn:

ARTHUR [sharply]: Why are you laughing at me?

HEAVENLY: I wasn't.

ARTHUR: You were—I could see you in the mirror. (69)

By contrast, having escaped to a fantastic outpost that resonates strongly with their raw emotional state, the characters in the secondary couple alternate in their exchanges between the light-hearted discourse of childhood and the euphoria of young adulthood. On the barren hillside overlooking the river (27), they join together in laughter:

[Arthur joins her above. The wind rises and blows her hair loose. They both point at things in the distance, talking and laughing, but the wind drowns their voices.] (28)

The virtual wasteland expressed by this bleak locale predicts the imminent emotional wasteland of the pair's relationship. Here, both protagonists confuse a vision of reality with what issues forth from their own imaginations. Hertha, for example, describes her spirit as "filling up the whole sky," while Arthur compares the sky to a pyrotechnical display that rivals "July 14th at Versailles!" (23). Williams takes pains to closely link the characters' emotions with the environment in which they find themselves. To illustrate, Hertha climbs to a great height, and Williams frames her diminutive figure against the hillside:

[She climbs slowly up the hillside, Arthur remaining below. When she reaches the top, she stands there silently, silhouetted between the two dead trees. It has grown almost dark except for the magenta streaks of color in the fading sunset. The wind is beginning to rise, and there is a fitful glimmer of lightning.] (27)

A Landscape of Inner Turmoil

In *Spring's* staging directions, Williams uses the Gothic convention of an unstable, symbolic landscape that typically reflects the protagonists' inner states. He intensifies the oppressive atmosphere of such dark (29), isolated Gothic spaces as Lover's Leap (5) and the garden of Eros (82) through the use of ominous sound and lighting effects. The wind drowns the lovers' voices (28), and the lightning punctuates their cries. Even as Hertha claims to have met God—"he doesn't use any words, just a lot of

beautiful gestures that I don't understand" (27)—she meditates morbidly upon her own death by exposure, pronouncing it “the noblest death I ever heard of” (9). Williams draws on a number of static images to reflect the sense of inner sterility that Hertha experiences prior to submitting to a Freudian “instinct for self-destruction” (93), a suicidal act for which “even natural elements are lifeless” (Malin 19).

In contrast to the lyric poetry admired by Aunt Lila and Arthur that praises the beauty of nature with harmonious subjectivity, Williams's aesthetic effects express the inner turmoil of the protagonists. He adapts various Gothic image patterns designed to reflect the loneliness of characters bewildered by an apparently unreal world, as well as by their own inscrutable, “frightening mazes of feeling” (*Spring* 53). He surrounds the action of the Golgotha Scene with rocky crags, glimmers of lightning (27), and flora that includes two leafless trees in twisted silhouette (5), thereby partially obscuring intense streaks of magenta on the darkening horizon (27). In short, Williams's Southern Gothic vision contrasts sharply with the fairy tale fantasy of an enchanted woodland idyll (Mücke 66). Through positioning Hertha “between the two dead trees [since] she was one of them now” (*Spring* 145), Williams blurs the border between death and the afterlife so as to “court mystery and the metaphysical” (Weston 53). Thus does Arthur's warning to Hertha—“[y]ou sound like Mme. Du Barry at the foot of the guillotine” (*Spring* 30)—take on prophetic significance.

Interestingly, in an introduction to Collier's 1962 edition of Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*, editor Richard Harter Fogle provides an analysis of the traditionally Gothic intellectualization of setting, which reveals distinct patterns of natural and architectural symbolism (6). Furthermore, he traces the way in which Gothic iconography

functions as part of a cohesive design which often constitutes an additional, if symbolic, character, registered in the setting.

In terms of staging, Williams reveals the significance of figurative blocking through his repeated use of both a structural pattern and a topographic symbolism, thereby extending the concept of setting to that of an inner, mental landscape. The play's dusky (*Spring* 19) equivalent of Lover's Leap, where Heavenly slaps Dick and Hertha pantomimes her own crucifixion, despite, or perhaps because of, her Vestal (121, 144) status, reproduces a corresponding emotion reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's objective correlative technique, and that "penetrates their mood" (19). For example, according to the play's stage directions, Arthur, recoils from the play's symbolically infernal equivalent of Golgotha, and instinctively moves to protect Hertha:

[He jumps to the lower level, catches her, waits and lifts her down with him. They descend to a lower level and seat themselves on the rocks. Arthur wraps his coat carefully around her. She looks at him silently—the wind falls.] (29)

We soon learn, however, that Arthur has "always run away from things that [he] wanted" (98), ensuring us that the relationship will end in disaster. Fittingly, while the couples struggle to connect with one another, they are interrupted by fat (14, 17), sloppy Port Tylerites (13)—Susan Lamphrey and Mrs. Asbury, among others—in search of picnickers who may have ventured off to explore the Devil's Icebox grotto (14).

Not a Garden of Eden

Williams alludes to ancient, pagan mythologies, as well as to the Christian tradition of the mystery play. He invokes both sacrificial and redemptive imagery by

setting the play just prior to the Lenten Holy Week (116), when sexual intercourse was traditionally discouraged, thereby corresponding to the young lovers' dark and intertwined psychological—if not altogether physical—torment. Through “the profusion of symbolic or allegorical figures and the blending of pagan and Christian stories” (King 642), Williams introduces topics of madness (*Spring* 123), dementia (114), emotional crisis (116), through topics that he pointedly refers to as various forms of “psychological business” (72).

Williams emphasizes the threat of the “vast, ungovernable forces of human existence in the world [such as] consciousness of time and mortality” (Rubin, *Writers* 136) and, by associating Hertha's suicide with the martyrdom of Christ, he evokes these forces in ritualistic fashion, as evinced by her ultimate sublimation, suffering, and sacrifice (*Spring* 116). Moreover, when Hertha curses the town, her admission of kinship with the trees—“I used to call them two weird sisters” (33)—suggests another relationship with a forbidden tree: as an antithetical “Eve,” the withered trees both symbolize and anticipate the colossal tragedy associated with Hertha's abortive desire for autonomy, and with the satisfaction of her fantasies. Also, as if to point up Hertha's hubristic fantasies, Aunt Lila reminds us that “only God can make a tree” (48). The “feverish animation and cleverness” (21) that fires Hertha's typically outspoken quest for the Gothic female protagonist's “intensity of experience”—as Frye describes it in his study of “Henry James and the Comedy of the Occult”—makes fantasy far more attractive to her than the drab and unredeemed reality of her experience:

HERTHA: Sometimes I wonder if anybody's ever gone anyplace—or do we always just go back to where we started?—I guess there's

something significant about the fact that the world is round and all of the planets are round and all of them are going round and round the sun! [She laughs.] The whole damned universe seems laid out on a more or less elliptical plan. [She rises.] But I can't get used to it, Arthur. I can't adjust myself to it like you're doing—[She gropes for words.] (26)

The Mississippi Delta

Williams's use of "borderline" locales lends itself to Mississippi's Delta wetlands, where many significant historical events took place (O'Connor, *Living* 101). He adapts a notably Gothic aspect in his development of the American Southern narrative as an exotic, yet also universal, setting, which heightens suspense, while the characters stolidly endure their confinement. He makes use of such types of settings throughout his catalogue of dramatic work. In fact, Holditch and Leavitt emphasize the significance of Williams's recourse to the isolated geographical settings of the Deep South:

One significant element of the Delta is the fact that it is something of an island, separated from the rest of Mississippi and the South not only by its strange topography but also by the insular and often superior attitude of the residents, so much so that David L. Cohn once described it as "a strange and detached fragment thrown off by the whirling comet that is America." Even now, Mississippians from the hill country or the prairie land to the east or the Gulf Coast to the south speak of going "*into* the Delta," suggesting, as James C. Cobb says, that they are travelling not only in *space* but also in *time* to what is essentially another world. (28)

In *Spring*, Williams aims to reflect the collective Southern experience at a turning point in the history of the United States. The Agrarians mourned the South's passing in the 1930s, while the planter, the belle, the Confederate veteran, the poor whites, the oppressed Blacks, and other assorted mythic figures were revived in a few films and plays of the 1930s to communicate "the essence of certain perceptions and beliefs about Southern society and to establish the distinctive features of the culture" (S. A. Smith 97). Smith contends that "the nation has come to 'understand' the South and Southerners" (97) through such stereotypes.

While presenting these so-called mythical associations intact, Williams interweaves them with darker associations that obscure, or even contradict, the claims made on their behalf. Like the insular Gothic American towns of New England, the relatively isolated topography of the Delta River country elicits both inward-looking and puritanical associations (*Spring* 31). Fascinatingly, both regions are possessed of particularly "lively historical spirits" (Weston 51), but the Delta's antebellum legacy overshadows (*Spring* 97) the "charming . . . stories" (13) associated with Mississippi's eighteenth-century history as an untamed Spanish frontier.

Holditch and Leavitt posit that Delta society, in particular, was "sharply stratified" (44), with "the large black population at the bottom, a condition reflected in several of Tennessee's works" (44). In Ozzie's confinement to the Critchfields' kitchen, Williams alludes to the reality of segregation. Moreover, the luxurious Lamphrey plantation resembles a fairyland, but only from a distance:

Though much less prevalent than the public has been led to believe, that [plantation] symbol colored the perceptions of later generations and gave

material support to the mythic vision of a “Golden Age” of white supremacy and agrarian splendor. (S. A. Smith 101)

More importantly, the play’s main setting consists of the Critchfields’ modest living room and its shabby décor, the shabbiness indicative of the family’s very limited funds (*Spring* 35, 110). Williams further emphasizes the fact that few Mississippians could afford such displays of luxury, making the traditional geographic and historical setting of the plantation mansion itself all the more conspicuous by its absence:

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Yes, that’s the marvellous thing about those old ante-bellum houses. They knew absolutely *nothing* about the economy of space. . . . Oh, I often wish we hadn’t given up the old Wayne plantation. The house was nearly two-hundred years old. It was the most historic place in the Delta. That’s Colonel Wayne’s picture there on the wall. . . . He led the charge up Cemetery Hill. . . . With your literary gifts, I’m sure you could write some things up for me. For instance that very dramatic little episode that took place on Colonel Wayne’s plantation the second year of the war when it was rumored that Sherman had crossed the border—(134–35)

As in the protest plays, Williams allies his audience with working class characters—in this case, the uncompromising character of Dick—by portraying the upper classes as morally inferior in their lack of concern for the sufferings of the poor and of other social outcasts. By way of contrast with Williams’s searing examination of the fate of Oliver Jackson’s character in *Nightingales*, he only briefly explores the intense, carceral atmosphere of servitude based on race in *Spring*. Instead, Williams roughly lays

bare the segregationist attitudes and brutal social codes associated with house servants (Onstott 634), while understatedly pillorying the racist, and witheringly patronizing mores, of Port Tyler's bourgeoisie: "Jackson, don't fill the glasses so full, they splash over" (*Spring* 84). Here, Jackson openly acknowledges both his tardiness and his lack of authority, which "helps to loosen somewhat the constrictions of type characterization" (Barthelemy 97) by asking, "[d]id I miss de contes'?" (*Spring* 82).

Spring's complicated domestic entanglements and the Delta's townsfolk's obsession with genealogy body forth a special relevance in a Southern context "because of the complex family structures in the South which, in the antebellum period, were partly due to the subcaste system among the Negro contingent of a plantation" (Weston 96). As Kolin points out (in *Civil Rights*), Williams portrays Black characters as insiders (11), and this is also the case in *Spring*. Although Williams shows Jackson sleeping outside, he is, at least in one respect, the party's definitive domestic insider (as the character with control over the attendees' access to the event's supply of alcohol).

Interestingly, Williams sets both *Spring Storm* and the 1956 screenplay of *Baby Doll* in the Mississippi Delta in order to comment upon racist and sexual codes in the Deep South. Even as an apprentice playwright, Williams did not shy away from depicting the traditionally Gothic insularity common to many small American towns during a period when alleged acts of vagrancy were often punishable by an indefinite stint on a chain gang.

The Individual and the Environment

Williams reinforces the notion that for some Southerners, a connection between "the land and the people remained more direct and primal in the South than in the other

parts of the country” (S. A. Smith, 117). Evidently, this may have been even truer for poor whites and Blacks than for white collar Southerners (*Spring* 16), a fact made all the more affecting when Heavenly asks Dick, “[c]an’t I compete with the river?” (10). By contrast, Arthur’s white suit and matching panama hat work together to establish him even more firmly in his position as a going concern at his family’s bank (134). As for Heavenly, she insists that “. . . goin’ places is to be a success of things where you are” (*Spring* 13), thereby expressing the typically Southern “sense of identity with place . . . that is one of the distinctions that still separates [the South] from the rest of the country” (S. A. Smith 116), and “bursting out” the following to Dick:

HEAVENLY [bursting out]: . . . you can take that river barge down to
 New Orleans an’ ship out on a cattleboat if you want to. You can go
 clear down to the Straits of whatever-you-call-it far’s I’m concerned!
 If you’re restless, if you want to get rid of me so bad, don’t think I’m
 gonna stand in your way! (*Spring* 18)

This interdependence between the individual and his/her environment, both physical and sociocultural, is “common in the Gothic mode” and, moreover, it “is the source of the conflation of sociological and psychological categories in scholarship about the Gothic” (Coudray 59).

Williams uses an array of natural symbols, such as the river, with which Dick plans to do “battle” (*Spring* 101). Likewise, the impending storm of the play’s title marks each protagonist’s passage into a different stage of experience or, as the case may be, that of total withdrawal from society, and from participation in life.

Water imagery often takes on a symbolic significance throughout Williams's writing, and *Spring* establishes this iconographic trend within Williams's first attempt at a full-length, Southern Gothic play. However, Williams complicates the prospective baptismal initiation rites unfolding upon the banks of the Mississippi River, with the introduction of narrative reversals and inversions, thereby inhibiting the characters' ability either to achieve secure unions, or to realize their youthful potential.

Taming the Wilderness

In true fantasy fashion, Williams makes use of the confession motif (Mücke 59), to question the traditional, romantic presuppositions of an automatic expiation of guilt associated with the act of confession:

ARTHUR: You don't need to—

HEAVENLY: Repeat the horrible confession? That's what mother called it. I told her the other day about Dick and me, but she was still anxious for me to give him up and take you. She approves of you, Arthur, and she thinks dishonesty's the best policy in love affairs—She didn't want me to tell you the awful truth. (*Spring* 140)

Much to her mother's chagrin, the news of Heavenly's sexual affair with Dick shocks certain influential members of the Lamphreys' lawn party, and effectively brings the girl's social life to an end. Thus, as in other Gothic narratives, intimate confession results not in an improvement in understanding, friendship, and trust, but in premature, and often violent, death (Mücke 59). Arthur's fantasy imaginings regarding the details of Hertha's suicide displaces his once hoped-for intimacy of with Heavenly, as he continues to struggle with his guilt: "I guess about that time Hertha was standing out in the freight

yards with the rain on her face too—” (*Spring* 145). Such “metaphysical” motifs (65) recall certain American modifications of European Gothic conventions commonly initiated in earlier attempts to produce an identifiably American literature.

As Weston recognizes, the all-encompassing drive to tame the wilderness (Weston 102), here made manifest in the character of Dick, provides an “apt metaphor for the double natures of the individual and the human family” (102). Human duality, as part of the concept of mystery, pervades Williams’s apprentice plays, and invokes the mystery of “the idea of knowledge as well as the sanctity of the unknowable” (96). These two plays also point to some of the same basic dualities of the classic Gothic mode, such as the real versus the unreal, and the comforting—as well as the inhibiting—nature of the communal enclosure (96).

The Lamphreys’ Garden

The Lamphreys’ garden represents a forbidding enclosure in which “[n]ature is subdued, ordered, selected, and enclosed” (Cirlot 93, 110). Thus, the location of the party on the plantation’s lawn, an arbor (*Spring* 82), appropriately symbolizes an ordered, selected, and elitist enclosure of the upper-crust ranks, which yet excludes Heavenly from its orbit. “After all, she’s associating with our sons and daughters,” cautions Mrs. Adams (85).

Williams’s iconography clearly illustrates not only his awareness of, but also a sophisticated grasp upon, the dramatic integration of conventional Gothic criteria. He does this in many ways: in order to intensify the already-pervasive Gothic mood of the play, established through the use of enigmatic natural settings and weird phenomena such as the barren bluffs, the manicured gardens, and the seemingly supernatural storms of

April, Williams emphasizes the effects of such environments upon the mood of his characters. He draws on Gothic imagery that visualizes the conflicted connectivity of each character, characters in which “sociological and psychological processes intersect” (Coudray 59). He expands the Gothic topic of thwarted love to encompass a broad range of social types. He also implies that Hertha commits suicide partly because she rejects the ignobility of spinsterhood, and partly in order to curse Arthur’s love for Heavenly.

Ingeniously, Williams discards the conventionally romantic, “semi-Gothic, quasi moral tradition” (Lovecraft 43), along with its attendant preoccupation with narrative events, and replaces it with an ambivalent unease that, nonetheless, eschews moralizing. He also emphasizes Gothic conventions in his use of characterization and setting—or, to paraphrase Lovecraft’s fitting appraisal of such generic criteria, “humanity” and “community welfare” (43). This combined emphasis makes for an interpretive experience that America very much needed at the time, one far removed from “the national legends of opulence and success and innocence” (Woodward 12).

Blood

Arthur recognizes that his drunken expression of disgust for Hertha has caused her suicide and now makes him a murderer (*Spring* 146). In fact, he compares his own callous act to “dipping [his] hands in her blood (147). Other gruesome iconographic images abound; Hertha’s reference to the “weird sisters” (33), clearly alluding to Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth*, contributes to a generally eerie impression of the supernatural. Recoiling from the typically Gothic guilt he experiences after his reckless and destructive (95) act of cruelty toward Hertha—“[t]hey’ll say I killed their Storybook Lady” (129)—Arthur deserts Heavenly. Fuelled by guilty fantasies, his accusation of

Heavenly—“[w]e were driving the engine that night, Heavenly” (145)—serves as an iconographic emblem that unites the various strands of traditional villainous imagery introduced by Hertha’s ironically familiar stock of little stories (21).

Fall from Grace

Williams applies Gothic imagery to set the stage, recounting the inexorable ostracism and alienation of two young women on the periphery of Delta planter society (23). The play’s iconography manifestly indicates that Heavenly’s calculated sexual alliances precipitate her fall from social grace, while Hertha’s intelligence, sensitivity, and lower class status combine to guarantee a measure of her alienation.

Williams establishes Heavenly’s mysterious sexual allure as a version of the “pure” Southern female identity (5). Although she flaunts her seductive allure, to the point that other young men at the party exclaim, “I wish I was Dick Miles!” (92), such a capacity for attraction only goes to go to vacant waste in the end (148). Like the Critchfield family’s Confederate predecessor, Heavenly appears destined to spend her days as the local lost cause, pining for an imperfect, yet glorified, past. Ultimately, the play ends with Heavenly left as a lonely front porch girl, another Agnes Peabody—a minor “old maid” character with body language that displays an “exaggerated animation which is characteristic of some southern spinsters” (8)—at the mercy of the hidebound, carceral, community of Port Tyler.

Meanwhile, Hertha remains untainted by sexual slurs, ironically marked instead by a perceived lack of refinement (87). Interestingly, she submits passively to Arthur’s embrace, after his raffish attempt to seduce her:

[Miss Schlagmann retires to the back room and closes the door. Hertha sits down mechanically at the desk and stares in front of her. Her face has a dead expressionless look. After a moment, the outer door is pushed open and Arthur enters—he is drunk, dishevelled, his flannel coat and trousers bedraggled with rain and his hair hanging over his forehead. He leans against the door and grins satirically at Hertha.] (119)

Monotony

The grotesque caricature of Oliver Critchfield in his threadbare, heirloom-filled parlor has more in common with Dick's description of domestic routine than does Arthur's drunken seduction, and also serves to highlight the motif of intractable monotony within the Critchfield family, from which Heavenly longs to escape:

[Dinner has just been concluded. Mr. Critchfield slouches into the living room, thoughtfully manipulating a toothpick. He removes his coat and shoes and loosens his tie; he flops wearily into the big chair under the floor lamp and unfolds his evening paper to the market reports. As Lila enters, he mechanically extends a section of the paper to her with a muffled grunt.] (56)

Star-Crossed Lovers

Williams demonstrates the treacherous consequences attendant upon the failed negotiations of first love (Weston 35), and identifies the “tangled” quadrangular relationships of the young characters with the Gothic setting in which they find themselves trapped (Williams, qtd. in Leverich, 263). In key scenes, such as Hertha's and Arthur's whirlwind courtship scene in act 1, scene 1, the storms of spring evoke the

stormy social tempest in which time and space converge to “crucify” both sets of star-crossed lovers, depicted in varying states of loss and trauma:

[Arthur joins her above. The wind rises and blows Heavenly’s hair loose.

They both point at things in the distance, talking and laughing, but the wind drowns their voices . . .]

HERTHA: Maybe the storm’s blown over.

ARTHUR: No. This is just the traditional hush before it gets started.

(*Spring* 29)

Impressionism

Grippingly, Williams seems to share Lorca’s Symbolist preoccupation with the “use of complex symbolic processes . . . [and] hidden motivations” (Gronbeck-Tedesco 128). As Holditch and Leavitt specify, “[t]hrough the half-century of Tennessee’s career, some theater critics continued to treat him as a realist, when in fact he is much more accurately described as . . . an impressionist” (xi). Moreover, he adopts Strindberg’s Impressionist aesthetic, with its grotesquely stark scenery that includes, in the case of *Spring*, desolate crags and “dead trees in silhouette” (*Spring* 28).

In another weird turn, Aunt Lila drives home Hertha’s curse, as intoned through the devastating news of Hertha’s suicide, albeit repeated in a matter-of-fact manner. Her unravelling of the story behind Hertha’s death occurs within the context of Lila’s bourgeois family, in which she assumes the studied role of the listener (both to the relatively frivolous distractions such as the Village Rhymester’s poetry and to Agnes Peabody’s society gossip). In general, Lila prides herself upon the way in which a strong

sense of deliberate neutrality guides her: “I’m not going to talk [Heavenly] in or out of anything” (133).

Gothic Dread

Ironically, instead of a romantic Delta idyll, one that would echo the charming stories composed by Hertha (13), Williams establishes an implacable atmosphere of Gothic dread. At first, Williams employs warm glow of the fading sunset (27), to provide both the requisite atmosphere and the necessary dramatic impact. While portraying Hertha both as a weird witch (33), and as a sacrificial vestal (121, 144), he likewise imbues her with sadistic and masochistic impulses.

Mud, River, and Water

Arthur’s degenerate behavior, tinged as it is with love-hatred (72), warps his relationship with both Hertha and Heavenly. His ensuing anguish clearly reactivates his paranoia, less as a pathological anxiety and delusion, than as a failed attempt to connect with an external reality, marked as he has been by an overwhelming sense of duty (23), fiscal responsibility (54), and familial obligation (49). Conversely, after presumably giving up her virginity in a cabin on Moon Lake, Heavenly renounces a dubious adventure on the Mississippi River with Dick, stating that she cannot “live like a nigger on a lousy barge” (101, 127, 128).¹²

Conspicuously, when Dick makes his ill-fated proposal of marriage to Heavenly, he arrives at the lawn party (17) of socialite Susan Lamphrey covered in river mud, as though he had “been having a mud-fight” (99). Perhaps, in this case, Williams makes an oblique reference—through his repeated use of stage directions that associate Dick’s

¹² It is significant to note that the “America of 1940 was still distanced from the Holocaust, the civil rights movement was yet to come, and such epithets . . . were commonplace” (Leverich 343).

costume with the Mississippi River's mud—to the outmoded Southern notion of the mud-sill way: notoriously, the perfunctory, but widespread “argument for slavery which contended that civilized society rested upon a lower class which performed its physical [and sometimes ‘muddy’] drudgery” (S. A. Smith 10).

Class

More importantly, Williams associates Dick with the labor class from the outset, as Dick repeatedly proclaims, “I don’t want a white collar job” (*Spring* 16). Throughout the play, Williams also links Dick’s fate to that of the Black Southern underclass. In the first example, Dick immediately ducks out of the church picnic, the better to watch a Black man on the river trying to pull into shore: “[b]et he don’t make it!” (7). Williams provides an even more convincing example when Dick, while proposing to Heavenly, offers the following characterization of their future life together:

Have you ever spent a night on a river barge, honey? That clean wet smell of the woods and maybe a hole in the roof you can see the stars through? Katydid’s hummin’ and bullfrogs off in the shallows. That dark warm smell of the water real close an’ the sound that it makes so quiet it’s sca’cely a sound, just a big, big blackness moving around you, an’ up on the deck a nigger pickin’ a fiddle an’ singin’ an ole river song, an that lazy soft rise an’ fall of the water under the boat an’ the lightnin’ bugs blinkin’ way off over there on the cotton fields or down in the cypress break . . . (105)

At last, Dick realizes his dream, having secured a position on the “Government levee project” (100). This suggests Williams’s awareness of the Southern New Deal economic

programs, which provided “wages which were more realistic than had been available in the past,” positions in which “blacks and whites were frequently assigned to equal jobs with equal pay, and the pervasive control of the economic elite was challenged” (S. A. Smith 49).

Not Heroes

Williams had been searching “for new personae . . . during the 1940s and 1950s” and locations in the modern South, in a period when “the planter and the belle would seem somewhat anachronistic” (110). The protagonists that eventually emerged in accordance with this new “myth of distinctiveness” (111), and which Williams, somewhat presciently, associates with in the character of Dick, were “not the traditional, heroic figures of invincibility usually found in mythology, as exemplified by the omnipotent oligarchs of the plantation” (Langer 111), but rather a personification of “America’s drive to create the hero as anti-hero, not as superbigman but as verylittleguy” (Browne and Marsden 30). Indeed, Mrs. Critchfield reminds us repeatedly that “the Miles boy doesn’t have a nice reputation” because he “[d]idn’t even get through high school and he’s never been known to hold a job for more than two weeks” (*Spring* 41). The “boy’s” apparent shiftlessness, however, also evinces his free spirit.

Attachment to the Land

Regarding their ties to Port Tyler, the male protagonists, Dick and Arthur, find themselves at odds with Heavenly. Their flight deflates yet another myth of the South, that of the Southerner’s “strong attachment” to the land (S. A. Smith 117). Interestingly, Hertha also longs to leave Port Tyler, as expressed in her characteristically outrageous fantasies “to follow a straight line upwards and get someplace that nobody’s ever been

yet!” (*Spring* 26). As Williams began honing his Southern Gothic drama he began to question the ways in which the Southern narrative tradition of “defining one’s life through one’s place in the community” (Kane 56) go tragically awry. Here, Port Tyler’s malicious, meddling elites dictate the social standing of the four young characters in *Spring* through their vicious gossip and officiousness (*Spring* 41, 59, 73, 83, 131). Even Hertha’s peers publicly mock her “cranky old maid” status (113).

Symbols of Isolation

Williams magnifies the play’s two key symbols of isolation, the witch atop the rocky hillside (27), and the front porch princess, perpetually awaiting a suitable match (103). These images loom large as allegories into which Williams interweaves many disparate iconographic details: the freight yards, the storm, the wild geese, the shares of Coca-Cola, the price of cotton, and Zella Armstrong’s genealogical roster of *Notable Families* (49), all assume a symbolic significance, implicating even the minor characters in a Gothic web of futility, greed, and deception. Williams deftly imparts all such details with an emphasis that pronounces their broader metaphorical significance.

The Deep South

On the hillside above the river, the Deep South itself, a spectral third character, operates upon the cultural and psychological margins of Port Tyler. As a matter of fact, Weston suggests that such Delta areas of land, water, and air constitute another character (Weston 37) in Southern Gothic plots. For example, the Mississippi bluffs and grottos (*Spring* 14) jointly transform into a Gothic rudiment that symbolizes the tenuous and alienated nature of the characters’ relationships. Moreover, the topographical emphasis adds another dimension of fantasy to the play, thereby rejecting psychological realism in

favor of Impressionistic symbolism, with Expressionistic flourishes of corresponding psychic mindscapes.

The Supernatural

Spring falls into a category clearly distinguishable from overtly supernatural narratives, such as Poe's, relating the play's sense of mystery, instead, to the iconography of classical mythology in order to "suggest something timeless" (Weston 20). Williams's characters voice Gothic concerns, and he imbues the narrative with the supernatural iconographies of balmy sky-riders (*Spring* 7), the Devil's Icebox (16), *The Wizard of Oz* (18), spiritualism (22, 107), magic towers (24), levitation (28), ancestral curses (56), ghosts (79), little fairy stories (13), and Little Gods (95). We often discover Williams's Gothic iconography when we least expect it, such as through its dependence upon seemingly inconsequential yet ultimately significant details, and on the shadings and nuances of his fantasy dialogue.

Unexpected Transformations

Although Williams reveals the male characters' ardor as transitory and circumstantial, the quest for conventional, socially sanctioned unions figures prominently in *Spring*. And yet, he reduces the physically attractive (5) Heavenly's social status to that of a relative shut-in (103), while Hertha commits suicide rather than share her fate. In accordance with Williams's stage directions, Heavenly lacks coarseness (5) but, ultimately, and contrary to our expectations, she transforms into a dull (148) potential spinster, and a secondhand one (53), at that. Such directorial stipulations reveal Williams's interest in mining the performative effects of unexpected transformations.

The Gothic Space

Whatever dramatic criteria Williams associates with Gothic space (Weston 34), in this case encompassing both the bounds of the landscape and Port Tyler's social constraints, he selects on the basis of their ability to influence characterization, setting, iconography, topics, and even to impact narrative and staging techniques. Thus, for instance, the indefinite border encompassing the morally permissive realm associated with the Mississippi wetlands, including Moon Lake, takes on a pseudosupernatural life of its own by dint of the audience's familiarity with the criteria that Williams uses to obtain his arresting staging effects. Williams's depictions of the Delta, as indicated earlier, evoke a curiously lush wasteland that he converts into a claustrophobic Gothic space to serve the iconographic ends of his apprentice drama, much as did James Fenimore Cooper, whose literary inheritance Williams invokes in *Spring* (75).

Williams's adaptation of the Gothic narrative involves not only the use of a secluded natural space, such as a grove, cove, or some other place of retreat, but also its extension through the Impressionistic décor, suggestive of Gothic architecture, emblemized in the play by the fountain, the arbor, and the Carnegie Library.

Although *Spring* originates from Expressionist elements, both in form and in content, Williams leaves the audience with a more subtle, universal impression of the play's major topics. He makes no attempt to distil, nor to delimit, the action in the play in order to achieve an exclusively symbolic effect, as did Expressionist drama. In fact, some critics contend that *Spring* is less Expressionist than "impressionist" (Holditch and Leavitt xi), for Expressionism traditionally sought to convey political and cultural ideas through every theatrical means available, whereas Impressionism's various

manifestations included only impressions and sensations (and often stopped short of interpreting them). Thus the play's aesthetic tone—be it morbid or sordid (*Spring* 111)—remains faithful to Williams's Impressionist Southern Gothic agenda.

Iconography of the New South

In accordance with the Gothic narrative structure, Hertha's curse dominates the action, and generates an increasingly morbid influence upon relationships, until human lives begin to self-destruct. Self-destruction, characteristic of a wide range of Gothic narratives but made particularly popular in the later eighteenth century by, among others, Jacques Cazotte (*Le diable amoureux*, 1776), remains particularly pertinent to the pervasive image of the fragmented female form (Conger 93), a disjointed iconography which relates most strongly to Hertha's character.

In *Spring*, Williams associates the image of the wounded, bloody body of the suicide with the Gothic triangle of lust, guilt and passion:

ARTHUR: . . . And after that she screamed. And I ran out the door and all I could hear for blocks was that screaming. And then it was quiet. Nothing but rain on my face. I was glad that I'd gotten away. And then a funny thing happened. [He turns slowly toward Heavenly.] I came to an alley. It was in back of your house. It was filled with the fresh smell of roses. I went sort of crazy. Covered my face with those flowers and whispered your name. [He turns away.] And I guess about that time Hertha was standing out in the freight yards with the rain on her face, too—and the engine's light in her eyes, screaming—We were driving that engine last night, Heavenly, you and me. (*Spring* 145)

Somewhat understandably, the play's iconoclastic leading man, Dick Miles, despises his romantic rival, the town aesthete, for the latter's privileged position as "that little milk-fed millionaire's brat" (18). Both Arthur's sensitivity, and his conflicting emotional responses, further complicate the love match between Dick and Heavenly as a compact between longstanding views of alliance, and arranged marital unions, where families choose a suitable partner, just as Mrs. Critchfield approves of Arthur in advance (140). In contrast to Arthur, the character seemingly most crippled by a foreboding sense of irresponsibility for his actions, Heavenly acknowledges the tension inherent in making her own romantic choices, and in confronting her mother's inevitable disapproval:

HEAVENLY: . . . But I've got a sense of decency.

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: You talk about decency!

HEAVENLY: Yes, I do.

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: You don't know what that word means.

HEAVENLY: It's you that don't know what it means. It's you that wants to make a prostitute of me. (53)

Mrs. Critchfield convinces Heavenly of the potentially dangerous nature of her daughter's love for Dick, for it not only threatens her family's reputation but also her future happiness in Port Tyler. Ultimately, we see that the sexual union between Heavenly and Arthur has resulted in ostracism, perceived here as a form of social death (94).

Throughout *Spring*, Williams combines biblical imagery (Golgotha, Easter, Miss Schlagmann's "spiritual counsel") with the epic grandeur of classical mythology, as in the symbolic personification of Eros. Williams's atmospheric Southern Gothic also

includes haunting folkloric elements, such as the ghost of the Confederacy's Lost Cause, which has "flourished longer than any other regional legend" (Osterweis x-xi). In yet another typically Gothic turn of events, Heavenly, framed center-stage before the portrait of the family's Confederate ancestor, thereby shares a "spatial perception of temporal simultaneity" (76) with him; as she is indeed "Heavenly," she proceeds to address him directly, and in an open, colloquial style, as if he were one of her contemporaries:

HEAVENLY: Colonel Wayne! I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it.

I want you to forgive me! Please excuse me for disgracing your name!—If that's what I've done. I don't want to disgrace it—not anymore than I have to. You know that as well as I do, Colonel Wayne! So please don't blame me too much! I'm in an awful fix. I don't know what to do! . . . So why don't you come down off your horse and tell me instead of lookin' so big and important up there?

(Spring 78)

By contrast, in underscoring Arthur's focus upon the power of memory, Williams calls to mind Heavenly's unwitting cruelty toward Arthur when they were both children. Arthur, however, recasts this cruelty by projecting it upon Hertha.

In the European Gothic tradition, medieval castles or cathedrals characterized by vaulted arches and elaborately carved gargoyles amid floral tangles served as settings for stifled desires (Weston 16). Williams transposes these structures, reminiscent of the once-venerated aristocratic heritage, to the Delta in the form of the manicured lawns and Greek revival statues of regal plantation mansions (*Spring 83*). He reworks the nightmarish settings of the traditional Gothic, such as its haunted houses, as seen in the Critchfield

homestead's more prosaic air of haunted decrepitude. We glimpse the telltale signs of such supernatural disturbances in the tragic consequences of Hertha's curse, and in the insinuated spiritual presence of the "big palooka" (55), Colonel Wayne, whose image haunts the Critchfields' pastel-hued living room, even as Mrs. Critchfield "haunts" the late Colonel with her incessant invocations and petitions. Here, Williams clearly appeals to Gothic iconography, imbuing the setting, both geographical and psychical, with an aura of mystery.

In *Spring*, however, Williams makes the Gothic narrative image of the journey (Malin 11) conspicuous by its very absence, although the main protagonists express their longing to escape Port Tyler for Europe, or to "take a cattleboat to South America" (*Spring* 16). Despite this, the play remains firmly planted in the Delta. According to Malin, the Southern inheritors of the old Gothic regard these settings as "'objective correlatives' of the psyche" (79). Just as the castle was viewed as "the outpost of authoritarianism" (78), so are the plantation mansions in *Spring* representative of "the Southern concern for order" (Watts 7).

Williams demonstrates the ways in which the internalized effects of Port Tyler's misogynistic attitudes impact the sexual awakening of an idiosyncratic young woman, framed here as a burlesque take on the fall from divine grace: "Heavenly's no angel, in fact she's a regular little hussy" (*Spring* 137). Heavenly achieves a universal dimension as she seeks to rediscover the lost, mythical past of her great-grandfather, a Southern aristocrat, whose honor she fails to uphold through her commission of rebellious acts and her fairly indiscriminate expression of sexual desire. In bucking such strict moral and theological principles, the fantastic perversions of an "individual's unnatural behavior or

desire” ostensibly express humanity’s fallen state, in that it amounts to a hubristic “marker of volition, the freedom to turn away from God” (Mücke 4). To understand how Heavenly’s sexual transgressions relate, by the strict standards of Port Tyler, to those of original sin and female wilfulness, and are associated both with original sin and free will, a brief consideration of Williams’s first, full-length account of the re-emergence and the new role of specifically Southern iconographic traditions might prove helpful.

No Happy Endings

Williams, in act 1, scene 1, sets “two constructs of reality” (5) against each other. The first is the hopeful, fairy-tale idealism of the Storybook Lady that countenances happy endings; and the other, the worldview of the errant Cavalier in which such conclusions do not exist. For Williams, a cynicism toward the seemingly preternatural possibility of a pat, romantic solution contrasts with other—nonetheless melancholically lyrical—interpretations of reality.

In an attempt to discourage Hertha’s self-destructive behavior, Arthur cautions her against climbing the precipice above the river, cautioning her that she is “not a wild goose” (*Spring* 28). Tragically, Arthur’s fears apparently ring true, especially as they relate to Hertha’s curse—“. . . they’d say I killed their Storybook Lady” (29). Just as Hertha’s bizarre performance has for Arthur the quality of simulation only, Williams’s metaphysical allusions seem designed to temporarily disorient and amuse the observer:

HERTHA: I’m going on up the rest of the way.

ARTHUR: To see God?

HERTHA: Yes. [Arthur laughs.] Don’t you think I’ll find him up there?

ARTHUR: Oh, you might! And then you might just find the other side of the hill. (26)

Such acts of fantastic simulation atop the lofty peak overwhelm and, ultimately, derail Hertha's ability to face reality. In her enthralled absorption, she evokes the "late Enlightenment fascination" with occult imagery that "yawned toward the limits of rational insight" (Mücke 56), and resorts to illusions rather than facts by embarking upon whimsical flights of fancy: "I could be anything that flies!" (*Spring* 28). In certain respects, even eponymously, *Spring Storm* borrows from the "Storm and Stress" (Mücke 56) fantasies of German Classicism and early Romanticism and, in particular, the works of Friedrich Schiller and Goethe, especially as suggested by the desperate pair's dialogue. We may even note Brechtian elements of antirealism.

Dorothy E. von Mücke makes it clear that the investment of the fantasy in the supernatural, as well as in characters whose behavior defies common sense, problematizes the desires of the protagonists. All are equally thwarted. Unlike Hertha's academic and creative accomplishments, which help define her character, Arthur's poetry (*Spring* 25) serves as a mere foil differentiating his sexual desires from Hertha's more repressed need for love, which, once expressed, only earns for her a string of definitive rejections. In any case, Arthur characterizes himself from the outset as an ineffectual dreamer and "one of those tragic 'not-quites'!" (25).

No Romantic Marriage

Williams leaves the ending open with respect to whether Heavenly will ever marry, given her rebellion and the loss of her virginity. Williams also rejects the anticipated final act, that of a normalizing union between Arthur and Heavenly. Arthur's

former romantic fixation upon Heavenly now bears the indelible stain of Hertha's suicide. Moreover, he tells Heavenly in no uncertain terms that Hertha's gory death implicates them both. Unlike Dick, who looks forward to the challenges ahead, Arthur's joyless return from Europe to Port Tyler crystallizes his self-perception as a character lacking in any measure of fulfillment. Williams confirms this through Arthur's condemnation of his former ideal, Heavenly, and through the character's pointed remarks about his plans for celibacy.

Williams addresses the subject of erotic frustration, for he draws attention to Heavenly's fate at the end of the play, punished as she is by the small-town Southern mores that ultimately confine her to her family's front porch. Having rejected marriage to Dick, Heavenly rejects not only the monogamy of her past liaison but asserts that "any man can do it for her" (Isaac 1999, xxiv). Therefore, she rejects the romantic image of marriage as a sacred bond, renouncing Dick, with whom she has shared a lifelong friendship, out of fidelity to her family's complex ideals of honor (*Spring* 132). But Heavenly refuses to discard her mother's dream—namely, that she marry her way up the class ladder—which also demands that she reject Dick's proposal. Here, Williams examines the ever-controversial topic of social climbing or falling and family heritage (Strindberg xi), albeit within a sexual context of falling from grace (and, coincidentally, falling from Lover's Leap).

Eros, Psyche, and Aphrodite

Chief among these mythical devices we note the attractive image of Eros, the godlike male and, by association, the Psyche figure, as embodied by Hertha, the female character seeking spiritual growth. *Spring* also includes a meddling Aphrodite figure,

here represented by the Terrible Mother (Weston 13) who, in turn, complicates the romantic quandary for her daughter. The mythic relationship between Psyche and Eros can be seen as a kind of coda that informs and shapes the characterization, and even the iconography, of *Spring*.

These mythic figures converge with surprising ease upon Williams's fantasy characters, the metaphorical paupers-turned-princesses (*Spring* 24, 63, 144), as well as the chivalric but errant gentlemen, and the domineering, evil stepmothers so readily associated both with Southern culture and with the fairy tale fantasy (Weston 13). By situating *Spring* within the pervasively evangelical New South (Sherill 218), Williams does not necessarily rule out the pagan referents of classical antiquity, but, rather, emphasizes the heterogeneous blending of the pagan past with a Christian present. Unsurprisingly, the classical image of Eros seems to take on a more immediate and palpable significance in the lush garden setting of a Delta plantation.

Location, Location, Location

A site-specific sense of myth and Southern mystery marks *Spring* as a pioneering example of the Southern Gothic narrative. If an invocation of the supernatural represents, as Mücke suggests, primary aspects of the European Gothic, then we might consider *Spring* a satiric experiment within the subgenre.

In a more extended definition of the Gothic narrative, Todorov's structural assessment of fantasy and related ideas includes a discussion of concepts such as the uncanny and its place in Freudian analysis (*The Fantastic*, 1970; Freud, "The Uncanny," 1919). Todorov examines the Freudian significance of an uncanny event: "[w]e do not take into account its relations with the contiguous events, but its connections to other

events, remote in the series but similar or contrasting” (91). In *Spring*, Williams explores certain motifs associated with the site-specific terror associated with the Gothic narrative, such as the betrayal inherent in narratives of entrapment, and in those of the seduction and the ostracism of a beautiful young woman.

The play features the traditional impasse of the female character that enters natural places which turn suddenly hostile (*Spring* 91). Thus, in *Spring*, the freight yards where Dick and Hertha shared their first kiss—“[y]ou were never interested in anything but trains, trains!” (12)—take on a sinister, perilous dimension when we later recognize the yards as the site of Hertha’s suicide. In terms borrowed from the traditional repertoire of Gothic and supernatural imagery, Williams evokes the “weird” sisters of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the crucifixion, and the myth of Eros, and suggests the physical manifestation of an ancient curse through the sheer evocative power of the Southern environment. This appeal to “an abiding essence with its hint of a supernatural force” (Weston 18), together with Williams’s abundant references to the aura of place, provide the impetus for the play’s inquiry into its audience’s understanding of Gothic effects, and into their expectations regarding such effects.

On the edge of the Mississippi Delta, Port Tyler constitutes a complex and artistically challenging setting that Williams nonetheless imbues with a measure of Lost Cause pathos and a hopeless fatalism. Its environs form part of a sparse, onstage wasteland that emphasizes the vulnerability of the characters trapped therein. Wilt explains that Gothic spaces engender anxiety, dread, and the sense that escape is impossible (10). As a matter of fact, according to Fleenor, Gothic writers—in both popular and serious modes—write primarily

. . . in response to social realities. . . . They focus on repression, segregation, or dichotomy rather than wholeness; they are formless except as quests; and they use traditional spatial imagery to represent an oppressive culture. (15)

Claustrophobia

Williams uses the iconography of claustrophobic space, the definition of which proceeds from the earliest literary appropriations of labyrinthine enclosures (such as cathedral and castle dungeons) and from a general awareness of the clinically morbid psychological and, thus, the parapsychological (Weston 19) realm that impinges upon the workaday drudgery of Port Tyler. Ironically, Williams invokes such imagery through the socially resigned sublimation—“[t]hat’s life” (*Spring* 116)—of Miss Schlagmann’s observations:

MISS SCHLAGMANN: And they always have the Tarzan serial. . . .
 [laughing sharply] They’re so absurd! But they *are* exciting! At the end of the last one he and the girl were locked in a dungeon with lions!—[She laughs.] But I suppose they’ll manage to get out somehow. (111)

American Gothic

Williams’s ability to imbue the Mississippi Delta region with the heavy mood of anxiety previously assigned to creatures trapped within European castles and ruins attests to his artistic versatility. Here, he uses the “carefully developed and nurtured” and “sharply stratified . . . Delta culture” (Holditch and Leavitt 44) to express the typically “American” Gothic “anxiety about Europe” (Coudray 98), with its reputedly lax social

mores, and war-theater in far-off accounts on the Sunday radio. As Arthur opines, “[w]e talk about things so frankly in Europe” (*Spring* 31). Be that as it may, Williams’s adaptation of Gothic criteria makes nodding references to the requisite European images, the most obvious example being Arthur’s stories about London and Europe, and the use of suggestive wall posters (108), after the fashion of Brechtian *plakativ* (Patterson 281). This not only constitutes a marked link with the Gothic tradition, but also modernizes and revitalizes *Spring Storm*’s New Southern incarnation.

Interestingly, Hertha Neilson’s role as The Story Lady self-consciously references a decidedly American style of the Gothic, founded on a “flourishing oral tradition of folklore and legend including the Dutch and German ghost stories and the colonial American witch tales” (Weston 24). Moreover, Williams symbolically portrays his chosen setting as a wild, untamed, and unpredictable borderland, emphasizing the place’s heartbreaking loneliness and the “beauty” discovered in its “tenuous connections” (O’Connor, *Living* 101). Joseph Weisenfarth asserts that we view the Gothic from the standpoint of a “psychodrama that domesticates its horrors” (Weisenfarth 21), and Dick would clearly share this view: “they call that *livin’* down there!” (*Spring* 15).

As with *Not About Nightingales*, Williams firmly roots *Spring Storm* in a historical time and place. He embellishes the Southern Lost Cause with Gothic criteria, and thereby provides a cultural referent for his lyrical aesthetic. Comparatively, in the nineteenth-century British novel of manners, “the labyrinthine architecture” of the Gothic logically gave way to “the labyrinthine machinations . . . of domestic arrangements” (Weisenfarth 21). Thus, the new American Gothic develops in a direction that relates it—but does not confine it—to Expressionism, especially in light of *Spring*’s overarching

psychological dimension. Williams, by contrast, blends staging techniques and iconography for further emphasis, as he does in the stage directions at the beginning of the play's final act:

This scene should follow the dramaturgic pattern of Act One, starting lightly and rising through an emotional crescendo that culminates in the fight between Dick and Arthur and the outbreak of the storm. (*Spring* 82)

The Curse

Hertha's curse invokes a spectrum of imagery associated with the occult. Williams permeates the conception of the curse (34) with a far-reaching iconographic dimension, derived from the practice of oral traditions such as poetry and storytelling, and which ultimately depicts an immoral ruling order. The magical invocation—in this case, the curse—does not merely serve as an indication of Hertha's occult knowledge, but bodies forth pagan petitions, such as those suggested by Hertha, and of other, even more emblematically sectarian associations implied through the installations called for in the staging directions, such as the statue of Eros, the haunting portrait of Colonel Wayne, and the gnarled, crone-like trees.

"Sex Relations"

Surprisingly, given Williams's emphasis on the fantastic range of experience, from the supernatural to the psychological, he finds the means to recast his Gothic fantasy within the distinct cultural context of the American South in the 1930s. Williams would later recall how the play's first reading ended with "a long and all but unendurable silence" in which "[e]veryone seemed more or less embarrassed" until, "at last, the professor pushed back his chair, thus dismissing the seminar" (Williams, qtd. in Leverich,

263). In an unsent letter to Holland, Williams added that, upon rereading *Spring*, he had reassessed this play, concluding that: “[t]he idea of the play as I see it now is simply a study of Sex—a blind animal rage or force (like the generative force of April)”

(Williams, qtd. in Leverich, 263). Leverich notes that Williams’s

. . . “tragedy of sex relations” as he called it, was eventually abandoned but . . . it was significant because it was the forerunner of plays that, with few exceptions, were notable as studies of the ways in which sexual passion often frustrates and destroys the rational basis of society. By mid-June, Tom had registered for two classes in the summer session, Mable’s seminar on playwriting and Conkle’s course on problems in dramatic art. . . . Tom had once again read *Spring Storm* aloud, this time to Mable and his seminar, and wrote that it was “quite finally rejected by the class.” . . . The reason, in all likelihood, was because Tom had tacked on “an alternate ending” where at curtain [Heavenly] strips naked onstage.

(263)

This period marks the end of Williams’s formal, postsecondary education and, also, the beginning of a so-called period of animosity against a form of intellectualism that “failed to understand his artistry and appreciate his plays” (Shackelford 105).

Cinematic Influences and Techniques

On the whole, Port Tyler symbolizes not only the Delta, nor the Deep South, but offers us a formal blend of generic traditions, invariably reflected in Williams’s vivid stage directions and characterizations. For example, the tone of the colors shifts symbolically from soft to stark, and to an even more vivid level of intensity, according to

the mood Williams intends to convey. The mellow amber crags of the Mississippi bluffs in act 1, scene 1, undergo an “atmospheric change” (*Spring* 5) with the coming storm; as emotions run higher (along with the protagonists), the sky above the precipice shows “magenta-streaks” (27).

Williams borrows a number of staging techniques to create a unique mood or atmosphere, such as the use of cinematic lighting effects, poster displays, live music, and the judicious incorporation of Gothic architecture. In the play’s stage directions, we note his use of montage at the garden party and, later, his use of framing techniques for dramatic juxtaposition: “[t]he upstairs door slams on [Heavenly’s] exuberant voice [and] Arthur goes hastily to the mantle mirror where he adjusts his tie and combs his hair; in a moment, Heavenly re-enters with two Coke bottles” (62).

Williams also offers his audience a disaffected, Southern twist on the Gothic, while referentially enlisting the narrative patterns of a folktale or fairy story, in which events seem to mirror or echo one another as they unfold onstage. To the particular psychodrama under scrutiny here, Williams brings his disturbing yet beautifully wrought cinematic sensibility in his staging techniques, and delights in skewering the conventionally “charming” romantic solution (13). The play’s brash sexual content links it to the pre-Production Code Hollywood sex romps made in the early to mid-1930s, such as *Other Men’s Women* (1931), *The Purchase Price* (1932), and *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933).

Williams draws from a wide range of aesthetic traditions, including those related to Impressionist painting, and to cinema, poetry, and historical narrative, and ultimately blends these cultural resources into the most effective form of stagecraft possible in order

to express his vision. Williams also informed Holland that he was “going ahead with ‘April is the Cruellest Month’” (*Spring Storm*) because “stage facilities” at the University of Iowa “would make [it] possible” (Williams, qtd. in Leverich, 343). At the same time, Williams was planning *The Glass Menagerie*: “I am also planning—if others are discarded—the study of an ordinary middle-class family in a city apartment, supposed to show the tragedy of bourgeois stagnation” (343). Incidentally, Leverich notes that Williams would soon trade the “bourgeois morass” of *The Glass Menagerie* for the “southern Gothic tarpit” of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (343).

Through the use of a traditional protest-play structure of three acts, with three scenes each in of the final acts, Williams seeks to channel the same kind of formal configuration that Strindberg employs in *The Father* (1887), and in his Damascus trilogy, especially *Easter* and *A Dream Play* (1901). Moreover, both in its tangled social dynamic, attenuated by an ambivalent ending, and in its use of a live string orchestra (*Spring* 82), *Spring* is reminiscent of Strindberg’s *Storm Weather* (1907). Nonetheless, *Spring* differs from its protest predecessors, developing in accordance with Williams’s emergent vision, as described in the Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, in which he proclaims his emancipation from “straight” realism (*GM* 131).

Like Strindberg, Williams draws heavily upon Symbolist poetry both to “reject literary realism in favor of subjective symbols that evoke emotional reactions” (Wolfreys, Robbins, and Womack 82), and to refine an aesthetics of “suggestion and fleeting sensation” (Bordwell and Thompson 382). To this end, he makes use of waning, glittering, and iridescent lighting effects in the other full-length apprentice plays—the sunlight, “pale as lemonwater,” in *Candles* (104); the ominous, backlit silhouette of the

personified cityscape in *Fugitive*; the winking of the dancing “Lorelights” in *Nightingales* (1)—and he further develops this experimentation with lighting and color in the fantasy plays. A purely literary evaluation of the play’s criteria might well overlook the intentionally fantastic visual and aural effects, as stipulated by Williams in the following excerpts from the play’s stage directions, in depicting both Mrs. Critchfield and Arthur:

Mrs. Critchfield charges into the front room. She stands stage center, her eyes shooting Olympian bolts at her husband’s oblivious figure. She suddenly swoops down on him like a predatory hawk and snatches the newspaper from his hands. (*Spring* 37)

The Japanese lanterns flicker and sway in the wind. The cable that supports them snaps and they are blown tumbling across the stage. There is the sound of branches thrashing, a cacophony of noises from the suddenly disrupted lawn party, and, through it all, expressing the frenzied spirit of the scene, are heard the distant strains of the waltz, fast and feverishly gay. There is a crash of thunder.—Arthur rises, staggering. He goes over to the statue of Eros. He stands unsteadily before it, laughing louder and louder as the storm’s fury increases—There is a vivid flash of lightning and then complete darkness. (107)

Williams also shifts perspectives to incorporate the minor characters’ experiences and contributions to the main drama, for example in his kaleidoscopic vignettes during the rained-out lawn party. Just as in the Hollywood cinema, the various characters’ motivations and psychological states—those of Jackson, Henry Adams, and Mrs. Dowd in particular—play a significant, even epiphanic, role in the play.

Likewise, in true Impressionist fashion, Williams's staging techniques "represent as fully as possible the play of a character's consciousness" (Bordwell and Thompson 382). Here Williams creates a fluidly cinematic type of fantasy by establishing a narrative pattern based on convoluted relationships. The pattern of incongruous or unexpected identifications, such as "metaphysics" with puppetry (*Spring* 65); and risky liaisons—"The Storybook Lady—the dark-haired princess in the magic tower . . . the Carnegie Vestal"—also generate humor and spontaneous laughter from the various characters (63, 121):

[Oliver] belches and rubs his stomach. He crosses the room. Mrs. Critchfield hastily snatches up various articles, arranges sofa pillows and changes the position of her antique chair. She switches on the little museum light over Colonel Wayne's portrait and then rushes out. Arthur enters first. His manner is markedly different from the first scene. His continental poise is lost, and he is awkward as an adolescent. He goes to the radio on which the roses are placed. Heavenly enters. (61)

This Southern Gothic drama relies primarily upon the erotic desires of two couples, and proceeds to present a provocative staging of their complex emotional development. The basic pattern of the storm, symbolized by a whirlwind of intense dialogue, appears to move purposefully toward a conclusion, although it ends with an ambiguous anticlimax. In Arthur's drunken state, as lightning glimmers on the spinning cyclorama, it epitomizes for him the thunderbolts of Eros (95).

Such Impressionist patterns were especially common in French avant-garde cinema of the 1920s. It used a style which, in turn, borrowed both from Expressionism

and Surrealism in its psychic dramas, and in its development of the characters' inner mindscapes, though in a less stylized manner. As John Gassner affirms, "Williams may trace his descent" from Strindberg (xiv). Indeed, so as to heighten the elements of poetic subjectivity even further, Williams's Impressionistic style affords an approximation of the character's "perceptual experience, their optical 'impressions'" (Bordwell and Thompson 382), which, in his uniquely open-ended manner, remain subject to further "impressions," and interpretations.

Likewise, his ability to subtly connect the narrative thrust of the play to its late Depression-era settings depends on his complex portrayal of the independent, yet intertwined, relationships of the characters, in a formulaic struggle with an especially suspenseful event that ultimately distorts the hitherto dominant narrative pattern. Williams's confident use of cinematic technique includes the use of freeze-frame and black outs, and of dramatic "tableaux," as in Williams's intended Golgotha sketch (Isaac, *Introduction, Spring* iv). He also calls attention to specific scenes or dramatic vignettes rather than to the development or dénouement of the narrative itself; the lovers' spats are set to the furious waltz of a "string orchestra from Memphis" (*Spring* 82). Here Williams sets a pantomime of the Lamphrey fête to music, thereby making use of the cinematic *montage* technique:

Heavenly enters with Arthur and Henry. The men are in tuxedos.

Heavenly is a radiant dream-like vision in her white organdy under the soft-colored lanterns and with the background of poignant string music.

She is bearing a frosted, candle-lit cake which she has just won at the dance. (86)

We may also note a final divergence of approach from Williams's usual method of structuring the dramatic narrative. His technique, in all its Southern Gothic glory of presentation, and in the tangled complexity of its melodrama, stops short of realistic, protest reportage as certain narcissistic stage personalities clash in brief and tragicomic exchanges. For example, Hertha makes her final speech after interrupting Ralph and Mabel—" [c]an't we carry on a little conversation in here? . . . I'd rather get pneumonia than get bawled out by that cranky old maid" (113)—and Williams submits a similar exchange when Mrs. Kramer calls Hertha's taste in poetry outrageous (110).

Instead of offering a collection of titled episodes, as he does in the full-length protest plays, Williams divides this play into a series of dialogues which, as Isaac indicates, may be "the result of a decision to eliminate transitional material" or outtakes (*Introduction, Spring* 146). The final act of the play (act 3, scene 3) reads like much like a screenplay, with Lila's involvement initially intimated only "indistinctly through the closed door" (*Spring* 142). Williams's use of Gothic formal and stylistic conventions make for strikingly original stage directions, embracing an Expressionistic use of color, lighting, and sound effects, designed to maximize the impact of his work, and to emphasize the characters' inability to put aside their various grotesque truths in order to form mutually satisfying relationships.

The play's appropriation and development of Gothic generic conventions grows out of Williams's very real concern to challenge and to resist the dominant mythologies of his Southern inheritance, while yet incorporating the poetic devices, lore, and mystique of the South. Williams accomplishes this in a lyrical, rather than simply Expressionistic, dramatization of his explicitly sexual drama of frustrated relationships and repressive

codes of behavior. Chiefly, his Gothic orientation comes from within, and he uses the resources of the Gothic literary tradition to forge a unique dramatic sensibility that would ultimately give rise to the New American Gothic, a movement which would, in turn, continue to build on his legacy.

CHAPTER VII

STAIRS TO THE ROOF

The Science Fiction Narrative

As Williams explains in his foreword, *Stairs to the Roof*¹ reflects his disillusionment on realizing that he was badly mistaken in his conception of the world as a “place of infinite and exciting possibilities” (xxi), finding instead a world dominated by monotony, limitation, and routine. Although *Stairs* “culminates in an escapist fantasy” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75), Williams recasts this brutally dystopic version of “the St. Louis of 1933–36” (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xii) in an avant-garde style that puts the play’s mechanistic inhumanity into extreme, albeit lyrical, relief. Clearly, Benjamin stands out as an alien among his own kind— “[h]e’ll have to be eliminated” (*Stairs* 87)—as he moves through his contemporary world while re-experiencing his past, from a jaded, albeit millennial, vantage point.

Until the final scene and the introduction of Mr. E, *Stairs* traces the narrative trajectory of a *bildungsroman*, filling in the context of Benjamin’s rapidly fading youth and his disappointing involvement in public life, where the expectations and demands of the key characters in his personal relationships thwart any opportunities for personal growth. We are made aware of such stifling expectations through the dialogue of Benjamin’s wife, the ironically named and apparently soulless Alma—“I’m going to quit you so fast it will make your fool head swim!” (29); through the authoritarian decrees of Benjamin’s stickler boss, Mr. Gum— “[i]s this a kindergarten for your amusement?” (11);

¹ The title of this play has been shortened to *Stairs* throughout this dissertation.

as well as through the pitiful condescension of his best friend Jimmy—“[p]unctuality is the courtesy of kings” (21).

In *Stairs*, Williams presents us with what turns out to be, at least in the play’s final scene, a cosmic epic that confronts the effects of the passage of time upon the rational, individual consciousness. Mr. E and Benjamin unite, calling upon us to cease our frantic quest for security and to reconcile ourselves with the “godlike” overmind (Saddik, *Blueprints* 74). The sporadic pacing of the play, with its spurts of momentum followed by lengthy dialogues, reflects the unstable tempo of the economic situation for both Benjamin and The Girl. Both members of the couple, however, seem to thumb their noses at this instability, since both fully expect to join the ranks of the unemployed through their own unconventional behavior. In the end, the locus of the action moves to outer space, “but while redemption is glimpsed in space and time, it is only visible as a suggestion of hope for a future which is beyond the time and space of which we are presently conscious” (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 91). Ultimately mystical in orientation, *Stairs* ends its foray into the fantasies of post-Depression America’s small wage earners with a typically sci-fi rendition of the protagonists’ glimpse into the so-called face of the Creator.

Social Science Fiction

Stairs represents a marked departure from traditional or so-called pure science fiction. In the play, Williams pioneers instead a sort of social science fiction. Tragically, the major protagonists’ financial and spiritual poverty apparently precludes any access to what the hypothetical American Dream might have to offer (*Stairs* 42). The depressing political backdrop to *Stairs*’ utopian elements accords the play a more solid grounding in

reality,² and his prospective intergalactic colonies of untold millions (*Stairs* 93) hold up a mirror to the earth, even though his apocalyptic visions “do not depict possible futures; they are warnings and moral lessons aimed at the present” (Asimov, *Social Science* 175).

The enemies of epic stature in *Stairs* remain “the same enemies that appeared in earlier Expressionist plays—assembly lines, ticking clocks, managers, stockholders, zoo keepers, and other representatives of a repressive materialistic culture” (M. A. Corrigan 378). The narrative perspective that Williams explores in *Stairs*, and the implications of that perspective for the unfolding rape scenario at the fantastic carnival, primarily concerns perceptions on the part of the modern, white-collar masculine protagonist, regarding the oppressive nature of capitalism. Such a consumerist system appears to function without recourse to human fulfillment, hence laying bare the potentially devastating consequences of the “fantastical homogeneity of white masculinity” (Stockton 11). Through the allegorical characterization of Beauty, seen as an imminent rape victim, the play makes a piquant statement about the limits of female agency under the authoritarian system of capitalism.

Stairs, the final full-length play of Williams’s apprentice cycle, ends with what soon would become its author’s trademark ambiguity. While Williams’s penchant for open-endedness contrasts with the exemplary resolution allotted by the majority of science fiction narratives, he nonetheless “sticks to the ridiculousness” of the fantasy premise with a “pseudo-scientific intent” (Brigg 173) based on the weird magic of

² Its complex blend of science fiction and social critique found only limited acceptance in performances in 1945 and 1947. This was during the same period in which *The Glass Menagerie* finished its successful Chicago run and moved to Broadway “to win all ‘Best Play of the Year’ awards” (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xviii). In an informative Introduction to *Stairs*, Hale notes the successful revival in 2000 of the play at the University of Illinois-Urbana, which featured “the latest in computer-assisted scenery” (xxii).

“arithmetic” (*Stairs* 97), including the experimentation with, and the impending extermination of, the human race (97). Moreover, the metatheatrical exploration of the rape narrative exposes that period’s worship of highly aggressive capitalism, which borders on a form of imperialism: “I suppose you might be termed the Christopher Columbus of the Consolidated roof—and who was, so to speak, your Queen Isabella?” (7). For Diane Stockton, whether fantasy or not, the “twentieth-century rape narrative registers a desperate attempt to preserve traditional patterns of robust, entrepreneurial masculinity in the face of economic forms that increasingly disallow illusions of individual authority” (Stockton 3).

Transcendence and Prophecy

Williams bases *Stairs*’ neat, but nonetheless open-ended, resolution on fantasy rather than on scientific concepts of space and time. He also centers the galactic civilization—found commonly in such magazines as *Science Fiction* and *Weird Tales* (Wollheim 30)—on lofty notions of transcendence, rather than on hard scientific principles (Bainbridge 7). Thus, he refrains from addressing the issue of how Benjamin and the Girl manage to disappear into space (*Stairs* 96), relying instead on the intervention of the godlike Mr. E, and thereby “implying an end to boundaries and the acceptance of an infinite future and an infinite progress outward in the universe” (Wollheim 31). Nevertheless, as Saddik suggests, Williams brings about a paradigmatic change at the end of the play, as substantiated though the inclusion of ironic science fiction pastiche (*Blueprints* 68).

Although Williams’s vision does not rely on technology to advance the plot, his vision is prophetic nonetheless. The play ends with a focus on the future, “which alone

was real and which was possible only if humankind did not become mired in present-day problems” (Kreuziger 30). The fact that Benjamin and The Girl are able to fly through space and to colonize other planets without having to depend on technological advancements means that *Stairs* has more in common with an earlier, more cryptic vein of science fiction³ rather than with the later pulps.

Redemption?

Wollheim cautions us that, prior to the 1960s, “the implication that God Himself might be just another mortal playing at scientific games would cause true believers to write furious letters to publishers” (Wollheim 51). Nonetheless, Williams demonstrates the apocalyptic consequences—“the extermination of the human race” (*Stairs* 97)—resulting from a literal translation of the metatheatrical world-as-a-stage metaphor. Near the end of the narrative, Mr. E interrupts the action by recasting Benjamin and The Girl as a modern Adam and Eve, thus linking, symbolically, the earth’s creation to its catastrophic demise:

MR. E: . . . You’re destined to be the father of untold millions.

BEN: On that—new star?

MR. E: On that new star!

BEN: Oh, then, then, —I can’t be a *bachelor*, then!

GIRL: No! You see? (95)

Ultimately, Williams makes no apparent distinction between the characters’ supposed reality and the unfolding *deus ex machina*. We learn, in the end, that Mr. E has virtually

³ Pioneered by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818); H. G. Wells in *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910); and Jules Verne in *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865).

dictated the shape of the play's narrative, including the anticipated reproductive roles of The Girl and Benjamin.

At the play's conclusion, we confront a cosmic crossroads that entails dramatic reversals for the couple and challenges the expectations of the audience. Here, alien worlds take precedence over the more familiar spaces that dominate the play's denouement. Although both had found their lives devoid of meaning, Benjamin and The Girl are given the opportunity to reinvent both themselves and an entire human race. Such penultimate resolutions, along with other popular science fiction tropes, "seem to confirm the suspicion that science fiction is escapist" (Puschmann-Nalenz 196). However, through The Girl's palpable unease and concern regarding her new role as a weird, cosmic Madonna, complete with the prospect of an Immaculate Conception, Williams undermines the notion of science fiction as a refuge from reality. Interestingly, the play concludes on a decidedly sci-fi note, by including a radically speculative narrative element (in contrast to earlier sections of the play which do not contain generic criteria explicitly associated with science fiction).

Be that as it may, Blish suggests that those who promulgate the term *speculative* tend to disregard the speculative nature of all fiction, since "science fiction differs from other types of fiction only in its subject-matter" (Blish, *Epilogue* 118). In fact, *Stairs* could be called "future fiction" (118) in light of its millennial preoccupations. Until we arrive at the play's conclusion, it might be said that Williams withholds references that prospective audiences would have come to expect from a science fiction narrative. Thus Williams defies conventional dramatic expectations.

Dystopia

Puschmann-Nalenz contends that a “widespread opinion” among critics of science fiction fantasy identifies the search for a refuge from dystopian chaos as “a purpose of serious sci-fi,” although such withdrawals do not guarantee “a better and happier world” (Puschmann-Nalenz 195). Peter J. Reed further clarifies this narrative goal, explaining that while “science fiction stresses grim aspects of existence—inevitability, meaninglessness, alienation and isolation, the absurd—it remains itself an escape into imagination and fancy” (196). Ultimately, the tone of *Stairs* is not nearly as “pessimistic” as many dystopian fictions (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 161), many of which rest either on false, and/or upon exaggerated, fears.

Only in the final scene does Williams avail himself of explicit science fiction criteria by invoking, for example, space travel, cosmic explorations, the notion of “monosexual reproduction” (*Stairs* 95), fantastic destinations—such as distant stars (97)—auditory and visual motifs that include the “music of the spheres” (93, 97), and, finally, Mr. E’s “beautiful sky-blue robe sprinkled with cosmic symbols” (92). Although the play is clearly fantastic in its dreamlike depictions of Benjamin’s inner dialogues, the majority of the scenes take place in geographical and historical settings with but little bearing on the concept of a universal future, and even less to do with that of outer space. Indeed, as a science fiction text, *Stairs* ranks as markedly atypical, and resists R. Pauly’s critique of modern science fiction:

The man-made, mechanized universe of science fiction is too presumptuous. Its technical realism, always on the side of the plausible, is founded on the basic tenet of progress and change, not necessarily

positive, but involving a linear cause-and effect concept of human existence. (Pauly 66)

At last, Williams rejects the concept of a verifiable reality, which he demonstrates in the play's fantastic episodes and the protagonists' autonomy, as subject to the intractable nature of Mr. E's control. Instead, the conventions of science fiction serve, in the end, to establish a narrative detachment from the audience's experiences, thereby making the confrontation with Mr. E all the more unexpected.

Williams also uses a dualistic approach not uncommon to writers of science fiction. For example, Benjamin and The Girl make acute observations of human behavior from a detached, almost astral perspective (something an earthbound character could not do). Moreover, Williams assigns this point of view to a character who asserts omniscient and omnipotent control over the characters. Thus does Williams present his audience with "domestic consciousness raising" (Brigg 38), a process by which "one learns to recognize the social net in which one is enclosed and to consciously decide, rather like an outsider, whether to take one's expected place or to challenge all that life has been before" (38–39). For Benjamin, such a challenge includes questioning Mr. Gum's authority over him—" [h]e possesses the knowledge that might very seriously disrupt this corporation" (*Stairs* 87); distancing himself from family values—"I got the sex alright, but without the sonnet" (41); defying his pregnant and unhappy wife's claims upon him by "stirring up hell in general" for her (28); and taking the measure of his own sanity while musing upon the image of the "whole universe [as] a great big gambling casino!" (30).

Professor Mabie famously dismissed *Spring Storm* with the proclamation that “[w]e all have to paint our nudes” (Leverich 263). But in *Stairs*, Williams moves beyond *Spring*’s so-called nudes to experiment with what some might consider a more profoundly individualistic amorality. He de-centers Mr. E, Benjamin, and The Girl, thereby partially anticipating the rise in popularity of antirealist, postmodern experimentation.

Stairs’ unconventional narrative structure, including its recasting of Benjamin’s glory days, raises expectations for further dramatic experimentation beyond traditional sci-fi generic parameters. Such experimentation leads ultimately to alternate strategies of audience reception, making possible a myriad of innovative, even nonlinear, approaches to genre. *Stairs* boldly epitomizes Williams’s final, full-length statement as a “beginning writer”—as he indicates in the play’s afterword (*Stairs* 101)—on the professional margins of the theatrical scene, prior to his “first major professional run” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67) at the beginning of World War II. Given *Stairs*’ movement toward a proto-postmodern sensibility, it is not possible to read it strictly as a science fiction text. Rather, we must articulate certain structural affinities between science fiction and a prescient form of proto-postmodernism.

Noticeably, in “Random Observations,” Williams seems to suspect that *Stairs* might invite controversy, but he prefers to let his final apprentice play stand as it is:

I know that there is a good deal of didactic material in this play, some of which will probably burden the reader. When I was half way through it the United States of America went to war. For a moment I wondered if I should continue the work. Or should I immediately undertake the

composition of something light and frothy not only in spirit but in matter?

I decided not to. (*Stairs* xxi)

The above quotation reveals not only Williams's commitment and dedication to "the little wage earners" (xxi), but also counts as a testament to the aesthetic integrity of his early works (101), in which he infuses the light and frothy elements with a fantastic imaginative strain, expressed in a spirit of resistance and rebellion.

Fantasy Episodes, Images, and Elements

Furthermore, Williams makes general use of fantasy episodes throughout the play, especially during the "obviously autobiographical college graduation scene" (Hale, *Introduction*, *Stairs* xxiii). He utilizes the cinematic technique of flashback, including that of individual fantasy, with even more frequency in the second half of the play, during such Carnival episodes as the battle between the Zoo Keeper and the Beast, throughout which "the song of the carousel is slower and fainter and sadder and finally stops altogether" (*Stairs* 75), the outright "odd and disturbing 'Beauty and the Beast' scene" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 72), the Clown episodes, and the lovers' final escape. Time-bending flashbacks, complete with psychedelic cyclorama, offer the audience a window into Benjamin's subjective mental processes, and present a psychic experience in a stream-of-consciousness manner.

In many of his experimentations as an apprentice writer, Williams examines the insidious oppressiveness of industrial technology, as well as analyzing and appraising technological artefacts. Benjamin seems to tap into the "great collective unconscious" (Rose and Rose 104) through an uncompromising pursuit of individualism, only to find himself irresistibly engulfed by the primordial imagery that surrounds him. Since a

markedly dehumanizing form of industrial capitalism transforms Benjamin's former friend—"as for you Mr. Apollo, take a look at yourself" (*Stairs* 22)—and his wife—"I thought we decided to put your beer money up for the baby carriage . . . just put the baby on roller skates" (27)—into embittered reactionaries, it is no surprise that for Williams, American culture, like the whole of human civilization in this play, emerges as thoroughly commodified and bereft of meaning, and thus practically powerless to serve the individuals for whom it is intended, and by whom it is neglected and ignored (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 55).

The leap into the absurdity of fantasy, which occurs when Benjamin becomes an active participant in his graduation tableaux, signals the revitalization of his repressed sexual desires. Audience members might assume that certain iconographic images, such as the "heroic statue of an athlete bearing a torch, on the pediment of which is chiselled the inscription 'Youth'" (*Stairs* 31), the Gothic archway (32), the senior's robe (31), the varsity sweater (33), and the tasselled cap and gown (36), signal Benjamin's depressive neurosis as mere figments of his imagination. Williams, however, makes use of these fantastic images to give voice to his lyricism. Such unexpected and dramatic recreations of Benjamin's past radically alter the audience's perception of his character, as when Benjamin transforms from an office eccentric to an earnest rebel-manqué (12).

The Dali-esque, Surrealistic (75) scenarios manifest an expression of utopian hope at the conclusion of *Stairs*, and yet, in terms of narrative pacing, Williams also draws on some of the salient features of dramatic Expressionism, particularly in his abandonment of a tight, causal, chronological plot in favor of *Stairs*' looser organization by subject matter and iconography, and its irregular episodic structure (M. A. Corrigan

378). As “the only way out of this devastating mess,” according to Saddik (*Blueprints* 70), the fantasy elements of the play’s conclusion effectively discourage us from dismissing the unreal solution miraculously proffered by Mr. E (and, indeed, by the playwright himself). The final twenty-five pages of the play take a decidedly fantastic turn, in a gesture toward a postmodern conclusion (Saddik, *Blueprints* 69) that includes a metatheatrical “morality play” (*Stairs* 71); that is to say, a pantomime within the play itself, complete with a running narration by The Reader (71). In the pantomime, we see Beauty, as well as Beauty’s foil, the Beast, appear in tandem, in keeping with the structure of the historical morality play (71) and in the traditional dramatic “formation of images in pairs” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 434). The pantomime also includes a commentary concluded by the omniscient Mr. E, for which Williams, in his stage directions, also makes allowance: “Mr. E . . . raises an arm and slowly wipes off a tear on the edge of his starry sleeve” (*Stairs* 96).

Williams’s explanations in his “Random Observations” pertain to his use of various fantasy episodes, which he variously describes as “volcanic eruptions” and “infinite and exciting possibilities” (*Stairs* xxi). He elicits audience reactions through the use of a radically playful, predominantly fantastic approach to the science fiction narrative, which causes us to conclude that he was prophesying the end of isolationist American politics, a position that Benjamin mirrors in *Stairs* through his fiercely independent ideological stance.

In this examination of *Stairs*’ overarching fantasy generic criteria, the question of whether Williams’s text might also be considered a romance cannot be neatly disentangled from certain epistemological questions. For example, does Benjamin’s

fixation on phantoms from the past, such as the Faustian spirit of Helen, preclude the possibility of meaningful contact with the characters with which he presently shares his life (Alma, The Girl)? Williams ends the play on an ambivalent note, but one that resonates with a cautiously hopeful pluck. The once derided but now celebrated lovers escape the earthbound setting of sterility as the tone changes abruptly from that of satirical social Darwinism to one of subdued lyricism. Williams closes with a narrative proposal that is literally blown up to a fantastic degree. Such a hyperbolic ending as a response to “complex social contradictions” (Saddik, *Blueprints*, 73) cannot be readily interpreted within the bounds of traditional science fiction narratives. In fact, in the play’s very structure, we see Williams’s attempts to portray the gritty reality of a failed American Dream, and to link this reality with fantastic and surreal visions that are both generated and reflected by the frustrated protagonists’ stream of consciousness.

Somewhat heroically, Benjamin rejects their overwhelmingly pessimistic outlook and stages a rebellion. Williams anticipates Freedman’s assessment that we have little choice but “to go onward, even though that means progressing into a more and more commodified postmodernity” (Freedman and Medway 200). In his retrospective revelations, Benjamin determines that, had he married his college sweetheart, he might have achieved the sought-after measure of happiness and satisfaction so grievously lacking in his present existence. According to the porous, fluid nature of the categories of science fiction’s subgeneric criteria, Williams transposes the variability of time “from the sphere of narrative technique into the sphere of narrative subject matter” (Puschmann-Nalenz 106).

Characters: Real, Imagined, and Transcendent

Stairs, Williams's groundbreaking advancement toward a form of proto-postmodern drama, anticipates Bakhtin's playful stress on the dialogic imagination, the heterogeneity of expression, and a commitment to literary inclusiveness and hybridity. Apparently, for Williams as for Bakhtin, dialogue, interaction, and exchange serve as the means to differentiate genres, as well as to highlight and contextualize the characters within a given horizon of expectations. Williams thus stresses the intrinsic otherness and peculiarities of the characters, in Bakhtinian fashion, even as he indicates their normality through the use of "variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in [the] environment and striking a dissonance with others" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 285).⁴

Williams adheres neither to the laws of science, nor to "the strict accounting for scientific innovation which are characteristic of classical science fiction" (Brigg 56). Importantly, his "treatment of human character and relationships" displays a "sensibility and a subtlety largely absent from all but a few of the most celebrated science fiction writers" (56). Some literary critics call our attention to "the limitations of science fiction to cope with the reflexive and deconstructive playfulness of postmodern writing," pointing to "the failings of many science fiction texts to pay attention to the human personality," or the "representatives of their species" (187).

In a minor key, radical departures in behavior affect the characters' relationships with each other. For example, *The Girl's* conclusive rejection of her boss's advances—a

⁴ Of course, as an apprentice in Erwin Piscator's first Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research in 1940, Williams would not have been familiar with the works of Bakhtin, which had not yet been translated.

rejection that he had not anticipated—only serves to heighten his desire. And when a drunken and angry Benjamin visits Jimmy, his college chum, the late-night intrusion at the latter's suburban home virtually ends their relationship. This rift takes place only after Benjamin has accused Jimmy of having sold out, of having “made normal adjustments” (*Stairs* 42) that include “bungalows on Peach Street,” and “faded purple pajamas” (42). Furthermore, Benjamin's reaction to his friend's disillusionment becomes violent when he “seizes the white lace curtains and tears them down,” thereby committing an unfortunate act, given that the men's wives continue to communicate with one another: “Alma, that screwball husband of yours is over here raising the roof and I just can't endure it!” (43). Such twists and turns in the protagonists' relationships reverberate throughout the staccato movements of the plot.

Williams privileges fantasy in this play, yet he interweaves it into the respective realities, largely class-determined, of the characters' lives. Significantly, all four members of the love quadrangle pursue their desires across class lines. Benjamin Murphy and The Girl, in particular, express their keen awareness of the constraints their bourgeois status imposes on them at every turn. Nevertheless, Williams also dehumanizes the protagonists by associating them with a markedly gloomy form of institutionalization (84). He makes use of nonspecific character names, such as The Girl—“a generic female” (Hale, *Introduction*, *Stairs* xvi)—and the mechanistic Messrs. P, D, Q, and T, an “office force” which, “with piston-like regularity . . . is performing its several functions” (*Stairs*

86). Evidently, Williams, very early in his career, became familiar with not only the theory of Expressionism but with its earlier dramatic manifestations.⁵

As Williams comments in his “Random Observations,” the composition of *Stairs* began with a specific concept involving a character or a cluster of characters.⁶ Williams’s concern with genre remains closely linked to a coherent conception of the role that various characters play in advancing the specific episodes, as with his eclectic group of “little wage earners”:

I left the others behind me—Eddie, Doretta, Nora, Jimmie, Dell—and I
never went back to see if they were still there. I believe they are.

THIS PLAY IS DEDICATED TO THEM.

I dedicate it to them and to all the other little wage earners of the world not
only with affection, but with profound respect and honest prayer.

(*Stairs* xxi)

Despite *Stairs*’ viable assignment to the subgenre of science fiction, Williams’s complex characters face the class-related challenges concerning love, personal fulfillment, and authority of the playwright’s protest background. Williams’s experimental approach lays bare the attempts of his troubled characters to extricate themselves, through fantasy and playful pursuits, from their circumscribed social roles and personal limitations.

⁵ For example, elements of science fiction fantasy in *Stairs* evoke earlier plays (Corrigan 377) such as Georg Kaiser’s *From Morn to Midnight* (1922), Rice’s *The Adding Machine*, and John Howard Lawson’s *Roger Bloomer* (1923).

⁶ Much like its fantastic Gothic counterpart, *Spring*, with the latter’s emphasis upon the application of “pure” characterization (Williams, qtd. in Leverich 211).

The Antihero and the Observer

In the characterization of Benjamin Murphy, Williams creates a traditional science fiction hero that derives in large part from “the main source of science fiction conjecture, the American pulp magazines of the thirties and forties” (Wollheim 35). The pulps cast such figures, most typically, as disillusioned “everymen” (34) seeking some form of hidden knowledge (be it scientific or otherwise). Williams, however, makes it increasingly difficult to pigeonhole Benjamin, since the protagonist by turns serves as company scapegoat, unfaithful husband and, finally, humanity’s savior.

Hale (*Introduction, Stairs*) has indicated that Williams, through the character of Benjamin, faces a quandary that differentiates this antihero from the action heroes of pulp science fiction in the 1930s and 1940s. The science fiction protagonist that, at the time, was popular “with kiddie matinee and popcorn circuits,” triumphs valiantly (Fabun 51). However, “there was no indication that their thinly disguised western-adventure stories would appeal to mature audiences” (51). By contrast, in order to avoid submission to such a huge mechanism as the Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers, or to avoid a subscription to the institution of marriage, and to familial domesticity, Benjamin seeks instead to withdraw in a decidedly unheroic fashion (Puschmann-Nalenz 180). However, since he withdraws into his own arbitrary world of fantasy, as Saddik points out, Benjamin’s situation prefigures—more effectively than would a Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon type—a mystified protagonist in a postmodern novel (one akin to, for example, such characters as Oedipa Maas and Dr. Hilarius in Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 *The Crying of Lot 49*). However, Benjamin reconciles his individuality with his paternalism, jetting off to father his own million-strong collective. Ultimately, Williams

weaves the characters into an “end of life as we know it” tapestry (Kreuziger 92), situating Benjamin and The Girl within the larger cosmic context.

Building on the work of earlier writers working with science fiction criteria, such as H. G. Wells in the *Time Machine* (1895) and Elmer Rice in *The Adding Machine* (1923), Williams chooses to place his main emphasis upon Benjamin, thereby drastically reducing the number of characters under consideration. Doing so allows Williams to intensify his stress on “the cycle of unfulfilling work and the social prison of marriage” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 73).

Williams directs Benjamin’s sensibility toward an awareness of his own psychic potential, according to a mythic plan replete with both romantic and heroic agendas, despite the character’s ostensibly plebeian, lowly origins (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xii). Admittedly no longer an idealistic young graduate, Benjamin now finds himself trapped in the bind of being economically dependent, as a pseudobourgeois individualist (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67) in the very system that he violently and often acutely despises. Yet his “quite authentic hatred combines with literary genius” to produce poetic paeans to liberty (C. Freedman 77).

With little preparation or background explanation, Williams plunges Benjamin and his prospective audiences of “both the stage and the screen” (*Stairs* xxi) into the patently weird goings-on, precipitated—as we ultimately learn from Mr. E—by Ben’s heroic inability to conform (96). In the end, the audience remains at liberty to conclude, not unreasonably, that Benjamin, the unconventional antihero, might be insane, and that the strange sights they have witnessed consist of the hallucinatory inventions of a troubled mind. Technically, the final episode also “tends to remove emotion from idealist

notions of spirituality or of the . . . individual” characters, and to suggest that psychic states may be reducible to concrete and individual material realities, a reduction that Freud “held to be the ultimate conceptual goal of psychoanalysis” (C. Freedman 32).⁷

To draw the audience into Benjamin’s radical vision, Williams interrupts the linear advancement of the narrative, turning instead to the development of Benjamin’s past lives and relationships, and thereby allowing the play to progress after the fashion of the stream of consciousness technique’s impromptu and fluid series of psychological phenomena. Through the use of this Expressionistic, performative procedure of staging an external account of the character’s inner self, Williams effaces the need for traditional dramatic concerns with the impacts that both the passage of time and the experience of distance may have upon the characters’ development.

In order to make its interpretations, the audience generally depends on a more reliable authorial and representative “anchor,” which means instead that Benjamin’s twisted point of view necessarily subjects us to the multilayered distortions in the style of the science fiction subgenre, owing to “the uncertainty as to whether what is perceived is a hallucination or the discovery of a parallel reality [which] dominates the protagonist as well as the audience” (Puschmann-Nalenz 62).

Interestingly, Mr. E’s inscrutable comments about humanity—“the wonderful, pitiful, inextinguishable courage of the race of man—has played me for a sucker once again” (*Stairs* 97)—may also apply to the individual protagonists, and thereby heighten the ambiguity of the play’s ending. Such fantasy scenarios also call to mind the work of

⁷ On a side note, Williams makes clear that Benjamin’s position was once his own. In fact, he writes in “Random Observations” that *Stairs* was written “involuntarily as a katharsis of eighteen months that I once spent as a clerk in a large wholesale corporation in the Middle West” (*Stairs* xxi).

the twentieth century Surrealists, and their dreamlike portraits of confusion, desolation, along with a sense of entrapment within the narrative.

Benjamin's motivations do not reveal themselves through outwardly heroic deeds. On the contrary, as Saddik observes, his antiheroic preoccupation resides in his own individual sense of fulfillment (although the audience might ascribe some measure of heroism both to his insatiable curiosity and to his unflinching exploration of—and confrontation with—the unknown). The main character's defense of Beauty and his interruption of the attempted rape contained within the metatheatrical morality play (71) temporarily win the favor of the carnival crowd and help to revise the bestial characterization that Williams initially presents.

As in many science fiction narratives, the protagonist in *Stairs* attempts to address the problems confronting him through the use of elements of Expressionistic fantasy, which aid him in “proving” to the audience the “weakness” and, more importantly, the “powerlessness of rationality” (Puschmann-Nalenz 154). Benjamin finds himself facing a series of increasingly bleak predicaments. Owing to an unconventional desire for self-fulfillment despite the conventional expectations governing professional behavior in the workplace, Benjamin makes a spectacle of himself at the Continental Branch of the Consolidated Shirtmakers. To wit, Benjamin angers his boss by exhibiting an unwillingness to conform, unlike his contemporaries, and thus, “[e]veryone stares at Ben” (*Stairs* 8). Moreover, as in such classical dystopias as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), Benjamin's exceptional individualism marks him out as different from the other characters, a difference that results in his persecution.

Accordingly, Kreuziger contends that the concept of control becomes a metaphor for mediating identity in many science fiction works. Thus, “it makes little difference in the end, whether soul (subject) controls body (object), or the reverse: both models forsake story and opt for conceptual conflict” (Kreuziger 82).

In the character of the faceless Mr. E, Williams creates a distancing device through which both petty, earthbound conflicts and intimate personal relationships ultimately undergo reinterpretation. Williams characterizes The Girl and Benjamin as a post-lapsarian “every-couple,” protected from destruction only by the collective ethos of the science fiction narrative. Given his ability to scrutinize and to control human behavior, Mr. E affords us the vantage point of an observer, to the point that he recasts the Swiftian view of human sagacity, while retaining satirical detachment and disillusionment, and also emphasizing the errant nature of the human experiment (*Stairs* 95).

The objective Mr. E could hardly be conceived as a wholly fey, Saroyan-esque (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xiii) fantasy figure, nor as an exclusively benevolent father figure (unlike Saroyan’s disembodied version of God in the contemporaneous *Coming Through the Rye*). In fact, Williams frames the omniscient Mr. E less as a detached onlooker and more as a stage director; in one example, Mr. E ultimately makes Benjamin and The Girl disappear in a blinding flash (*Stairs* 96), thereby freeing them through a fantastic combination of seemingly limitless possibilities, narrative structure, and a setting “that is bounded by neither time nor space” (McGhee 72). In this scenario, Williams presents such unexpected occurrences and contradictions as monosexual

reproduction, anthropomorphic transformations, and the omnipresence of the observant Mr. E as the rule, rather than as the exception.

Stairs clearly presents conceptual conflict, “not only in spirit but in matter” (*Stairs* xxi). As Williams describes it, despite the apparent sense of conflict, the symbols and iconographic metalanguage of the unconscious may be translated into readable signs, just as Freud himself recognized in his theorization of drama, of the implications of memory lapse, and of various neurotic symptoms. Such symptoms may be interpreted as legible effects of unconscious desire (C. Freedman 108): “[i]n this dear, funny little head of yours there’s something that holds the image of everything else there is! . . . Ben, catch me, I feel dizzy!” (*Stairs* 32).

Williams makes a powerful statement through Mr. E’s immutable decrees, showing how such edicts affect the lovers’ so-called real existences. Williams also demonstrates an awareness of an audience’s potential struggle in identifying with such characters as the barfly (Jimmy), the unattractive wives (Alma and Edna), and even the lovelorn working girls. As in *Spring*, the use of such foils helps us to better understand Benjamin’s estranged point of view, as well as to appreciate his Expressionistic perceptions (especially in terms of the intricate dramatic narrative that features different episodes which put the various different aspects of his character into perspective). We are likewise made party to Benjamin’s often-hallucinatory perspective and, remarkably, according to Saddik, “[w]hat appears, at first, to be an awkward juxtaposition—the play’s simultaneous critique and embrace of capitalism—acquires fresh import when considered as a herald of the postmodern mentality” (*Blueprints* 73).

The Female Protagonists

Williams's conducts his characterization of the passive female along classic psychoanalytic lines but, throughout *Stairs*, contrasts this model with explicit examples of mature and satisfying male-female relationships. Sharon Stockton brings to light "the interconnections between gender and production in Western thought" and the impact of this interconnectedness on interpretations of femininity, as well as "the extent to which the feminine has been represented as a function of the reproductive capacity as it is managed under patriarchy" (Stockton 7). In science fiction texts, as in many seminal works that fall under the more general rubric of fantasy (Rutland 6), an investigation of gender grounds itself in that of subjectivity, especially as the concept of gender constitutes the locus of nature and culture.

In various "reductive portrayals of women" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67), Williams identifies a "disturbing" (72) frustration of the development of his female protagonists and their friends, most notably that of Alma (and of Edna, her confidante) and The Girl (and Bertha Hotchkiss, her roommate). The Girl and Bertha come to rival Alma and Edna for the affections of the male protagonists, both of whom are married. For example, The Girl longs for an indissoluble union (*Stairs* 94) with Alma's husband, Benjamin, and Bertha begins an affair with Edna's husband, Jimmy (83). In *Stairs*, the dialectic of sexuality and gender—unlike that of class, race, or ethnicity—remains firmly grounded in biological differences, and also accords with the biological requirements of human reproduction. Jean-Joseph Goux (once again, much like Williams), examines the ways in which these characters defy or negotiate their prescriptive, and ultimately limiting, roles under patriarchy:

While the male is associated with the transmission of a pattern, a model, the female braves the contradiction of a material reproduction and is merged with what is other in relation to constant ideal form: that is, with amorphous, transitory, inessential material. . . . [C]haos, disorder, and the abnormal but also the sensory, the concrete, the nondeductible are identified with the woman (whatever the mythical or ideological version), and . . . permanence, order, organization, and law are on the male side.

(222–23)

The characters' stratified positions, consisting of the working Girls versus the stay-at-home wives, exemplify Luce Irigaray's statement regarding the political complexities of female passivity, given that "women do not constitute, strictly speaking, a class, and their dispersion among several classes makes their . . . demands sometimes contradictory" (Irigaray 368).

Williams also shows how hierarchical structures, based ultimately on biology, make it virtually impossible to separate women in quite the same physical ways as has been the case with subordinated racial, class, and ethnic groups traditionally separated from the living space of their oppressors. For example, the powers that be in *Stairs*—divine and otherwise—enjoy measures of independence and individuality that Benjamin also flaunts (albeit on a lesser scale). Even at the play's conclusion, The Girl joins Benjamin at his request, but only because the concept of monosexual reproduction terrifies him (*Stairs* 95). In a bold Foucauldian strategy, Williams ultimately curbs the more subversive aspects of sexuality by regulating it through Mr. E's planned experimentation, as well as through Benjamin's preference for traditional biological (and,

presumably, gender) roles. The present study agrees with Irigaray and Saddik that such reductive forms of female underdevelopment (Irigaray 368) and treatments emphasize “women’s submission by and to a culture that oppresses them, uses them, makes of them a medium of exchange, with very little profit to them” (368). Only when The Girl, Alma, and Bertha rebel do they hope to gain freedom from the chronic anxieties wrought by their tormented and vapid lives.

The struggle against the reification that reduces the apparent worth of various characters to that of objects, or even to nameless “things,” pervades *Stairs*. This struggle takes place in bedrooms, offices, zoos, carnivals, and within the characters’ individual fantasies. In another sense, however, the female characters fear both anonymity and the oppressive notion that their lives lead nowhere in particular, as in the chilling reminders of the unfathomable “outer space” that infuse the play (*Stairs* 32, 92). Throughout the play, Williams “gestures toward” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 69) a questioning of the status quo, just as Benjamin launches into a surprisingly Gothic, “Hamletesque” (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 55) tirade on the disgusting physicality of women, lamenting that “a man can come to you with nothing but the ordinary equipment and you’ll shout welcome so loud that the windows will break in the adjacent buildings” (*Stairs* 28–30). Also, according to Benjamin, Mr. E takes Foucault’s notion of self-mastery to an extreme: “[o]ne sex doing the whole thing all by itself!” (95). Once and for all, the individualistic language of the dialogue in *Stairs*:

. . . emphatically establishes what we have seen to be the *sine qua non* of every text in which the tendency of science fiction is strong: cognitive estrangement, a clear otherness vis-à-vis the mundane empirical world

where the text was produced—which is, however, connected (at least in principle) to that world in rational, nonfantastic ways.

(C. Freedman 37)

Disillusion, Despair, and Deliverance

Social Critique

The play offers a social critique from an unusual perspective, that of “small wage earners” (*Stairs* 35). Despite the fantasy sequences in the play, several characters signal an acutely class-conscious political awareness, a feature that Williams notes more often in the full-length protest plays. Consider, for example, how the ways in which the college graduates, once brimming with the idealism that Benjamin encounters in the course of his flashback, metamorphose into either the alienated or, indeed, the homogenized products of technology. The episodes evoking Benjamin’s life experiences, whether scholastic, professional, or domestic in nature, show the young Williams’s keen concern with social analysis and censure.⁸

Williams openly lampoons the American Dream of business success, family values, and romantic love. This bold attack on the mainstream values of middle America took place at a pivotal moment in American history, given that Williams “finished *Stairs* in December 1941, just after Pearl Harbor, to find that as World War II erupted there was no market for a play with a utopian ending” (Hale, *Fugitive Kind* 236).

While Williams borrows the iconography, topics, setting, and characterization of science fiction, he intends that these conventions finally serve as targets of irony and

⁸ Williams acknowledges in his afterword that he created *Stairs* to vindicate certain “organic values, such as intensity of feeling, freshness of perception, moral earnestness and conviction” more typical of a beginning writer (*Stairs* 101).

parody, as when Mr. E programs a future for the couple by substituting a new and universal vision of their now-defunct American Dream. As Williams states in his preface:

Benjamin Murphy and Benjamin Murphy's problems are universal and everlasting. Also—this! Volcanic eruptions are not the result of disturbances in the upper part of the crater; something way, way down—basic and fundamental—is at the seat of the trouble. At the bottom of our social architecture, which is now describing perilous gyrations in mid-air, are the unimportant little Benjamin Murphys and their problems.

(*Stairs* xxii)

Science and technology continue to play a major role in the regulation of Western society and, as Hale points out, today's "comptometer" (*Stairs* 3) is the computer and "there are still little people toiling at dehumanizing jobs and dreaming of freedom" (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xix).

Williams and Elmer Rice protest a common enemy in, most notably, *Stairs* and *The Adding Machine*: both playwrights demonstrate the ways in which economic concerns shape the identities of their respective protagonists. Williams saw theater as a platform from which to address political issues but, in contrast to Rice's unlikeable Mr. Zero, Williams presents a far more complex protagonist, one boasting both individual and everyman aspects. Both playwrights lamented the mechanization of the individual, and the caging of white collar workers in a city dominated by a sterile urban skyline of concrete and steel. Williams calls for sets that present, panoramically, the imbrications of economic and social forces in America, and even anticipates the Theater of the Absurd in *Stairs'* cautionary depictions of the herd mentality of Messrs. P, D, Q, and T.

Williams and Rice, however, both present their audiences with social satire, rather than with outright dramatic absurdity. Williams, for example, satirizes all those who buy into the American Dream, such as Benjamin's wife, his in-laws, and his former friends—characters whose vapid lives appear pointedly “[a]bsurd!” (*Stairs* 62). Whereas Rice hints at what “the mark of the Beast” portends, Williams explores the very nature of the Beast archetype, in a theatrical world where individuals, like beasts, are far too ready to follow the herd. In proto-postmodern fashion, Williams blends fantasy, comedy, satire and polemics to dramatize the inadequacies of the American Dream for his disenfranchised cast. In Rice's conception of the afterlife, we enter “the adding machine” itself, whereas in Williams's we enter Benjamin's amorphous fantasy, thereby gaining insight into the nature of autonomous and responsible human beings. Although Mr. E's arbitrary experiments may strike us as patently absurd human experiments, they offer a more effective solution than that ostensibly proffered by Rice's character, Charles the Fixer. Williams tells Benjamin's story from the latter's inner perspective and, like Mr. Zero, Williams creates in Benjamin much more than a cipher; Benjamin believes that his life should comprise more than a series of repetitive, predictable actions.

Estrangement

In the 1930s and 1940s Americans were driven by an ideology that championed traditional family values and a hard work ethic (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 75). Yet in traditional works of science fiction, the cognitive notion of estrangement dominates, because the

. . . mundane status quo shared by author and reader is contrasted, while also connected, to a potential future that is indeed historically

determinate—at least in literary effect—but of its very nature less factually preset than any established past. (54)

Using both anthropomorphism and cross-species relations, Williams intensifies the effect of the fantasy genre's cognitive estrangements, with creatures such as Beauty and the Beast, the snake-like Alfred, the bull-like Mr. Gum, the spider-like Alma, and the squirrel-like Benjamin, not to mention Benjamin's beloved pigeons, and The Girl's metamorphosis into the Swan. In fact, one of the play's most telling episodes takes place in a zoo: the fox hunt in scene 9, which Williams entitles "Keys to the Cages" (*Stairs* 56).

In a repeated trope that runs both through *Spring* and through *Stairs*, characters either close themselves off from their respective societies willingly, or else face ostracism for the social transgressions of which they have been accused. Thus, social estrangements predominate; Williams explores in greater depth the issue of alienation, on professional, sexual, and even spiritual levels. He roots *Stairs* in the following admittedly idealistic analysis of the modern condition and thus extends beyond the irony, the satire, and the parody of fantasy, and into a yet another generic subtype, that of science fiction. To wit, looking back on his apprentice period, Williams writes of discovering in this an altruistic, and yet earnestly fragile, image of humanity:

Unskilled and awkward as I was at this initial period in my playwriting, I certainly had a moral earnestness which I cannot boast of today, and I think that moral earnestness is a good thing for any times but particularly for these times. I wish I still had the idealistic passion of Benjamin Murphy! You may smile as I do at the sometimes sophomoric aspect of

his feeling and the honest concern which he had in his heart for the basic problem of mankind which is to dignify our lives with a certain freedom.

(101)

Social Issues and Expressionism

Williams approaches the play's narrative structure in a broadly experimental fashion, in keeping with his innovative staging of his characters' conflicts and resolutions. His fantastic model of the passage of time—typically perceived, both by most audiences and the *dramatis personae*, as a logical advancement—instead supports Benjamin's nonlinear and intermittent time schema. For example, our experience of Benjamin's graduation ceremony takes place long after it occurs. Tellingly, Kreuziger notes that the “ability to regard and use time in a flexible manner is one of the science fiction writer's special interests” (114). In the end, we learn that time's passage no longer submits to the units measured by clocks and chimes. Rather, Mr. E measures it by inventions, discoveries, space-flights, and encounters (of the third kind), all of which are, apparently, “only a tomorrow away,” perhaps because Depression-era science fiction is, understandably, filled with topics related to imminent expectation (92). Williams also offers his unique twist on time travel—another topic of importance in science fiction texts—by employing the Expressionistic and interactive flashback technique. Indeed, “there is hardly a major writer of science fiction who has not tried . . . chronological manipulation” (Rose and Rose 21). For all intents and purposes, the audience participates in Benjamin's excitement, and intimately shares his impressions with the aid of the play's auditory and visual effects.

Williams conjures a jaded, mid-twentieth century vision of America's rampant commercialism and quest for material security. For example, Mr. Gum ponders aloud the marketability of his factory's textile prototypes: "I don't know what type of person would wear a shirt like this" (*Stairs* 5). In the characters' exchanges of dialogue, color imagery assumes an important role throughout. In one pointed example, the Consolidated Shirtmakers' designer laments that: "[t]he stripes on the dickey should have been pale, *pale* blue but they're almost *pur-ple!*" (4). This preoccupation clearly denotes an Expressionistic influence, as do the play's symbolic settings, including one "backdrop" of "a medieval castle with a park about it" (70). Likewise, Williams calls for costumes—the carnival crowd wears "loud holiday clothes, straw hats with brilliant bands, etc."—designed to express, for example, the crowd's correspondingly intense emotion: "[t]hey are feverishly eager to laugh, desperate for movement, impatient of anything but trivial distraction" (70). Likewise, the mutely captivating, "dark" Beauty wears flashing "sequins" (71).

Although Expressionism in the American theater had already peaked in popularity before the mid-1930s, its experimental techniques remained available to later dramatists, and cropped up even in non-Expressionist plays, such as the Living Newspaper productions of the Federal Theater Project (M. A. Corrigan 377). Such stylistic imports helped to create Williams's fantasy atmosphere of mingled familiarity and alienation. In *Stairs*, the characters interact with the play's Expressionist backdrop as well as between and among themselves.

Williams's innovative arsenal of fantasy techniques includes both the characters' pseudo-monologues, in which Benjamin relives his embodied memories and in which

The Girl's boss, Warren B. Thatcher, speaks passionately to his mistress over the telephone, and their compulsive retelling of their hopes and desires in typically "imaginative gamesmanship or role-playing" (McGhee 28). As Thatcher exclaims, all "this sounds a little bit fantastic!" (*Stairs* 18). Many of the play's devices convey a Brechtian effect of alienation, and justify *Stairs*' characterizations as an experiment in consciousness-raising.

However, the play more or less lacks an ideologically assured element of Brechtian political coercion (Saddik, *Blueprints* 68). Notwithstanding Williams's "abandonment of old political forms" (69), it could also be said that this, his final full-length play as an inexperienced author (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* x) contains his most sophisticated use (xiii) of such Brechtian techniques as projections and pantomime. During this early period Williams's "aim was to use every medium possible to the stage" (xv) in order to convey strong concern with social issues, concerns couched "mainly in terms of their effects on individual existential anxieties" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 71). More importantly, Williams highlights contrasts between different characters, and how the ways in which the familiar and the unfamiliar relate to one another. In one example, the Beast makes radically heterogeneous and polyvalent (C. Freedman 37) contributions to the play's dialogue because "[h]e don't understand no English!" (*Stairs* 74). The quirky, idiosyncratic, and peculiar nature of these adventures imparts an almost grotesque quality to the play, which casts the normal office routines of the protagonists in ironic relief.

Gender, Race, and Culture

The Girl, like her young comrade, Bertha, displays a marked concern for the consequences of her own sexual behavior. On this note, Mr. E attempts, not too

successfully, to reassure her about childbearing practices “on World Number Two” (*Stairs* 94). Not surprisingly, *The Girl* is “depersonalized from the beginning through her generic identifier” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 73), just as most

characters in a science fiction story are usually treated . . . as representatives of their species than as individuals in their own right. They are matchstick men and matchstick women, for the reason that if they were not, the anthropocentric habit of our culture would cause us, in reading, to give altogether too little to the non-human forces which constitute the important remainder of the *dramatis personae*. . . [S]cience fiction offers the less cozy satisfaction of a landscape with figures; to ask that these distant manikins be shown in as much detail as possible as the subject of a portrait is evidently to ask the impossible. (Brigg 175)

Nonetheless, in her passive romantic suffering, her painful intellectual awakening, her ultimate struggle for independence, and her anguished political concerns, *The Girl* exemplifies the universal struggles that women face.⁹ Although Benjamin bases his relationship with *The Girl* “on reductionistic stereotypes of women’s bodies” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 71), *The Girl* defies such prescriptive roles by proving herself as an active participant in her own destiny, despite being led like “Alice In Wonderland” (*Stairs* 55) into a primitivist setting rife with male competition and displays of power.

⁹ Williams, however, does not examine such struggles solely through the lens of what would come to be known as protest or kitchen sink realism (such topics were “not usually . . . the terrain of the science fiction writer” [Brigg 175]).

In the fantasy world of pantomime portrayed in the Carnival episode, Williams confronts his audience with iconographic imagery that suggests how social constructions of race and gender play out in and through the bodies of vulnerable women. As prescribed in the production notes, Williams heightens the play's implicit sexual tensions; the audience can hardly mistake the episode's suggestive overtones, which provokes the audience's indignation and anger on Beauty's behalf.

The play's generalized iconography stereotypes the women of the play as passive creatures in pink dresses (*Stairs* 64), and highlights the men's firm sense of entitlement. The "Beauty and the Beast" episode focuses on the material body, dramatizes an attempted rape, and features The Girl's and the wives' rebellions. However, all these elements undercut the then-contemporary vision of women as passive receptacles (Stockton 13), while also providing an implicit critique of the figure of the beast-as-rapist and encouraging speculation about the greater significance of such disturbing vignettes.

In scene 11, "The Carnival," Williams likens Benjamin to his faceless counterparts in the volatile carnival crowd and, therefore, depicts both Ben and the mob as "these are the hungry-souled captives of the city let out for a night" (*Stairs* 70). During the performance, the crowd's approval swiftly dissipates in the "contradiction, experimentation, and play" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 69) common to both the world of the carnival and the faceless mob attendant upon it for, while the crowd initially hails Benjamin for saving Beauty from the Beast, they quickly reject his bombastic speech in favor of international good fellowship (*Stairs* 74):

[There is an instant reversal of public opinion. Loud hostile booing follows, together with a shower of popcorn, peanuts and pennies]

BEN: Okay, okay, I don't know nothin'! I'm just an impractical idealist!

ZOO KEEPER [shooting off his pistol in the air]: He's a *thief*! He just escaped from the zoo with fifteen foxes!

[He jumps on the box stage pursuing Ben around the Beast. They dodge this way and that.]

BEAST [grasping zoo keeper and holding him off]: *Tovarishch*?

BEN: No *tovarishch*!

[The Beast catches the Zoo Keeper under his arm and Ben leaps off the platform and makes a spectacular getaway on the child's scooter won on the wheel. The Girl starts after him but gives up with a cry of despair . . .]. (75)

Interestingly, as in other fantasy rape narratives, in *Stairs* (73), the objectified and brutalized female body no longer promises subjectivity and, therefore, exposes the privileged, masculine role in the techno-economy of capitalism, although, ironically, it could be said that this role "is revealed to be one that finally nullifies" the masculine as subject (Stockton 21).

In this episode, the portrayal of the Beast as a powerful automaton shares similar connotations with widely-held American perceptions of Russia during the 1930s, the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union. Here Williams touches on the self-serving nature of capitalistic chauvinism, which regards the gender relations of foreign—and especially communist—cultures as including bestial and degraded monsters.

Considering the play was written in 1940, when the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact began to crumble and American narratives were, in some cases,

peopled with denigrated portrayals of other nations and cultures, Williams's use of the quasi-Russian Beast merits scrutiny. However, Williams explodes the stereotype of the inhuman Red peasantry for, somewhat surprisingly, the Beast turns out to be not entirely unsympathetic: he quickly recovers from his trancelike state to aid Benjamin and The Girl in their escape from the gun-toting Zoo Keeper.

Given the unpredictably aggressive nature of a beast subject to grotesque psychological distortions, Williams clearly makes ample use of such playful or experimental techniques as unstable characterization, elaborate self-parody, irreverent allusiveness, comically inconclusive endings, and an eclectic mixture of styles and discourses, "most of which had been the stock and trade of Russian literature since the time of Pushkin and Gogol" (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 137) (however postmodern they now may seem).

"Didactic Material"

Williams readily admits that, throughout the composition of *Stairs*, he relied upon didactic material (*Stairs* xxi). As in *Stairs*, the majority of science fiction narratives of the period contain a didactic cue or lesson, instructing readers and spectators that the universe, including humanity, consists of a great zoo of horrible beasts in which "we see on every hand . . . fugue, flight, aggression, and panic" akin to the "one Orson Welles precipitated" in October of 1938 (Wylie 239).

Humanity and nature. Rose and Rose suggest that, within the generic context of science fiction, we should closely examine the concepts of *humanity* and *nature* since nature, as the environment and objective reality, determines the pattern of each character's development or evolution (83). In *Stairs*, this "can be seen both in terms of

the evolution of the species and in the development of the individual” (83). In this respect, Williams takes up a topic more commonly found in newer or more recent science fiction narratives—such as the New Wave of science fiction that crested in the 1960s—namely, “the reverse cause-and-effect relationship that in some sense [humanity] ‘molds’ nature . . . thus having a hand in determining the basic reality” (83). In *Stairs*, Benjamin is “caught between the desire to manage, and the desire to avoid being managed” (84), a paradox which Saddik exemplifies thusly: “[Williams is] aware that capitalism, while an individualist economic system, ironically winds up enslaving the individual” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 72). Moreover, this irony “is embedded in the system, as individualism is only promoted insofar as it threatens neither the status quo nor those in power” (72).

The beast within. If, as we have seen, a narrative preoccupation both with the status of women and the effects of technology were vital to the emergence of fantasy as a genre in its own right, then the influence of psychoanalytic theory must also be acknowledged for its powerful cultural impact. For example, Freud’s work in psychology modernized comparatively traditional concepts of atavism. As Williams demonstrates, by the time *Spring Storm* was written, the concept of atavistic regression (*Spring* 65) had become entrenched both in the popular and academic cultural ethos. Since the time of the Greeks, Western philosophy and religion have reinterpreted the notion of the *beast within*. As both Chantal Bourgault du Coudray and Joseph Gixti have argued, Freud tied his conception of the beast within to the human unconscious (Coudray 66). According to Carl Jung, residual impulses deriving from humanity’s link to an earlier, purportedly more bestial, incarnation continue to shape modern subjectivity. This view “led to

depictions of the masculine unconscious as programmed with violent and lustful impulses” (Coudray 94).

Individualism. Jung’s concept of individualism presents self-development as a type of journey or quest in which the subject attempts to reconcile the warring aspects of his psyche. Such attempts at integration resonate with the narrative structure of the fantasy genre. However, individuation, as understood by Freud, expresses itself as a negative impulse that can only exacerbate psychic conflict. Thus, according to Freud, “a happy person never fantasizes, only an unsatisfied one” (*Civilization* 42). Jung, on the other hand, saw fantasy as “the creative activity whence issue the solutions to all answerable questions; it is the mother of all possibilities” (qtd. in Coudray 141). He further argues that individual fantasies spring from positive impulses which we ought to embrace rather than deny.

In *Stairs* Williams makes use of dramatic alienation effects to express a fresh evaluation of individualism as a form of self-expression with political overtones, an individualism that has been associated with a “uniquely transitional moment in the history of European modes of production” (M. Freedman 75). Accordingly, Williams presents Benjamin as another white collar worker who finds himself exhausted, consigned to a cubicle, and detached from any understanding of the larger project in which he apparently plays a part. Consolidated Shirtmakers even dismisses the branch designer, yet the employees, under compulsion, continue to produce items for consumption that nonetheless lack the palpable materiality of a working class product (Stockton 21). As both Puschmann-Nalenz and Saddik indicate, despite an innate tendency toward defeatism, the message of the fantastic dystopian narrative

. . . is the glorification of individualism; [this] world view . . . exults in the revolt against conventional ideas (conventional as seen from the point of view of society) and against the passivity of the masses.

(Puschmann-Nalenz 97)

Thus Williams's establishes his dystopian vision as a non-traditional testimony to "existential human ideals and the imprisoned state of the human soul in an age of increasing spiritual emptiness and impersonality under American industrial capitalism" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 71). Although Benjamin lacks a clear commitment to the collective good, Williams does not portray him as elitist. Neither is the lovers' "final escape" a "definitive and easy solution" (72).

Spirituality and artificial reality. In addition to Benjamin's individualistic motivations, especially those shared by such late Depression-era science fiction heroes as Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, Benjamin forges an Expressionistic relationship with his milieu. In keeping with his fantastic ability to generate his own reality through his powerful imagination, Benjamin acts as a kind of demiurge, a prototypical Mr. E, whose creative powers anticipate, on a smaller scale, Mr. E's. As the prospective father of untold millions of human beings (*Stairs* 93), Benjamin will perform an important paternal function, a role which, throughout the play, he seems to sense and even prepare himself for, despite his estrangement from Alma (an estrangement which he glosses over, instead of explaining, during a conversation with The Girl after the new pair spend the night together: "[r]eality is composed of some very harsh ingredients, little girl" [78]).

The Girl's meeting with Benjamin comes at a vulnerable juncture in her experience, when she returns to work after nightfall in order to reclaim a regrettable love-

letter to the object of her obsession, Warren B. Thatcher, her indifferent boss. Williams's poignant statement regarding the play's gender-based power differential highlights the fact that The Girl's perception of romantic hopelessness and near-total alienation drives her attempt to break into her place of employment, instead of getting out of it, as Benjamin aspires to do (48). Thus, Williams makes us aware of the fundamental contradiction of the situation by identifying it, paradoxically, with the play's ideological message, a message that "simultaneously proposes and mocks spirituality" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75). By the same token, we find throughout *Stairs* that the experience that offers the most significant measure of authenticity and impact for the lovers—that is, prior to the couple's teleportation by Mr. E—issues forth from a form of denial based on substitutions and sublimations of grim realities: "I'll be Warren and you will be the swan!" (*Spring* 69).

Coincidentally, as we find in many postmodern and science fiction texts, the characters in *Stairs* here experience a so-called reality with such a measure of alienating distance and with such a lack of emotional commitment that it "appears fictitious and *is* fictitious for those involved," as Puschmann-Nalenz emphatically notes: "the artificial alone is capable of exciting emotions and concern and redeeming the self from its alienation" (54). Although both The Girl and Benjamin accept these bizarre substitutions—"[i]t's a fair transaction!" (*Stairs* 69)—Benjamin initiates his most cherished and rewarding relationship with a woman by invoking the embodied memory of his college sweetheart, Helen. Although Helen exists only as a memory, Williams deems the ghostly image of Helen as a character in her own right, worthy of a given name (unlike The Girl). Moreover, in Faustian fashion, Benjamin's relationship with the

ephemeral Helen appears, at first, as more real to him than with the generically identified Girl (Saddik, *Blueprints* 70), or even more real than his dehumanized, fiendish, and cannibalistic wife (*Stairs* 26), Alma, described in the stage directions as a “woman corresponding to the spider of a certain species that devours her mate when he has served his procreative function” (26).

Instead of finding the ability to achieve a fresh take on their lives, and to launch a set of new beginnings, both Benjamin and The Girl gradually accept an increasingly indeterminate existence. Here, Williams introduces a note of ambivalence that extends toward their new, and mind-boggling, respective roles as cosmic incarnations of Adam and Eve. The relationship that the lovers finally negotiate suggests the play’s fantastic, topsy-turvy mutability. Additionally, Williams intensifies our sense of the lovers’ vulnerability as they express their terror at the possibility of becoming slaves to Mr. E’s admittedly ill-conceived experiments.¹⁰

Williams subscribes to innovative approaches to various topics—approaches currently common to many postmodern texts—and even parodies science fiction as a social by-product of modern American culture. For example, *Stairs*’ free and ample references to science fiction fantasy narratives invite generic associations which “illustrate a whimsy that characterizes the entire play” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 69). While the first four full-length plays conclude with deadly accidents, shootings, and suicides, *Stairs* ends on a promising, if somewhat ambivalent, note.

¹⁰ Mr. E’s regal costume evokes the persona of a wizard or witch-doctor, and Saddik refers to Mr. E as a mad scientist (*Blueprints* 75), although Benjamin addresses him simply as “Doc” (*Stairs* 93).

An Apocalyptic View

In *The Shattered Ring*, Lois and Stephen Rose argue that “totalitarian scenes in science fiction are actually objectifications of a general psychic state of anticipation in today’s world” (36). Kreuziger notes something similar, in his underlining of the link between science fiction topics on the one hand and apocalyptic topics on the other (3). Rose and Rose point out that science fiction’s preoccupation with a morally neutral tone relays a certain element of detachment from what “we sometimes regard as human ‘progress’” and, further, they consider how such progress “may be traced as much to hate as to love, to fear as to the desire for pleasure, and may prove no progress at all” (68). Mr. E’s definitive statements concerning human limitations assume the “incapacity of the present world to endure” without an impending holocaust, or “some similar disaster that would clear the stage of human activity as we know it” (23).

The purportedly scientific nature of the topics under scrutiny have already been explored exhaustively in sci-fi and, consequently, may be considered technically dated (Kreuziger 89). As Lester del Rey states, the single most important topic in science fiction—just as, ultimately, in *Stairs*—“has been that of getting into space” (328). By not predicating his spaceflight on scientific advancements, Williams sidesteps the common, outmoded statements, described in the old stories (Asimov, *Just Thirty* 273).

In America, fantasy literature, including its science fiction subtype, takes up a strongly utopian slant (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 91). However, for Williams, apocalyptic scenarios conjure up an Armageddon of human proscription and, ostensibly, extinction. As such, they offer a critique of prophecy, as well as “an expanded horizon for ideological proclamation” (Kreuziger 2). Clearly, Mr. E’s intervention hardly offers any

realistic solution; in fact, it is “so outrageous and fraught with so many uncertainties” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75) that it remains manifestly indeterminate on a formal level, given that the solution haphazardly binds the play’s various narrative strands. Hence, the ending is deliberately arbitrary.

Moreover, the play differs from Williams’s earlier plays, both in tone and in spirit, as Williams reminds us in “Random Observations” (*Stairs* xxi). In *Stairs*, Williams flirts ambivalently with apocalyptic forms so as to explore the “conflict or tension of opposites” (96), a conflict that he resolves, albeit questionably, with the divine intervention of Mr. E. However, Williams makes but limited use of topics that arise at the penultimate climax of anarchic individualism—such as “the time of chaos” (Rose and Rose 23)—and conveyed through the ominous proclamations of Mr. E: “[o]ur reason for this experiment is the rather sorry mess that having two sexes has made of things down on World Number One” (*Stairs* 95). Williams makes liberal use of humor, bawdy and otherwise, throughout *Stairs*, although most science-fiction writers generally avoid the introduction of humorous elements (Pratt 89). Williams, however, both proposes and mocks traditional science fiction resolutions (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75), whether apocalyptic or utopian. While Williams eschews traditional Christian symbolism, he embraces the central mystery of human existence, in the case of science fiction: whether “life comes after death, or whether life arises out of death and is affirmed through it” (Kreuziger 113). However, Williams’s vision does not fall into the classically apocalyptic narrative category, since *Stairs* registers the ambiguities and limitations of human desire, rather than any facing up to, or testimony to the fact of, human limitation (114).

“*We Are Not Alone*”

According to Kreuziger, this textual mode of sustained and yet imminent expectation falls under the topical rubric, “we are not alone” (Kreuziger 3), thereby signalling the tension between expectations for the future on the one hand, and the present responses to such expectations on the other. This “not alone” tagline applies to the entire cast of *Stairs*, as the main protagonists learn, collectively, about the ultimate fantasies of science fiction, as demonstrated by their assertion that they are not the only beings in the universe (*Stairs* 95). Interestingly, this ambiguous statement presents us with a “negation of a negation,” since “[s]cience fiction fantasy is about the suspension of disbelief” (Kreuziger 97). Kreuziger adds that this

. . . trusting faith in the existence of other intelligences in the universe is not merely another stage tacked on to the consensus future history of science fiction; it constitutes a wholly separate formal mode of relating the promise which exceeds all expectations. (98)

Furthermore, the cosmic “we are not alone” concept presupposes the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial beings and, as such, provides a formula for human existence, one in which expectation is imminent, and “time will be measured by signs, interventions, paradigm-events and miracles” (125). Chiefly, Mr. E, whose beard “flows purely and whitely in the freshening wind of a summer twilight” (*Stairs* 92), succeeds in invoking in the audience certain apocalyptic expectations (largely a result of the eerie, episodic laughter with which he signals the play’s scene changes). In *Stairs*, time no longer consists of the past, the present, and the future, for it is “measured not according to the ordinary events of the real world, but according to the extraordinary events”

(Kreuziger 213). Williams concludes the play by questioning the reality of all such events, as well as the very nature of time itself. Ambiguity even holds indistinct sway over his final stage directions:

What is it? The Millennium?—Possibly! Who knows?

Voices in the crowd repeat, “What is it? The Millennium?” “The

Millennium” grows to a repeated murmur as the crowd looks up to

where Ben has disappeared. Perhaps a banner reading THE

MILLENNIUM appears from that direction . . .

THE CURTAIN FALLS

THE END. (*Stairs* 99)

Gender Relations in the Dystopian Now

Williams recasts a number of the sexist conventions inherited from the pulp science fiction criteria by raising pertinent issues that address the prescriptive nature of women’s social roles. As Hale makes clear, the audience responds to The Girl when she sheds her passivity: when she confronts her boss, she becomes real (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xvi). Williams’s examination of the status of women at the beginning of World War II, and of their seemingly dichotomous roles as stay-at-home wives and office-girls (*Stairs* 16), hardly resolves itself through any concrete plan (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75). The sexual and emotional energies associated with the family do not result in unity, but in conflict and recrimination (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 157). In addition, throughout *Stairs*, Williams anticipates the Foucauldian collusion between sex and domination through his use of various images that suggest atavistic psychic states, and even romantic torment: “I’m not ugly . . . I’m not a duckling—I’m a snow-white swan” (*Stairs* 85);

“we’ll have to . . . build you a little private office, a penthouse kind of, where you can associate with pigeons” (8); “I’m terribly in love!” (19). In another schema, the play’s authority figures make note of Benjamin’s displays of individualism, registered throughout both in costume and in dialogue, by way of keeping tabs on his whereabouts:

GUM: Where does he disappear to?

ALFRED: That is a mystery, Mr. Gum.

GUM: We don’t have any mysteries in the Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers.

ALFRED: I didn’t think we did. But Benjamin Murphy seems to have created one for us. Johnnie, go look for Murphy and bring him back dead or alive. (4)

In light of his reaction to Mr. E’s proposed form of “monosexual reproduction” (95), whereby Ben “designates The Girl as his reproductive partner” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 74) and, given that he abandons his pregnant wife, we wonder what kind of father of a new human race and on a distant star Ben will make (*Stairs* 96). Through his eccentric dress and erratic behavior, Benjamin transmits ambivalence concerning his responsibilities both toward his pregnant wife—“you women are too easygoing” (28)—and toward his job at the Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers. Nonetheless, after a series of protracted and Expressionistically dramatized inner struggles, Benjamin comes first to understand, and next to proselytize, his new philosophy. More importantly, since society in his view foists a flawed, dehumanized system upon him, he seeks to relinquish all burdens of responsibility. Still, his desperate attempts to be different earn

only ridicule and charges of insanity on the part of his employer, his fellow workers, his friends, and his spouse: “[l]ost your mind!” (30).

Spiritual Entropy

After various dramatic realizations of alternative possibilities generated by Benjamin’s fevered imagination, and resurrected from unreality by dint of the other protagonists’ emotional recollections and reactions—“I was sacrificing a life of adventure and excitement for the life of a petty wage earner behind a pair of white lace curtains . . . [y]ou cheat!” (*Stairs* 35)—Benjamin declares that a different result had once been thought possible. Interestingly, such historical turning points and subsequent revisitations are also common topics in science fiction. Kreuziger argues that science fiction’s predilection toward espousing authoritarian politics “is due to the fact that the *fiat* of a ruler [such as the omnipotent Mr. E] brings about change instantaneously” (92) or, in this case, in the whiz-bang of the play’s inconclusive, millennial future (*Stairs* 99). Despite Benjamin’s many discouragements, his need for artistic expression and his deep desire to articulate his inner longings can no longer be denied. As Williams emphasizes in *Stairs*, through his dramatic preoccupation with the passage of time from “the bell at the front of the office,” which “sets up a harsh clamor” at regular intervals (13), to the final chant of “THE MILLENNIUM” (99), the characters achieve exemption neither from the entropic drift of the cosmos nor from the gradual atrophy of their own physical bodies, despite their compulsive applications of “Vapo-Rubs” and cold cream beauty masks (44).

As Puschmann-Nalenz notes, only a handful of science fiction writers abandoned traditional, invariably unquestioning, representations of classical science, turning away

from “contemporary scientific and technological devices” (Puschmann-Nalenz 18).

Williams was one of a handful of dramatists, including Rice, to move in the experimental direction of the new stagecraft during the late 1930s. By repeatedly changing the setting throughout the play’s nineteen scenes, and by underscoring the characters’ respective class and gender identifications— “[h]is secretary got married, he needed another, and I had just completed a three months’ course at Rubicam’s Business College” (*Stairs* 63)— Williams emphasizes both the gradual destabilization and enervation, both of Benjamin’s fantasies, and of those belonging to the main protagonists. In short, a general sense of entropy envelops this particular cross-section of “little-wage earners of the world” (xxi). Williams also seems to make unconscious use of a common science fiction formula, that of Gödel’s Theorem (Hite 123), which posits that “there is always the surprise of something outside the realm of knowing which we thought was complete” (hence Mr. E’s *machina*). Such inscrutable mysteries are often deemed to be at odds with hard science fiction, which typically privileges scientific detail and technological plausibility above the unfathomable motivations of the characters.

In keeping with Williams’s unique fantastic vision, Benjamin flees his tedious, mechanized job by regressing into memories of the past, creeping into the City Zoo by night to free the foxes and, ultimately, joining in the sanctioned chaos of the carnival. Thus, fantastic characters and situations dominate the action until the play’s conclusion, at which point Mr. E takes up the subject of universal control. In portraying the universe as arbitrary and subject to the whims of Mr. E, Williams rejects the logical, post-Newtonian order, and presents instead a “fictional analogue to that world, one in which

characters and readers must deal with uncertainties as radical as those of physics” (Hume 190–91).

Benjamin’s quest for meaning ends when Mr. E decrees: “I came to the conclusion that I had made a dreadful mistake when I created the race of man on earth” (*Stairs* 96). In support of this decree, Williams ruthlessly lampoons Western capitalism and its pervasively sinister moral authority (98), along with the mechanical emptiness of its routine performances (12).

Philosophical Considerations

Philip Wylie maintains that a “sampling of the ‘psychology’ of the ordinary science-fiction story” reveals that sci-fi writers tend to cater to humanity’s expectations that “a ‘deity’ of some sort” will “fix things up” for us, because such “invented legends attempt to compensate for a sense of insecurity, doubt of self, and inferiority feelings,” much like Benjamin’s and *The Girl’s* (238). Thus does he draw our attention to the “quasireligious and philosophical aspects of the ‘modern mythology’ that is science fiction” (Wylie 232). As in other such science fiction texts, the mechanized and stultifying dystopia in which Benjamin lives and works typically militates against individual freedom and self-actualization, and the protagonists “are subject to forces [which they] can neither comprehend nor control” (Rose and Rose 76).

Although Williams does away with the scientific and technological gimmickry of hard science fiction in *Stairs*, he nonetheless makes use of such traditional science-fiction topics as space travel, which “opens up the new frontier . . . as the most obvious avenue to an extended perception of nature, both in terms of distance and of the visions of very different natural environments” (73). Extrapolating from the theories of Albert Einstein,

Williams co-opts and then plays with such topics as “the transferability of energy and matter, the possibilities of other dimensions, and other space-time complexes” (73):

BEN [intrepidly]: Which one is it, Doc?

MR. E: Why that one, way up there. [He points with his sparkler.]

[Ben peers through his cupped hands.]

MR. E: We just turned it out this morning. We call it World Number Two.

BEN: Completely furnished? (*Stairs* 94)

However, Williams’s quasiscientific cosmology, in keeping with his inclusion of science fiction imagery and subject matter, pushes this dramatic experimentation beyond either realism or poetic lyricism and into the realm of fantasy.

Peter Brigg suggests that the German term *Weltanschauung* commonly applied to the work of James Joyce and to that of other authors, such as Nietzsche—i.e., the “worldview which breaks down the barrier between science and humanism”—seeks to combine unpredictable, non-literary, references with the scholastic imagination (Rose and Rose 58). After his extensive foray (from 1935 to 1938) into the protest genre, Williams perhaps decided, in 1940, to experiment with “the transformative possibility inherent in uncertainty, contradiction, [and] experimentation” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 68) in the lives of the clerks toiling anonymously at “the bottom of our social architecture,” like Messrs. P, D, Q, and T (*Stairs* xxii). Saddik confirms that in *Stairs* Williams is “less concerned with class bias than with existential humanist ideals” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 69).

The play’s subject matter connects it to postmodern notions of authenticity and independence, which call for an ability to contextualize one’s relation to society while acknowledging, at the same time, that “the manipulation of the individual by his social

role takes from him his autonomy and, if he is not cautious and alert, also his total moral integrity” (Puschmann-Nalenz 191). The topics that clearly link *Stairs* to postmodern texts include the paradoxes inherent in the respective mental states of Benjamin and The Girl, in the experiences defined by their individual illusions and by the deceptions they fabricate for others and, finally, in the romantic fantasy that they construct together.

The very notion of postmodernism continues, notoriously, to defy definition, although widely acknowledged to have grown out of modernism. However, *postmodernism* places a marked emphasis on ironic reflexivity, the breakdown of the unified subject, the marginality of cultural discourses, and the dethroning or de-centering of master narratives. As Saddik argues, the metatheatrical aspects of *Stairs*, in which the characters perform both for each other and for the audience, and the way in which the text remains open-ended—albeit an open-endedness “very different from Brecht’s” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75)—could be considered “proto-postmodern” in its playful reflexivity, and in its questioning of the generic codes that frame the action of the play.

The postmodern aesthetic, which Linda Hutcheon addresses from a variety of critical positions, seeks to account for the prevalence of both parodic and ironic elements in contemporary cultural texts (Rutland 5). The fusion of irreverence and solemnity that establishes the mood of *Stairs* typifies many postmodernist works. Some such works seek to express political statements through the voices of their radically de-centered protagonists while questioning, paradoxically, their own capacity to do so. Such contradictions make *Stairs* a dystopian play in accordance with Booker’s definition of the term (*Dystopian Impulse* 142–43). The topic of autonomy, and of Benjamin’s tragicomic attempts to achieve it, frequently comes up in the dialogue of many characters throughout

the play. For example, according to Williams's society-as-cage metaphor (*Stairs* 42, 50, 66, 68, 91), individuals cannot escape their collective enslavement (Saddik, *Blueprints* 70), a situation that we find all too evident in this lively parody of dystopian plays.

The use of irony throughout the “carnavalesque chapter in literary history that emerged out of a decaying modern paradigm . . . [was] resurrected in the newly developed theoretical domain of postmodernism” (White xi). Barry Rutland sees the ironic, or postmodern, mode as indicative of the breakdown of discursive certainty (Rutland 5), which paves the way for what Bakhtin calls the radical laughter, the generative potentialities of Carnival (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 96). A number of ironic perspectives motivate the actions of the protagonists in *Stairs*, which unfolds in “an age that began to abandon faith in absolutes in favor of an acknowledgement of the concepts of reality and truth as complex, often relative, and open for negotiation” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 70). In short, *Stairs* effectively resists categorization and “thus anticipates the blurring of genre and form so often discussed in connection with postmodernism” (Shackelford 108).

Sexuality and Disconnection

In his recourse to subject matter typical of science fiction, such as the “we are not alone” trope, Williams invokes the topic of autonomy, as he does in the majority of his full-length apprentice plays. He also proposes a mechanistic view of reproductive destiny. Such topics are also to be found in certain postmodernist works, as well as in a number of science fiction texts (Puschmann-Nalenz 182).

Keith Booker cogently asserts that “a lack of meaningful dialogue with the past often paradoxically plays an important role in the impoverishment of the present”

(*Dystopian Impulse* 63). However, in *Stairs*, Benjamin's exceptional "dialogue with the past" plays a significant part in signalling his disconnection with the present: "I wanted to marry a girl who wrote lyric verse" (*Stairs* 41). In dystopian science fiction texts, many characters quite commonly question social traditions and conventions, as does Benjamin in his denial both of customary domesticity—he "spot lights Jim's connubial bed, no bed of roses" (82)—and productivity (27). We may also note this same trend in *The Girl's* release from the constraints that resulted from her past adoration of her boss: "[i]t's like a fever—it started out very slowly" (65). Likewise, in the case of Jimmy's regrets, Williams does not strive for verisimilitude, but a mode of disconnection:

HER VOICE [like a pneumatic drill]: Rise and shine! Rise and shine! Rise
and shine!

JIM [slowly propping himself up on his elbows.]: Huh?

EDNA: [still more enthusiastically]: Rise and shine! Rise and shine! Rise
and shine!

[Jim stares for a moment with absolute incredulity into the face of Edna.]

JIM [abysmally groaning]: MY GOD! [He flops back down on the bed
and covers his face.]

BLACKOUT. (82)

Intriguingly, the suggestion of the "potential complicity" (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 75) between the family and the official structures of power, structures which Benjamin staunchly repudiates throughout *Stairs*, has also been noted by Foucault, who sees sexuality as a principal means by which modern society administers and controls the behavior of its citizens, conceiving the family as the obvious focal point for socialization:

“[s]ince the eighteenth century the family has become an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love; . . . sexuality has its privileged point of development in the family” (*History* 108).

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud suggests that civilizations tend to repress sexuality, all the more effectively to sublimate sexual energies into activities that benefit society as a whole. Hence, a “large amount of the psychological energy which [society] uses for its own purposes has to be withdrawn from sexuality” (Freud, *Civilization* 57). This seems to be corroborated by Benjamin’s view of reproductive gender inversions, which he regards as “terrifying” (*Stairs* 95), whereas Mr. E’s more sanguine view recalls Freud’s suggestion that “modern society tolerates sexuality only as a way of propagating the race” (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 163).

Williams presents us with an example of Freudian repression, in the case of the Murphys’ unfulfilling marriage. Benjamin finds himself caught up in this domestic dialectic of repression and desire. This leads Alma to leave him—“I’m calling from the bus station, I’m going to leave Ben” (*Stairs* 81)—even as he substitutes fantasy for reality, replacing his current love interest, The Girl, with a swan image. Instead of arguing with Alma about whether or not he was “discharged at the office” (30), Benjamin flees from his pregnant, screaming wife— “[w]hat a dreadful bitch that woman is” (39)—and soon thereafter convinces The Girl to “join him for a night’s adventure of his own orchestration, placing her in his fantasy narrative and blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 70). In the end, having meticulously planned the couple’s reproductive destiny, Mr. E succeeds in making relationships, including sexual relationships, obsolete. Williams leaves us to wonder whether these breeding automatons

will emulate the reproduction pattern of asexual amoebae (perhaps a referential throwback to humanity's mysterious, primordial origins).

However, despite *Stairs*' numerous Freudian resonances, one detects a more Foucauldian interpretation of the "mutual implication of sex and politics" (Malak 9). For example, sexuality in *Stairs* does not necessarily beget lasting emotional bonds—"Alma, my wife—once a delectable female, now a *fiend*" (*Stairs* 24)—nor is it based upon sex (owing to the intervention of Mr. E). Instead, Williams arranges the play around the limiting, stultifying impact of the hierarchical roles that the lovers long to supersede:

GIRL: [Projecting onto him the identity of her loved one]: Warren! —

Warren, Warren!

BEN: What did you call me?

GIRL: [raptly whispering]: Warren! . . .

[She leans back rapturously. He presses her slowly to the grass. The carousel goes on and on with its distant, ghostly music as . . .]

LIGHTS DIM

[Mr. E is respectfully silent offstage]. (69)

Benjamin seems to fantasize that The Girl, like Leda, "being so caught up, put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop" (Yeats 161), and appears both surprised and disappointed that she poses mundane questions. His fantasy empowers the character of The Girl, however, in that Benjamin conceives of her character as that of a "postmodern chameleon" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 73), struggling to fulfill various atavistic incarnations of femininity: "[o]ne moment you're a swan, the next you're a bird of paradise!" (*Stairs* 76).

Benjamin escapes the “mechanization of the individual under industrialism” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75) in a more constructive and definitive fashion than does his more resigned friend, Jimmy, a character that denounces Benjamin’s rebellion as “a stupid gesture, a useless act of resistance” (*Stairs* 42). As with Alma, material comfort and security make up for Jimmy’s lack of personal or spiritual (Saddik, *Blueprints* 74) fulfillment. Instead of simply acknowledging, and passively accepting, his failure to realize his potential—as Jimmy does: “I recognized a certain amount of truth in your statements” (*Stairs* 39)—Benjamin confronts, head on, the grim realities of his existence in each fantasy episode. In the end, Benjamin makes good his escape by vanishing into an alien dimension of time and space through channelling the resources of his imagination. His powerful fantasies thus provide a source of strength as well as a means of retreating from reality. In them, he revisits his youth (31); decries and abandons his stifling home and work situations (7; 30); and longs to realize the potential of his formative years in outer space: “[a] man with your ambitions, why not Murphy?” (95).

Compellingly, Williams adapts his innovative approach to the traditional worldview of science fiction, in drawing on experimental imagery and motifs in order to propose a new way of describing the human condition. He appears to come out against technocracy, the system believed by its proponents to offer a more productive alternative to capitalism and supported in the 1930s by science fiction aficionados such as Hugo Gernsback, among others.¹¹ However, Williams “is rather playful in his approach and sees change in abandoning old political forms to ‘experiment’ and reforge something

¹¹ Gernsback briefly edited *The Technocracy Review*, inspired by Thorstein Veblen’s 1921 book, *The Engineers and the Price System*; Williams intimates that Boss Whalen adheres to similar technocratic principles in his so-called scientifically run prison in *Nightingales*.

entirely new out of the old” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 68). Unlike *The Adding Machine*’s Mr. Zero, Benjamin, as an active, highly individualistic being, stops short of being reduced to an object of mechanization.

Science Fiction’s Fantasy Subject Matter

As noted earlier, Williams seems to anticipate postmodern, post-Structuralist fantasies, fantasies in which the mind “speaks in tongue-less images,” although Scholes assures us that the word still remains our “fleetest and most delicate instrument of communication” (*Structural Fabulation* 38). With a view to defining science fiction, Scholes imagines “some dislocation in space or time from the present reality” (24). Scholes further argues for a structural analysis of science fiction’s roots in fantasy (103). Kreuziger, on the other hand, puts a simpler spin on Scholes’s approach, calling the Structuralist approach a “response to the need for a coherent system of meaning in the face of the demise of all the classical systems of meaning” (70). For Kreuziger, Structuralism provides a bulwark in face of the forces of postmodern chaos.

With respect to science fiction’s incongruous subject matter, David Ketterer, in his study of *New Worlds for Old*, argues that sci-fi serves as a logical outlet for the apocalyptic imagination that characterizes much of mainstream literature, and that such apocalyptic visions have both a “positive and a negative charge” (13), here borrowing Frye’s terminology in *Anatomy of Criticism*. *Stairs* emits a positive charge in Williams’s envisioning a new horizon for humanity in a future world “freed from disease, corruption, poverty, and [perhaps] even death” (Kreuziger 72). The play does stop short, however, of deifying Mr. E as “humanity’s salvation” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 75).

The motifs with which Williams concludes *Stairs* revolve around the fantastic concepts of space travel, the apocalypse, alien overlords, and asexual reproduction. By way of expressing the political undertones of Williams's protest topics, Mr. E contextualizes the Depression for the audience, in the following penultimate, iconic, but ironically down to earth, gloss at the play's conclusion:

MR. E: At last I come to the inescapable conclusion that I made a dreadful mistake when I created the race of man on earth. I decided to correct it by blotting the whole thing out. Good! —But what happens? My heavenly spyglass happens to fall on a little clerk named Murphy. No hero out of books, no genius, mind you, just an ordinary little white-collar worker in a wholesale shirt corporation. A man whose earning capacity has never exceeded eighteen-fifty per week. At first I am only a little amused by his antics. Then I chuckle. Then I laugh out loud. Then all at once I find myself—weeping a little. (*Stairs* 96–97)

At the end of the stairway, Williams solidly grounds the play in the fantasy genre and, even more specifically, within the subtype of science fiction. In *Stairs*, as in other science fiction texts, ranging from magazines and radio serials to the stage, “the limits of space and time, of death and reality, are effortlessly transcended simply by the wishes of the characters” (McGhee 11). In the case of *Stairs*, the characters dance with joy and shout “hooray!” at the prospect of leaving earth (*Stairs* 96). Here, with the blurring of the “distinction between acting and being,” *Stairs* enters the realm of total fantasy; fantasy offers “the only way out” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 73). Mr. E's experiment (*Stairs* 95) throws into question the way in which “any culture or period denies or absorbs into an obviously

inadequate framework any radical departure from its expectations” (Brigg 113). The contradiction of prescribed roles and inadequate frameworks “also comes up in a different sense at the end of *Stairs*, when Benjamin’s boss, Mr. Gum, realizes that he has lost control of his employees, who are all fleeing to the roof” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 74). He admonishes his managers to “[s]mile, you sons of bitches!” and to “[p]lay like this is what you always wanted!” (*Stairs* 98).

Attempts at Transformation

The play’s fantasy caricatures—Beauty, the Beast, and the sad Clown—betray a collective angst as a result of their inability to alter their status quo, despite their many struggles to do so. But by surviving the kind of apocalyptic cleansing that was almost visited upon “World Number One” by this extraterrestrial overseer, Williams’s protagonists in *Stairs* gain sufficient courage to attempt undergoing a radical interior transformation in response to their stifling external settings (7). The audience follows the lovers’ points of view because, in spite of their purported status as average wage earners (*Stairs* xxi), the pair embraces a sweeping idealistic vision, whether romantic or heroic. Interestingly, The Girl, whose anonymous moniker characterizes her as a so-called everywoman, gives a rousing “we the people” speech (Saddik, *Blueprints* 67) in which she decries social stratification and privilege (*Stairs* 85). In another example of idealism, Benjamin’s independence marks him out as the hero of the piece. More importantly, the origin of this reward-based social model, much like that of the Gothic,

was . . . coined by the past and by history, especially by the European Enlightenment and the beginnings of modern sciences in the late seventeenth century. In SF texts there are a striking number of

reminiscences or explicit hints referring to historical concepts of the universe and to philosophical systems and relating them to SF's concept of an imaginary alternate reality, especially to the image of humanity in them; they reach from Descartes to German Idealism and Transcendentalism, to Darwinism and to the Phenomenological School of the early twentieth century. In SF there seems to be a general silent agreement that this image of human nature is so durable or unchangeable that it could also serve as a model in a different world.

(Puschmann-Nalenz 102)

Williams metaphorically exemplifies the violence attendant upon regressive attitudes and behaviors when Benjamin “clips” (*Stairs* 57) the Zoo Keeper on the chin, and when “the Beast turns into a handsome young man after he essentially rapes Beauty” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 72). Williams even seems to send up traditional male fantasies by registering an admittedly depersonalized alarm (72) on the part of The Girl at the prospect of “[o]ne sex doing the whole thing all by itself!” (95).

Williams transforms Benjamin, once a total outcast, into a customary “everyman,” a “father [to] untold millions” (*Stairs* 93), and the type of character that finds himself thoroughly at home within fantasy's science fiction subgenre.¹² However, the transformation seems incomplete. Although Benjamin kisses The Girl and expresses

¹² Commenting upon the kinds of fantasy protagonists prevalent in science fiction, C. S. Lewis notes that “[t]o tell how odd things struck odd people is to have an oddity too much: he who is to see strange sights must not himself be strange [but] ought to be as nearly as possible Everyman or Anyman” (65). Yet the part of Benjamin Murphy, the “universal ‘little man’” (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xv) was written, as Williams states in his preface, for actor Burgess Meredith—who starred in, most notably at the time, the film adaptation of *Winterset* (1936)—a move that “tied [Murphy] to realism” (xv). Perhaps “creating the part with Burgess Meredith in mind” (*Stairs* xxi) helped Williams refine the requisite complex and contradictory combinations of personal qualities by dint of which Benjamin catches the eye of the divine Mr. E, a character that plucks him from his unfulfilling, pedestrian life.

his love for her on the shores of a “wide black lake, willow-fringed” (59), the audience soon recognizes that Benjamin lacks the ability to follow through with this betrothal, being married, which reveals the essentially empty nature of his gesture:

BEN [taking her hand]: Reality is composed of some very harsh ingredients, little girl. One of them is the fact that I’m out of a job, or almost out of job. Another one is—I’m married!

GIRL: Oh. [She turns slowly.] This is reality—isn’t it?

BEN: Yeah. Kind of, I guess. [Pause.] Don’t be resentful.

GIRL: I’m not,

BEN: Please don’t be hurt about anything.

GIRL: I’m not.

BEN: Tonight has been nice, don’t you think? (78)

The Strangeness of the Fantasy Setting

Williams invites us to draw a parallel between fantastic outer landscapes, especially those of distant galaxies, and the inner mindscape of fantasy. His stage directions call for Expressionistic settings to convey the fantasy mindscape that he strives to reflect. Instead of merely exploring outer space, *Stairs* explores the deeply hidden dimensions of Benjamin’s innermost thoughts, including his memories and stream-of-consciousness imaginings, while yet acknowledging to his audience that reality was open for negotiation (Saddik, *Blueprints* 73). However, in that part of reality that includes the mundane lives of the little people at the bottom (*Stairs* xii), the forces of chaos and futility clearly dominate.

The Roof

Williams sets his fantasy close to home. According to Freud, in chapter 5 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, domestic settings often bear the import of a range of disturbing sexual connotations, and structures such as elevators and stairs—whether to an attic or to the roof—signify psychic as well as physical orientations (*Interpretation* 192).

Undoubtedly, Williams displays the most significant iconographic symbol in *Stairs to the Roof* is the play's title, which anticipates the inevitability of the cosmic exploration embodied by Mr. E.

By taking over the stairs to the roof and, indeed, the roof itself, against the wishes of the Consolidated Shirtmakers, Benjamin explores the tensions inherent in the natural world, and the dialectic between entropy and negentropy (i.e., regeneration). He also explores the artificially imposed forces of human order which, as Williams demonstrates, originate from the mechanization and the attendant dehumanization of society:

BEN: . . . I'm the Christopher Columbus of the Continental roof. Say—in case I don't go up there anymore, I'd like you to do something for me. I have some dependents up there. A beautiful flock of pigeons. They're used to me feeding them every day about noon. I may be called out of town on business and I'd like to leave some trustworthy person in charge.

GIRL: What do you feed them?

BEN: Golden bantam corn.

GIRL: I'd be very happy to assume that responsibility for you.

BEN: Many thanks. Go as far as the elevator goes and then keep going.—
You'll see a flight of stairs. (*Stairs* 53)

Distorted Set Designs

Williams, in his staging directions, uses a distorted set design to mirror Benjamin's inner conflicts: "Ben steps into the spot of light—he looks gravely up at the statue and takes a drink from a pint bottle of whiskey" (30). Williams also calls for Surrealistic scenery lit by flashes of colored lighting effects, and disturbing (Saddik, *Blueprints* 72), freakish pantomimes designed to correspond to the mood of the garish Carnival, including "an ugly giant-like creature in the robes of a monk," lurking before the "backdrop" of a Gothic "castle" (*Stairs* 71) (a form of symbolic correspondence which Moore identifies as an objective parallel of the fantasy writer's emotion [103]). Williams sets this fantasy in a realm of tangential connections, both pansexual and monosexual (95), as well as within the evolutionary connections between various animal species. In this way, he blurs conventional boundaries that separate gender, race, nation, and ethnicity.

The City Zoo

Significantly, the scene played out at the City Zoo contains some of the most closely described romantic moments in the play, and the zoo metaphor expands to reflect the tenor of the play's subtitle, "A Prayer for the Wild of Heart That are Kept in Cages" (ii), because the pursuit of the status quo ultimately imprisons each character in his or her own individual cage (42, 50, 66, 68, 91). Benjamin cannot bear to let a pregnant fox give birth in a tiny cage, despite the Zoo Keeper's proclamation that the "feisty little bitch will have 'em in here and like it" (57).

The Office

Williams metaphorically builds upon the cutthroat existence of *Fugitive Kind's* flophouse by transposing the rats and skunks of the earlier play into a veritable dog-eat-dog business setting, which also recreates a measure of the early play's urban decadence and decay. Williams bookends *Stairs* with an office-bound setting in which the authority of the giant multinational corporations dictates the lives of the white collar workers (down to their very mode of dress), and in which the influence of purported community standards and notions of civic responsibility hold sway.

The Carnival

The definitive landscape of the play remains the carnival. From Williams's perspective, for the characters to either encompass or move beyond their reality, a traditional social structure proves inadequate. He responds by experimenting with various forms of contradiction. For example, to the passages which depict the mind-numbing tedium of the lives of Benjamin, The Girl, their bosses, Jimmy, Edna, and Alma, Williams adjoins the fantastic projections of Benjamin's unconscious mind. To limn this mental phantasmagoria, Williams offers up Surrealistic, Rabelaisian Carnival scenes (*Stairs* 70) consisting of a rich mix of ethnicities, cultures, and languages, which Williams further transforms through his use of a traditionally chaotic setting, one that evokes "self-indulgent sexual adventure; artistry; western consumerism; and general frolic" (Matich 644).

The carnival setting can perhaps be best understood in terms of Bakhtin's concept of folk unity (*Rabelais* 52). The audience experiences the carnival as a metatheatrical site, and as a mysterious, modern "amusement park . . . full of lovely music!" (*Stairs* 60)

set apart from Benjamin's individualistic fantasy. In this distinct world, which the pair unknowingly stumbles upon, all performances, from loud booing and cursing (75), to the Mummers' pantomime of the morality play (71), bear resemblance to the medieval Carnival, and especially to its atmosphere of "freedom, frankness, and familiarity" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 153). Furthermore, Williams creates a fantastic Carnival atmosphere in line with Bakhtin's ironical view of the same events,

in which the exalted and the lowly, the sacred and the profane, are levelled and are all drawn into the same dance. . . . They did not demand conventional forms or official speeches. They enjoyed the privileges of the people's laughter. Popular advertising is always ironic, always makes fun of itself to a certain extent (as does the advertising of our own peddlers and hawkers) . . . even cupidity and heating have an ironical, almost candid character. (160)

As in traditional morality plays, a Beast-type character attempts to trounce those weaker, until an often diminutive everyman, unexpectedly, wins the day.

Initially, the contest in *Stairs* takes on an entertaining cast, and the crowd naturally reacts to the fantastic oddities on offer with good cheer:

BEN: [suddenly smiling] Tovarishch! Nitchevo, nitchevo! Tovarishch!
[Instantly the rampant Beast is changed to a gentle lamb. He purrs and extends his hand to stroke Ben's head. Ben offers him a bite of the cane. He accepts and beams. Cheers. Ben is a public hero. From the crowd there are cries of "Speech! Speech!"]

Me, a hero? Nah, naw, naw, I'm just a successful linguist. Call any guy brother in his own language and hostilities are over. Peace is re-established! The peppermint stick is broken in friendship! (*Stairs* 74)

This system of popular festive images developed over thousands of years, distilling its own manners, beliefs, prejudices, and thereby growing into “a powerful means of grasping reality” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 211). Transitory images of social, historical, and natural catastrophe are “kathartically” (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xii) presented at the carnival, with its attendant masquerades and disorderly conduct (*Rabelais* 235).

Incidentally, the early scenes set in Mike's Bar (especially scene 3), also feature the kinds of grotesque (281) and disorderly actions traditionally associated with the consumption of alcohol.

The carnival's iconography of reversal, games of chance, and the unexpected also parodies its implicitly utopian connotations. Some critics, including Bakhtin, contend that the subversive energies and transgressions with which the carnival has been associated since medieval times were often condoned by official orthodoxy:

Despite the significance of the carnival as an arena for the staging of subversive energies, one must not forget that the carnival itself is in fact a sanctioned form of “subversion” whose very purpose is to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion—a sort of opiate of the masses. (Booker, *Techniques* 5–6)

Saddik interprets *Stairs* as a work that “can be seen as planting the seeds of a postmodernism that acknowledges the complexity of issues dealing with the individual versus the collective and the need to find entirely new ways of thinking about that

binary” (*Blueprints* 75). In this respect, the fantastic carnival in *Stairs* affords the desperate Benjamin Murphys of the world a temporary mode of authorized escape.

Outer Space

Puschmann-Nalenz stipulates that the “relation between the SF-protagonist and his social environment leads from participation to isolation—either geographically or by deviant behavior—and back to reintegration in the old or the creation of a new social pattern” (Puschmann-Nalenz 98). In *Stairs*, Mr. E initiates this new pattern through his imperialist colonization of outer space as the final frontier (Saddik, *Blueprints* 71).

Williams applies the open-endedness typically found in science fiction in the play’s final scene, “when every custom, practice, social and psychological reality, and the physical world itself, are wholly open” (Brigg 133). The works of Jules Verne, especially such sci-fi fantasy fiction as *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), seem to confirm Williams’s adoption of the traditional sci-fi tendency to establish a civilization in a distant galaxy (C. Freedman 51). According to Arthur C. Clarke, the “interplanetary story will never lose its appeal, even if a time should come at last when all the cosmos has been explored and there are no more universes to beckon . . . across infinity” (*Science Fiction* 219).

The final utopian image of triumphant humanity coincides with the millennium, an optimistic moment in time conjured up by the birth of a new generation in space. Thus, in the vision of a pregnant body (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 367), scrutinized at the end of the play by Mr. E, The Girl, and even Benjamin, gain a new awareness, not of abstract millennial concepts but of the immortality of the ancestral body of untold millions (*Stairs* 93). Here, the body of the female, signifying the potential of the universe, also reveals

Benjamin's terror at the prospect of monosexual reproduction (95). However, The Girl happily retains her status as Benjamin's partner, and the two fly off to colonize the cosmos (93), acquiring a millennial, historic character in the process (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 366).

As in traditional science fiction texts, *Stairs* begins with a protagonist trapped in a mechanized environment both dominated and dehumanized by technology. By shifting the play's scenic focus to outer space, Williams raises the traditional open-ended science fiction question as to "whether or not the human race will simply repeat all the old mistakes on a much grander scale, or is it capable of a new beginning?" (Rose and Rose 23). Williams, however, leaves this question unanswered. Instead, he chooses to inexorably reveal how the protagonists—who fall in love in a zoo, and declare their unconventional affections by a "wide black lake" (*Stairs* 59)—strip both marriage and the procreative function of its intimacy, subduing even the basic communicative instinct between husband and wife (24). Williams's unique use in *Stairs* of a fantasy setting and atmosphere does not assign to Mr. E's domain "all the elements of the real world" (Puschmann-Nalenz 183), and Mr. E's advanced biological tinkering lacks the descriptive details, both historical and geographic, common to many hard science fiction texts. In this way, Williams dissociates *Stairs* from the realm of traditional science fiction, and brings to the fore its purely fantastic elements.

Iconography of the New Science Fiction

Williams's iconography in *Stairs* draws on a familiar, and relatively fixed, stock of images and motifs, primarily visual in nature. These include décor, costumes, and props, as well as certain typecast performers (some of whom may themselves have

already become cultural icons, such as Burgess Meredith). Also included are stock patterns of dialogue, of music, and of physical topography. Space travel functions as part of the play's metaphorical iconography, although it does not serve as a point of departure for further scientific speculation (as in hard forms of science fiction).

Mr. E's bizarre conception of human civilization as a glorified Petri experiment—an artificial test designed to promote certain social values—ironically parallels the play's metatheatrical Carnival scene. Williams's technical gloss adds a grotesque dimension to the pictorial representation (Mücke 190). This grotesquerie becomes amplified in the play's unpredictable situation, its reductive characterizations, its contradictory and complex articulation both in realistic and metafictional modes, and in its Expressionistic sets, symbolism, and techniques. In terms of technique, Williams breaks down the fourth wall of the theater by frequently calling forth the laughter of a mysterious observer—later revealed as Mr. E—to punctuate the numerous scene changes (*Stairs* 19, 30, 43, 47, 55, 58, 76, 79, 85, 89, 92).

Science fiction serves Williams's objectives—to demonstrate the underlying dogma behind social institutions (a typical postmodern undertaking), as well as to portray to his audience the struggles of “the little wage earners” (*Stairs* xxi).¹³ Despite their deep disparity, Williams manages to reconcile the iconographic polarities of the characters' workaday worlds and the gorgeously gaudy carnival (70), via a fantastic cosmic context that links the technological and the spiritual, and the material and the otherworldly.

¹³ This bears out Puschmann-Nalenz's observation that most proper science fiction “indulges in presenting itself in theory and practice” as a literature of ideas, and “as rationally founded speculation” (209).

Williams exemplifies the complex situations engendered by ruthless business hierarchies, betrayed friendships, and entangled domestic bonds in the iconography of the married couples' soon-to-be broken homes, and their ripped lace curtains (*Stairs* 35). Here, we see Williams's paradoxical "postmodern embracing of contradictions and differences that are able to coexist in the same space in order to create something innovative" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 68). For instance, Benjamin and The Girl make a "leap of faith" into the cosmos, almost as though doing so was both a necessary and sufficient condition for fulfilling the epic expectations involved in science fiction (Kreuziger 192). As in traditional science fiction narratives, "[h]ope becomes something to do when everything else has failed" (197). Still in possession of his self-proclaimed, youthful "moral earnestness and conviction," (*Stairs* 101), albeit nearing the end of his apprenticeship, Williams urges us to take these images literally. Essentially, the play's fantasy iconography makes for an affirmative conclusion, short-circuiting the audience's expectations by allowing them to identify with the triumph of a mere individual, while yet celebrating the apparent triumph of the entire human race.

Stairs ends with the traditional science fiction motif of a global catastrophe, from which the protagonist-heroes escape into space. However, Williams brings about this space travel through the use of a fantastic poetic statement, rather than by offering a more conventional scientific or technological solution (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xv). Rather than departing in a flying saucer or other such contrivance, the pair disappear into space after Mr. E waves his sparkler wand (*Stairs* 96).

In making use of such relatively new, "pulp" science fiction iconography as time shifts and alternate universes—both commonly found in the stories of *Weird Tales*

magazine—Williams pushes the boundaries of mainstream drama by his irreverent twist on both utopian and apocalyptic imagery. He presents space travel as a metaphor for rebirth and, by way of achieving a Surrealistic take on fantasy, attempts to transform and to disconnect (Puschmann-Nalenz 192) individual motifs from those of science fiction.

He explains his aesthetic strategy as follows:

A symbol in a play has only one legitimate purpose which is to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words . . . [in] the incontinent blaze of a live theater, a theater meant for seeing and for feeling . . . the vulgarity of performance.

(qtd. in Fedder 421)

He also takes pains to specify the singular importance of the “color, the grace and levitation, the structural pattern in motion, the quick interplay of live beings, suspended like fitful lightning” in live theater (Williams, qtd. in Fedder 423).

Cinematic Influences and Techniques

The Influence of Surrealism

Throughout the 1930s and into the early 1940s, the Surrealist aesthetic radically transformed the avant-garde movement, affecting fashion, architecture, film, and theater. Surrealists frequently worked as designers, film directors, and graphic artists, and their success was such that their visual strategies were increasingly appropriated in commercial arenas, especially in advertising. While the pressures of commercialization, at least at the beginning, were sharply at odds with Surrealism’s uncompromising artistic sensibilities, such conflicts also provided the stimulus for cross-fertilization between and among, on the one hand, commercial advertisers and, on the other, Surrealist artists of

various stripes. Williams's use of theatrical symbolism extends into his staging techniques. Setting, lighting, sound, costumes, props, and movement express a Surrealist aesthetic in tone, character, and subject matter.

In *Stairs*, Williams construes the millennium as a superlative state of fantasy which brings about ecstasy, union with God, and even eternity. Yet, in light of the promise of asexual reproduction, even this clearly does not make for a world where traditional forms of desire can readily be fulfilled. In the end, the dynamic interactions between the play's various settings—the protagonists' workaday worlds, Benjamin's active fantasy life, and Mr. E's galactic domain—reveal an underlying ambiguity throughout the play, leaving the audience to wonder whether these worlds could, in fact, be one and the same.

In keeping with this Surrealist dramatic technique, Williams succeeds in constructing a new, visual language. While the ontological status of each parallel universe in *Stairs* cannot be adequately accounted for, this makes for no less effective a form of Surrealist drama. Indeed, Mr. E's symbolic reality ultimately prevails, although Benjamin and The Girl remain both incredulous and uncertain about the reality of his sphere of operation. Williams's iconography of transformation in *Stairs* works in much the same way as symbolism functioned for the Dadaists and for many Surrealists, merely shifting as the unconscious shifts (at random). Since the advent of modernism, the individual experience of sacred transformation or metamorphosis has tended "to be unacknowledged or misunderstood," yet fantasy literature tantalizingly evokes spiritual states of being (Buckland, *Fantasy Recovery* 17). All such Surrealistic distortions—a kind of "antibeautiful," and yet decorative, misshaping of material to mirror the

hinterland phenomena of hallucination, madness, dream states, and irrationality—present paths to the fantastic realm of the subconscious (Merrill 65).

Special Effects

As for the technical opportunities occasioned by science fiction, Rosalie Moore reminds us of the great scope and freedom afforded sci-fi writers, in terms of the presentation of generic criteria and an attendant penchant for “experimenting with every type of fictional technique” (*Science Fiction* 101). *Stairs*’ dramatic special effects—puffs of smoke, sudden flashes, colored, spectral lighting, and projections¹⁴—also add to the play’s overall Expressionistic construction, largely owing to their unexpected nature. As for his use of costume and set design, Williams underscores the “dehumanizing aspects of a mechanized world through the presentation of robotic characters [in pantomime] and the use of letters” such as Messrs. P, D, Q, and T (Hale, *Introduction, Stairs* xxiii). This emphasis on performative anonymity ensures that Benjamin stands out in his emerald studded belt and cowboy boots, to the point where he makes an undignified impression upon his boss, Mr. Gum (*Stairs* 5).

Imagery

Stairs’ imagery presents a Hawthornian “metaphysical reality beyond the facts of the extensional world” (Rohrberger 41), which remains consistent with Williams’s use of fantasy techniques. Various fantastic dreamscapes—symbolic expressions of Benjamin Murphy’s character—introduce some of the most extraordinarily Surrealist effects ever created by the playwright. Through the inclusion of photographic projections, a cyclorama, sculpture (Youth), the Gothic architecture of the collegiate tower, the

¹⁴ Intended “for stage or screen,” according to Williams’s “Random Observations” (*Stairs* xi).

bourgeois domestic backdrops consisting of the painting of blind Justice, and even the cast's elaborate costumes, we see how one version of a prescriptive reality closes in on Benjamin: "the bells ring on, slowly and obliviously [as Ben] drops his arms—falls sobbing against the marble pediment of the statue" (*Stairs* 36). While wandering in the sculpture garden of his fantasy, Benjamin finds himself surrounded by statues that embody Greek virtues, although Youth, despite its tyrannical majesty, does not appear to project the calm and austere beauty intended by the Greek sculptors (Mérimée 79).

The failures, regrets, and disappointments of the present undermine Benjamin's youthful ideal of unassailable knowledge, and during the barren bar-scene and in the squalid apartment in which he lives, such idealism also stands in opposition to his dreams of unbridled adventure and fulfillment. Given the temporal sequence and the development of Benjamin's fantasies, including a return to his college graduation, we note the contrast between the historical and geographical contexts of Benjamin's most significant fantasy: on the one hand, an academic event marking a significant achievement and, on the other, the drunken, tawdry reality of the actual incidents that triggered the dream.

The sets, lighting, and sound effects prescribed in Williams's staging directions accord with Todorov's interpretive criteria of ambiguity and grotesquerie as consistent with the key features of the fantasy genre. Williams falls back upon unconventional staging techniques in order to create fantasy's requisite effect of shock. Perhaps the most significant influence attributable to the Surrealist and Expressionist movements was an increase in Williams's emphasis upon the visual elements of his theater. In the theater of verisimilitude, the setting, props, and lighting work together to produce an overall

ambience that an audience would consider an appropriate accompaniment to a so-called realistic dramatic action, whereas, in Expressionistic drama, these serve a more metaphorical purpose. For example, in *Stairs*, Williams calls for set designs that possess both practical and metaphoric functions (M. A. Corrigan 380). Mr. E's benign appearance, as the coincidental embodiment of the fantasy of the bearded, paternal God described by Hertha in *Spring*, as well as the lordly emissary of his world of light and transparency, belies a disquieting inscrutability. Admittedly, Mr. E thunders, "I, by God, am the *oldest* fool of them *all!*" (*Stairs* 75). This agent from a mysterious world of light and transparency tolerates no barren shadows as he probes, matter-of-factly, the lovers' degree of sexual compatibility amid a set of fiery, millennial pinwheels.

The play's dramatic special effects transform its antirealistic conventions. *Stairs* would likely have been easier to adapt to film than to the stage, since its elaborate sets and special effects lend themselves more readily to the illusory treatment of cinematic magic than to that of the theater. Williams's nonlinear plotting, along with the non-sequiturs that punctuate the play, call further attention to his unconventional stylistic and formal conventions. Characters also make use of exaggerated props (such as the giant candy cane) that demonstrate the limited influence of realism within the carnival world, and hark back, visually, to traditional fairy tales of enticingly life-sized gingerbread houses.

Williams was also influenced by minor forms of the science fiction narrative, such as the popular pulps and the serialized radio shows of the period. Nonetheless, the movie houses which he frequented in the 1920s and 1930s provided him with his most concentrated exposure to varying interpretations of Expressionist style (M. A. Corrigan

377). Even if producers had been in a position to disregard profit margins in the 1930s, they took “little refuge in the belief that perhaps science fiction represented an art form that would give the studio prestige” (Fabun 61). Furthermore, only a few

. . . English productions, released in the early thirties, were “real” science fiction and reasonably successful: H. G. Wells’ *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* and *Things to Come*, but they were only tantalizing. Hollywood could not be certain that American productions of science-fiction themes would have the same success with American audiences. . . . Paramount got mildly excited about science fiction prospects in 1934 and bought *When Worlds Collide* as a possible De Mille epic and then gave it up as “too fantastic.” (51)

In fact, the cinematic techniques that came about during the same period as Expressionism, and with which the mainstream cinema had much in common, including an emphasis on the visual and the episodic (M. A. Corrigan 377), provided Williams with key components of his atmospheric vision. A *New York Times* review of the 1947 production of *Stairs* in Pasadena, California, notes, in particular, the tempering aura of the play’s Expressionistic technique, adding that the “production has a cast of forty and twenty scenes, with sets designed especially for constantly changing ‘mood’ lighting, and period mood music” (Rev. of *Stairs*).

Hale notes Williams’s filmic technique of employing unvarying “projections of skyscrapers” upon the urban office spaces (*Scholars* 237). Unmistakably, in light of the fact that filmmakers have recourse to an array of technical procedures, boast extensive casts, permit close-ups, and meet exacting costume requirements, a film adaptation of

Stairs would face fewer limitations than those encountered in a stage production. Yet, given Benjamin's unusually Expressionist perspective and turn of mind, Williams embeds the protagonist's memories in a theatrical reality. The playwright invites the audience to participate, voyeuristically, both in Benjamin's graduation and in his intimate relationship with The Girl.¹⁵

In *Stairs*, Williams's employs the cinematic point-of-view technique in a highly developed and innovative way. Since Williams describes numerous scenes culled from Benjamin's memory, the intended members of the audience do not merely function as voyeurs but actually enter into Benjamin's Expressionistic mindscape, participating imaginatively in his thoughts rather than merely observing the plot unfold onstage. Thus, the audience assumes a privileged position (much like Mr. E), seemingly removed from the laws of time and space.

Benjamin's role as an outsider contributes to our sense of alienation, but only to a point: when fantasy transcends reality, he takes genuine comfort in the Surrealistic identification with the memory of Helen, his college sweetheart. Throughout the memory episode, Benjamin asserts the enduring dimension of his love, imaginatively presenting us with the woman he originally intended to marry (*Stairs* 41), as he tells Jimmy while paradoxically exulting in the exclusively imaginary nature of his dreams. His former sweetheart now dwells in the fantasy world of his reveries and, like The Girl, he places her in a fantasy narrative "of his own orchestration" (Saddik, *Blueprints* 73). Benjamin's flashbacks to his college graduation, and his later burlesque visions, immerse us in a

¹⁵ The Girl's romantically conflicted role harks back to the main protagonist's problems in the film adaption of the Broadway production of Ferenc Molnár's 1923 play, "The Swan." Iconic actor Lillian Gish made her talkie debut as the coolly beautiful "Swan"—attributes which The Girl ultimately adopts—in the 1930 remake, entitled *One Romantic Night*.

realm of disjointed impressions, in the manner of “the most interesting fictional experiments in SF . . . based on the concept of the variability of time structure” (Puschmann-Nalenz 102), leaving the audience to wonder whether they are participating in Benjamin’s hallucinations. These imaginary episodes provide Benjamin with the much-needed confidence to quit his job, leave his unhappily pregnant wife, and grapple with the carnival’s sideshow strong man (the Beast).

Williams also makes use of fantasy staging techniques by blending Benjamin’s experience with fragmented—or remembered—university songs, ghostly music and the music of the spheres (*Stairs* 93, 97), melding such aural effects with introductory and transitional interludes. As McGhee indicates, the stream-of-consciousness technique used in science fiction takes “sound and image to an exaggerated, sometimes apocalyptic conclusion . . . [and] is one important result of the working of the fantastic” (17). Fascinatingly, as Hale points out, Williams includes, for the first time, open-ended notes in his theatrical directions that make allowances for a set designer’s realization, and offer but general staging suggestions, which include a call for a Brechtian banner reading “THE MILLENNIUM” among them (*Stairs* 99). According to Williams’s stage directions, the same music may be heard at different intervals, although he intersperses the specificity of a direction for music of the spheres and choral chanting with an ambiguous call for ghostly music (97, 51). As further evidence of Williams’s borrowings from the repertoire of Expressionism, Mary Ann Corrigan characterizes the nature of Williams’s apprentice experimentations and influences, at the time of *Stairs*’ composition, as follows:

An active participant in college and little theater groups, Williams knew contemporary plays and came into contact with “epic theater” director, Erwin Piscator, at the New School. Through montage the film accomplished naturally and with finesse what Strindberg had to revolutionize the drama to achieve—a breakdown in the continuity of time and space. Although few films as wholly Expressionistic in method and in aim as *Dr. Caligari* appeared, Expressionistic distortion became part of the repertoire of cinematic techniques. (M. A. Corrigan 377)

Regarding their penchant for parody, Corrigan also reminds us that “American films, with their characteristic light touch, adopted comic-satiric forms from Expressionism, illustrated by George F. Kaufmann and Marc Connelly’s *Beggar on Horseback* (1924)” (M. A. Corrigan 377). She further traces the development of American Expressionism from the “comic dream play of the 1920s” through to the grotesque antics of the Marx Brothers and the musical fantasies of the 1930s, with “the locus of action in all firmly outside the realm of daily reality” (378). Williams’s Expressionistic tendencies also enable him to free himself from linear notions of time and realist conceptions of space, as well as to stress the discontinuities and intermittencies of memory and consciousness—most notably in the layered characterization of Benjamin and Mr. E—in which time operates more along the lines of a palimpsest than of a continuum, wherein the past frequently disrupts and overlaps the present, and vice versa.

While the majority of the sound effects in Williams’s apprentice plays correspond to the unfolding diegesis (on-stage action; McGhee 17), the auditory features of *Stairs* create the impression of a mysterious, ethereal plane inhabited by a detached observer

that stands beyond the confines of the stage (an observer with which the audience, ironically, identifies). The repeated echo of disembodied laughter, and the far-off sound of carousel music, punctuate and heighten our overall sense of detachment, and intensify the impact of the characters' unexpected or fantastic behavior.

These departures from the norm elicit our astonishment, as do the actions of Benjamin and the Girl when, by setting the foxes free, they trigger a chaotic atmosphere and Ben attacks the Zoo Keeper. In “making nature strange” (Baren 8), Williams finds inspiration from such disparate sources as the pulp science fiction magazines of the 1930s, art nouveau, and the relatively new techniques of cinematography, with the advent of the sound cinema. Like Jean Arp, Herbert Bayer, Salvador Dali, and Pablo Picasso, Williams invests the symbolism of the Beauty and the Beast, and even the romantic “willow-fringed lake” (*Stairs* 57), with a range of subjective associations, especially by invoking the Surrealist concept of “the outrageous” (Dorff 13), which here becomes a metaphor for the unconscious mind.

Williams also makes use of the Surrealist penchant for anthropomorphism, using it as a tool to blur the distinction between the human and the nonhuman. An atavistic concept adapted from science fiction and paralleled by the development of biomorphism—which Williams suggests with Mr. E's penchant for “monosexuality” (*Stairs* 95)—anthropomorphic symbolism, as an aesthetic preoccupation within Surrealism, led to the use of organic materials by many artists and designers of the 1930s—although, in *Stairs*, Mr. Gum vetoes his designer's call for “mother-of-pearl” buttons (4). Williams's protagonists express a longing for the “special relationship that exists between the individual or group and some part of the natural world, usually a

species of animal but in some cases a plant species or landscape feature” (Burelbach 155). Physical beauty, symbolized here by the swan-inspired costume of The Girl, and the literal Beauty of the carnival, also atavistically suggests the higher potentialities of human beings, all the while exulting and celebrating in a spirit of carnival. However, Williams also accentuates the “instability” (Saddik, *Blueprints* 73) of female identity in visual art, a technique commonly used in “the iconographic aspect of fantasy” (Buckland, *Fantasy Moral* 103).

Bizarrely, although Williams calls for a traditional proscenium arch, his protagonists disappear beyond it to the whistle of pinwheel fireworks (*Stairs* 81). In contrast to the sumptuous backdrops and to the overblown props throughout, a mood of sterility dominates the surprisingly unproductive workplaces of Benjamin and The Girl. Williams also calls for a choreographed pantomime in the actions of Messrs. P, D, Q, and T, while they type at invisible machines. As previously noted, Williams employs Surrealistic lighting effects to identify Benjamin’s most significant psychological moments, such as during the flashback scene in which a blue spot highlights the mood of deep regret and longing that infuse Benjamin’s recollections of his college sweetheart. At the play’s conclusion, Williams takes special care to create a strong impression of “THE MILLENNIUM” (99). In the end, he combines such visual techniques as lighting, scenery, and backdrops with special sound effects to sustain and to enrich his audience’s fantasy experience.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Out of the various genres he inherited, Williams's initial challenge was to shape his own, unique dramatic vision. He rejected genre as a fixed set of constraints, rules, and prescriptions embodied within literary forms that were already ossified (if not, indeed, obsolete). Each traditional genre that Williams recruited, he subsequently questioned and, ultimately, transformed. His apprentice work thus represents an implicit challenge to the classicism of traditional approaches to genre. The five full-length apprentice plays—*Candles to the Sun*, *Fugitive Kind*, *Not About Nightingales*, *Spring Storm*, and *Stairs to the Roof*—are fuelled by the powers of fantasy and imagination that align Williams's sympathies with the idealistic goals of his protagonists. At the same time, they recoil from the dehumanizing and cruelly illogical elements both of capitalism and of bogus spirituality that prevent the redemptive possibilities that Williams seeks to dramatize. Through his transformation of genres, Williams allows us to glimpse the chaotic world of America in the 1930s before it was launched into the horrors of the Second World War.

The power of generic conventions lies in how they serve to enforce a certain view of the world, drawing a horizon of expectations and neatly encapsulating disparate systems of belief. We may trace such generic functions, as they impact social norms and conventions, to Aristotle's *Poetics* (the first critical attempt to evaluate literary genres in a systematic fashion [Fishelov 91]). Williams's use of genre emboldens us to resist the inertia and rigidity inherent in outmoded generic formulas, and challenges us to find fresh new ways to overcome our traditional views. He gives short shrift to genre as a prescriptive means of dictating absolute limits of time, place, and action (90), preferring

instead to select and mix inherited generic elements in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of patterns. Moreover, Williams's personal identification with and palpable empathy for his vast array of characters distinguishes the apprentice plays from the Brechtian tradition of alienated detachment. Thus, he refrains from casting *Candles to the Sun*'s social protest in an epic mode of Brechtian social commentary and ironic distancing. Instead, he shapes the dramatic elements in this play in a highly personal and lyrical manner; note, for example, the poignant sacrifice inherent in Fern's gift of her son's tuition money to Alabama Red, the union organizer. Williams's ambivalence toward the controversial topics often associated with fantasy also fits well with the uncertainty and the tonal ambiguity he prefers in the majority of these full-length apprentice works.

This dissertation examines each play in terms of how Williams reworks and extends the generic criteria that Chandler identifies in *Semiotics*, such as narrative, characterization, setting, topics, iconography, and staging techniques. Each chapter details Williams's various dramatic hybridizations and aesthetic processes, as well as his open-ended methodology, identifying them as the driving forces behind his creative approach to genre. Individual characterization and expression play a paramount role in Williams's endeavor to master his craft, and the formal criteria under scrutiny serve as the means of articulating his emerging vision. We see this most readily in his ambivalent, ironic, and inconclusive endings, which tend both to complicate and enlarge the audience's response, leaving it with a heightened sense of the questions and the problems that his drama poses, rather than having a gained a pat set of answers.

With his historical grasp of the need for generic transformation, Williams supersedes the social, cultural, and psychological forces of both order and coherence that

underpin and reinforce the more regulatory, decorous, and prescriptive notions of genre that once prevailed in the classic tradition. Rather than harnessing his perceptions to a fixed set of interpretations or frames of reference, Williams employs genre as a means of framing and articulating a deeply personal vision. Ever alert to the ways that historical change can produce corresponding changes within genres, Williams engages in the minute particularities of the historical process in which he plays a part, rather than constraining it to serve a literary tradition that had already been eclipsed.

Genre's Mediation of Dramatic Vision

Williams's extraordinary receptivity to forms, exemplars, types, kinds, and modes of genre, ranging from social protest to fantasy, cannot help but sensitize the literary scholar to the most basic and radical meaning of *genre*. Not only does this term offer us a mode of anatomy of classification, as its Latin roots suggest; it is also a means of elaborating or shaping a vision in response to imperatives that seem most urgent. Williams, however, goes far beyond any concern over taxonomy, categorization, or description as such. In fact, he moves beyond traditional enquiries into genre and instead sifts through, questions, and ultimately supplants what he has received from his theatrical antecedents. In his active engagement with the text, he both frames and responds to the queries that unfold. The very processes of apprenticeship and study aid him in examining all the more earnestly the generic implications of his dramatic quest, and his conception of genre is anything but static. Rather, his conception remains in process—open and adaptable. An evolving dramatic vision, and a search for adequate generic and formal structures, remains the only constant in the bewildering range of enquiries into genre

articulated by Williams in these five plays, in which he uniquely transforms the traditional theatrical genres that he would soon dismiss as exhausted (Williams, *GM* 131).

These outmoded traditional genres nevertheless enabled Williams to create radically new admixtures in which he could fully express his unique personal, social, and political concerns. In the five selected plays, Williams drew primarily upon two generic traditions: the *protest* genre and the *fantasy* genre. The protest genre, since its development, had evolved into a number of different varieties or types, three of which Williams chose to address in these apprentice plays: the protest mining play (*Candles to the Sun*), the protest gangster play (*Fugitive Kind*), and the protest prison play (*Not About Nightingales*). The second generic tradition that Williams drew upon, the *fantasy* genre, furnished him with the selection of two varieties that particularly interested him: first, what came to be known as the Southern Gothic play (*Spring Storm*) and, second, the science fiction play (*Stairs to the Roof*). Importantly, the modern Southern Gothic play, which was a relatively new construct that Williams pioneered, resulted from his innovative entwining of two other narrative structures that he had inherited: the Gothic formula, which had evolved mainly from a style of writing initially popularized in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; and the Southern literary tradition, narratives of which had evolved, in America, since the antebellum period.

The Defamiliarization and Mixing of Genres

Williams's emphasis on the passage of time and, by extension, on the predominant historical process, generates a more diachronic than synchronic approach to dramatic structure. Although he apparently shares the Russian Formalists' imperative to defamiliarize or to make strange (Kolesnikoff 54) perceptual modes, conventions, and

literary techniques of generic expression, Williams never felt afflicted—as did many of the Romantics—by the need to abandon them altogether. These forms, techniques, and structures, as shaped in Williams's dramas, serve to emphasize both the limits and limitations of the received generic constraints and the conventionality of earlier literary structures. By drawing on Gothic conventions, and on those of science fiction, forms previously considered in some cases as marginal or subliterary, Williams shows us how the norms, beliefs, and the expectations on which those forms depend had become redundant.

This subversive parody—if not, indeed, rejection—of literary genres depends, paradoxically, on a coherent and formal conception of how literary texts interrelate and engage with one another. However, the lack of a basic common framework within which fixed generic rules operate often renders such forms of engagement and communication impossible. More importantly, social and cultural contexts clearly produce, as well as reinforce, an audience's generic expectations. When different genres are layered, interpenetrate, and become blurred—as they most certainly do in Williams's plays—they create a heterogeneous mix that mediates between the conventions of genre and the text itself, in an ongoing dialogue that serves both descriptive and prescriptive functions.

For example, *Fugitive Kind*, Williams's second full-length play, can be described as a social protest drama situated in a flophouse inhabited by marginal characters and misfits, and Williams weaves the various strands of the play from a heterogeneous mix of generic conventions. In order to relocate elements of social protest within a contemporary setting, for instance, the play airs certain then-current references that become—and remain—eerily relevant; for example, the lovers speak of John Dillinger, shot down in

Chicago in 1934, while the play's eponymous gangster on-the-run hides out at the flophouse. In addition, Terry saves Glory, named for the American flag, from the demented Abel's assaults. Here Williams takes pains to account for the determinants of Terry's vision: his tubercular mother works as a prostitute to support him; and he launches into an aria against the little "clock punchers" while "God's asleep" (*Fugitive* 147). Ultimately, Williams's heady allusions to gangsters, religious agnostics, the workplace, and prostitution, as well as to a deep, subcultural marginality in general, make it difficult to neatly classify *Fugitive Kind* as a protest play. New generic codes form as a result of the protagonists' motivations, as evinced by their dialogue, and due to the ongoing dialectic of history, textual production, and reception.

Preceding chapters have emphasized the literary precursors to Williams's full-length apprentice plays, and his liberal experiments in them with genre. In recognizing his indebtedness to specific generic precedents, Williams makes the relevance of genre to his need for personal expression fully apparent in these plays.

Williams's Proto-postmodern Awareness of Genre

As some critics have suggested, four of the five full-length apprentice plays would qualify as modern-day tragedies (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales*; Hale, *Introduction, Stairs*; Isaac, *Introduction, Candles*; Isaac, *Introduction, Spring*). Although it does not fall unequivocally into the category of tragedy, in that none of the characters die—unlike the rest of the full-length apprentice plays—*Stairs to the Roof* most certainly contains elements of modern tragedy, such as the tragic effects of social change and the "ordinary tragedies that occur to ordinary people in an ever-changing world" (Carson and Carson 363).

Williams does not embrace the Romantic legacy of implicitly rejecting preceding genres out of hand. Instead, he makes ample use of the generic devices he inherited, such that any antigeneric tendencies he may have had remain checked by the sheer usefulness that these diverse formal constraints afford him. In *Stairs*, Williams re-evaluates the fantasy genre, however reductive, through an ironic line of attack, and indelibly transforms it via parody, pastiche, and ambivalence, until his approach bears an uncanny resemblance to the postmodern literature that would follow decades later. Moreover, Williams's concern with the generic features of a text demonstrates a prescient concern for the later deconstructive emphasis on textuality, and on textuality's attendant modes of marginality and indeterminacy. We need now only consider how Williams, within the broader perspective of the social protest tradition in *Stairs*, uses science fiction to navigate these intersections, thereby revitalizing science fiction's marginal status to serve his own unique ends—namely, to promote a radically utopian social critique.

Williams challenges existing social, cultural, psychological, professional, sexual, and moral epistemologies. He topples hierarchies of interpretive order, both in the development of his narrative and in the denouement of his plays, and does so through a self-reflexive, ludic, and referential use of language. The names of his protagonists in *Nightingales* afford just one of example of this. Typecast names—Queenie, Swifty, and Canary—evoke film *noir* (Hale, *Introduction, Nightingales* xvii) through their allusiveness and archly playful references to an iconic and more risqué period of pre-Hays Code cinema.

Williams demonstrates how the elements of plot provide an ongoing synthesis of a play's development, characters, and basic motifs, just as we find in German

Expressionist theater—“the most turbulent of the new artistic currents that cleansed backwaters of realistic stagecraft and dramaturgy” (Valgema 2)—and in symbolic drama. Yet Williams does so without arriving at the same kinds of predetermined formulaic conclusions common to both Expressionism and theatrical Symbolism.

Williams also exhibits an uncanny awareness of the manoeuvres and technical devices that serve to awaken audience response. His intimate appreciation of genre allows him to orchestrate and to elicit the feelings, biases, and opinions of playgoers, appealing to and yet challenging their values and beliefs, while extending the horizons of their expectation, as established by the generic conventions prescribed by the cultures into which they were bred, conventions which Williams varied dramatically over time.

The Generic Horizon of Expectations

Genre provides a momentarily fixed set of expectations and beliefs that encourage a set of interpretations at a given time on the part of a certain audience. Yet it also establishes a spectator-oriented perspective, a perspective that raises expectations through the ongoing responses of consecutive audiences and playgoers. Generic expectations and major transformations in the constitution of a given audience both play key roles in establishing these successive interpretations and communities of response. However, depending on the different cultural legacies of each audience member—given that, from a cultural point of view, no audience remains entirely homogenous—generic manifestations and revelations of meaning are also likely to vary.

The awareness that generic conventions gradually undergo transformations over time ultimately gives rise to questions regarding genre-formation, and its subversion. If genres are indeed historically reproduced then they must necessarily be shaped by the

emerging ideologies, social circumstances, cultural traditions, and literary expectations of the era in which they exist. Williams's deconstruction of genre, therefore, is necessarily shaped by the specific contexts and horizons of expectation in which they were originally produced. Genres contain overt ideological messages, however mediated by the transformation and substitution of codes, the blurring of generic conventions, and the interrelation and combination of formal devices. Consequently, the messages contained therein invariably change with each changing ideological context. This often produces generic inventions that combine highly eclectic, contradictory, and ambiguous meanings (meanings which, however, remain subject to ongoing reinterpretations on the part of successive audiences).

Thus, genre is best understood not as a fixed set of types, norms, and recurrent patterns, but rather as the outcome of an ongoing process wherein interaction, transformation, and historical variation set up a loose chain of resemblances, connections, and continuities for the critic to interpret. *Nightingales* exemplifies just one instance of how Williams sets about the task of both responding to, and shaping, the generic horizon of expectations. In the play, which treats social injustice and the plight of outcasts in the Depression, several convicts find themselves imprisoned in a steam-heated cell, named Klondike, where they are roasted to death for initiating a hunger strike. One of Williams's initial working titles for the play was *The Rest Is Silence*, in memory, he explains in a dedication, of four men who died by similar torture in a Pennsylvania prison. Williams accentuates this real-life link through an identification of the sadistic character, Boss Whalen—the prison's warden—with characterizations of the tyrant

Mussolini. The protagonist in *Nightingales* realizes that his real life, despite his devotion to Keats, is not about nightingales.

References to Depression-era politics pervade all five of the full-length apprentice plays. In *Stairs to the Roof*, Williams adds an autobiographical dimension by including his barely disguised recollections of the numbing office routines that he endured as a “clerk in a large wholesale corporation in the Middle West” (*Stairs* xxi). Furthermore, in accordance with the Living Newspaper narrative, Williams elects to document poverty, class warfare, and social injustice. His literary aspirations come to the fore in an array of allusions: an early draft of *Nightingales*, tentatively entitled *Hell; An Expressionistic Drama Based on the Prison Atrocity in Philadelphia County*, reveals his debt to German Expressionist drama, while Canary Jim’s lyrical passages—especially when the persecuted character expresses his terror of incarceration—accentuate the literary and autobiographical elements that feed Williams’s vision, as when Jim destroys his copy of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” Cultural dislocations and anxieties mark the passage of the protagonist’s experience through the play. If Jim survives the fall from the warden’s window, the passing pleasure boat Lorelei—yet another symbolic literary allusion—will be his salvation. Thus, the play both shapes and responds to an elaborate generic horizon of cultural and social expectations that are nonetheless rooted in real events.

Since works of literature may be said to bear a relationship to one another simply by dint of their having been classified—in some cases arbitrarily—as literature, the more protean forms of genre strongly invite methodological inquiry. Genre classifications, however, are not reducible to a set of conventions that adhere to a complex set of codes which can, in turn, be distinguished from one another and set out prescriptively in a

classical hierarchy. Rather, definitions of genre depend on specific criteria, concrete approaches, clear manifestations of intent, and common “interpretive communities” (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159). Thus, identifiable nuances, moods, and accents ultimately become the true markers of genre. Clearly, then, genres cannot exist prior to creation, but depend instead upon the literary imperatives and social determinants that produce them.

The Depression zeitgeist remains one of the principal determinants of Williams’s work, shaping his poetic, experiential, and personal vision of genre. For instance, he dedicates a play penned as “a prayer for the wild of heart that are kept in cages” (*Stairs* iii) to “all of the other the little wage earners of the world” (xxi). While this would seem to inscribe it firmly within the social protest tradition, Williams gives *Stairs* a decidedly “sci-fi” treatment. *Stairs* can also be classed under what has been called the genre of autobiography, since it admittedly reflects the playwright’s “season in hell” (xxi) during the Depression, when he worked at International Shoe. Only a nuanced sense of the literary and historical determinants of generic criteria can hope to do justice to the full-length plays of Williams’s apprenticeship.

Genres that are familiar to an audience will predetermine its expectations and understanding of a text. Such expectations encode a particular view of the world and a set of cultural givens that mediate or encapsulate a specific culture. In this sense, traces of other modes of cultural productions, such as film and fiction, exist alongside, and often even in contradiction to, the anticipatory elements in the dramatic genre (and to a certain extent qualify, and even displace, the role of the author). In *Spring Storm*, for example, Williams constantly alters the cultural horizon by demystifying, and reinforcing, the presiding Southern mythos of the play, which determines the characters’ fates.

Ultimately, Williams authors himself as a fully fledged playwright in the five plays under scrutiny, even as he adds to a growing oeuvre of one-acts, poems, and short stories of his apprentice period.

Cultural Heterodoxy and the Blurring of Genre

Williams produced significant innovations in his apprentice plays, transforming while yet working within the dramatic genres that he had inherited from the long line of playwrights who preceded him. In order to make such comparisons in a systematic way, we turn once again to Chandler's list of generic criteria (*Semiotics* 159): namely, narrative, characterization, topics, setting, iconography, and staging techniques (see the Appendix for tabular detail.) In drawing comparisons between the plays, this dissertation relies mainly upon scholarly research, often in the form of direct quotations, from contemporary critical sources, the concerns of which remain consistent with Chandler's categories. The innovations that Williams introduces in these plays attest to his early promise and hint at his future eminence as a master playwright. However, attempting to determine to what extent these plays influenced his later dramatic productions presents a challenge, considering that they were only published between 1998 and 2005.

The styles, literary clichés, and formal norms that constitute a genre influence the playwright's deployment of various familiar schemata and motifs. These criteria constitute the essential generic communication, and provide a general framework for the requisite socially "negotiated consensus" (Chandler, *Semiotics* 159). Given Williams's heuristic, exploratory, and deliberately ambivalent appropriation of the abundant generic material at hand, genre mixing and the blurring of generic types inevitably pervade his work. The formal properties common to each of the full-length apprentice plays are

ontologically unified by Williams's literary sensibility, which gathers an array of fixed types, forms, and constructions of genre, within the context of a fluid, pluralistic, and open-ended narrative structure. Taking into account these elements of genre dispersion, and Williams's self-proclaimed license to poach generic forms and properties wherever they might be found, the formal cohesion and unifying vision makes Williams's work appear all the more astounding. He pits the conventions of one genre against another to reveal even more original formal combinations, and thereby arrives at a uniquely complex version of his own truth.

APPENDIX

CHANDLER'S CRITERIA AND GENERIC COMPARISONS

*CANDLES TO THE SUN***CHANDLER'S
CRITERIA**

Narrative	The narrative traces the double spiral of two convergent plots, drawing the audience into the chaotic fates of the play's industrial and domestic workers.
Characterization	Williams's "clockwork figures" (<i>Candles</i> 2) include assorted "natcheral born slaves" (7), such as a prostitute, an "affectatious" member of the elite (26), a heroic labor leader and two sons martyred in the mines, as well as two long-suffering maternal figures.
Topics	Williams focuses upon the pervasive deprivation that characterizes the life of a miner and his family, and their subsequent loss of material and cultural resources and, more particularly, employment. Thus, various members of the Pilcher family suffer from: (i) a scarcity of bread, coffee, milk, and oil, causing the grandmother to die from malnourishment; (ii) a lack of educational resources, resulting in Bram and Hester's illiteracy; (iii) a lack of access to health care, resulting in the mother's and father's unnecessarily prolonged illnesses; (iv) and a lack of normal social interactions as a result of being ostracized on two accounts: first, owing to their daughter's prostitution and, second, their open hostility toward the wife of the superintendent of the mine.
Setting	In contrast to the typical description of earlier protest-mining narratives in which squalor and poverty are unrelieved, the play emphasizes the pastoral setting surrounding the mine and the clean and welcoming, if threadbare, homes of the workers and of the camp prostitute.
Iconography	The iconography in this play evokes four of the five senses: (i) visually, our attention is drawn to the lamp (perpetually turned low to conserve oil), the red kimono (which connotes Star's sexuality), the letter that brings tragic news of the loss of a son, albeit illegible to the illiterate parents that learn of its contents through the local teacher, and the worthless "scrip" with which the miners are paid and compelled to spend only at the company store (80); (ii) with respect to sound, a siren wails to announce the death of a miner, while waltz and fiddle music can be heard from the dance hall, and the play ends with the spirited singing of the united miners; (iii) the sense of smell is poetically conveyed, as the honeysuckle and grass evoke nostalgia for two of the female characters. Finally (iv), Williams even evokes his audience's sense of taste, with constant descriptions of the family's food as tasteless "mush" (2).
Staging Techniques	Williams accentuates the play's various moods through the use of lighting, ranging from subdued to luminous. In contrast to the lighting, the stage design, including the props, remains more or less consistent throughout, evoking "the sordid monotony" of the miners' lives (54).

CANDLES TO THE SUN

CHANDLER'S CRITERIA	GENERIC TRADITIONS OF THE 1930s	WILLIAMS'S INNOVATIONS
Narrative	Williams's ambiguous endings "stand in sharp contrast with the overall optimism" expressed in many of the mining narratives of the Depression era (Duke 74).	Williams eschews agitprop cant in favour of lyricism. In fact, William Jay Smith suggests that "as a chronicle of social protest the play will never be fully understood" (W. J. Smith xvi).
Characterization	Williams defies the generic "labour melodrama" stereotype (W. J. Smith xxvii), according to which "working people, especially miners, cannot lead themselves" nor "unite to challenge the economic forces controlling their lives" (Duke 70).	In <i>Candles</i> , only the miners themselves, by demonstrating their unshakable solidarity, can unite to change their situation.
	Critics commonly describe the portraits of female characters in many "labour plays" of the period (W. J. Smith xvii) as "superficial" (Duke 77).	Williams incorporates both domestic and corporate forms of protest, with more complex portrayals of female characters, wherein "the microcosm of the family represents the macrocosm of a suffering community" (W. J. Smith xxvii).
	Although such narratives "attempted character development, their portrayal of miners and their families seldom rose above stereotypes" (Duke 68). Many portray miners as "poor, dumb, and righteous" (39).	Rather than falling into facile stereotypes, Williams portrays the miners as intelligent, sensitive, and complex.
Topics	As Duke contends, from a Marxist standpoint "a universal series of events [will] substantiate ... the inevitability of social upheaval" though the dynamics of class conflict (41), as Williams amply demonstrates.	Nonetheless, Williams's leftist leanings are non-doctrinaire, and he seasons his vignettes with both ambiguity and humour.
Setting	Most commonly, we find coal mining narratives set in "appalling coal camps where no grass grows" (88). Audiences come to associate "a coal mining setting" with an "ambience of darkness, dirtiness, and dampness" (2).	Williams surrounds the mine and the miners' cabins with a lush and inviting valley.
Iconography	Such narratives display a preoccupation with "the dramatic impact of mine-related disasters, such as explosions and underground fires" (102).	Williams refrains from describing the interior of the mine, and focuses instead upon the miners' domestic concerns outside the mine.
Staging Techniques	Playwrights of the period resort to "traditional," even conventional, methods of staging (102).	Williams innovates by making use of "poetic" stage directions that call for understated, even "tenuous," lighting effects (W. J. Smith xvii; <i>Stairs</i> 104).

FUGITIVE KIND

**CHANDLER'S
CRITERIA**

Narrative	While <i>Fugitive</i> might seem, initially, to be a more isolated and individualistic response to social problems, such as homelessness and unemployment, upon closer inspection, we note the common thread of radical social consciousness and an implicit call to resistance underpinning most of the play's dialogues.
Characterization	A group of over twenty-five transients present an urban cross-section of various ethnic groups, including several criminals as well as members of the social elite, as they either pass through or occupy the premises. The eclectic, yet representative, population of this particular flophouse is minutely particularized. The permanent occupants of the flophouse include the family of the Jewish proprietor, Mr. Gwendlebaum, with his daughter, Glory, and his son, Leo. In short, Williams peoples a single setting with characters drawn from radically different social backgrounds.
Topics	Vast socioeconomic disparities, illness, and urban paranoia are some of the main topics treated. Williams notes the suspicious observations, and an accompanying sense of claustrophobia and resentment (typical of the play's characters).
Setting	Williams employs the social setting of a flophouse in a large urban center in the United States. In historical terms, Williams sets the play during the Great Depression.
Iconography	We find frequent references to snow as a purifying agent, either to "blot out" the city's "nastiness" (<i>Fugitive</i> 130), or to cushion the chronic clamor from the traffic of the street, including sirens, passing trucks, and the clanging of streetcars. In addition, the radio in the office of the flophouse plays the blues. Additionally, Glory puts on an emblematic red dress in response to Terry's request, thereby signalling her romantic interest in him.
Staging Techniques	By means of dramatic red lighting and a silhouetting of the skyline, the city becomes "a great implacable force," thereby serving to oppress the characters (3).

FUGITIVE KIND

CHANDLER'S CRITERIA	GENERIC TRADITION	WILLIAMS'S INNOVATIONS
Narrative	The protest narrative tends to offer "easily identifiable moral categories" (Mason 2).	Instead, Williams offers an ambiguous and nuanced treatment of such polarities as good versus evil, right versus wrong, and moral versus immoral, by combining both protest and gangster criteria in an intricate comparative frame of reference.
Characterization	Characterized by "repellent brutality" (29), "the gangster protagonist is someone who not only makes violence a spectacle ... but also displays the wealth and status that it provides" (12).	Terry, the play's "gangster character," not only shies away from gratuitous violence, but avoids ostentatious signs of wealth, opting instead to remain anonymous in the dingy flophouse.
Topics	Traditionally, "gangster life is associated with freedom of movement" (19), and "a gangster controls the space around him" (20).	Williams's gangster lacks the bravado typically associated with the "classic" Hollywood gangster. By contrast, Terry attempts to conceal himself in various ways to avoid attention. Rather than controlling the space around him, Terry's environment controls him, and he knows it.
Setting	Specifically, most of the action takes place in "an obligatory set of locales"; for example, "nightclubs [and] speakeasies" (xiv).	Williams depicts the flophouse locale as being crowded, dirty, squalid, dilapidated, and essentially void of glamour.
Iconography	The gangster subgenre features "an obligatory set of iconographies" such as "the city, guns, and technology" (xiv).	While Williams also makes use of these typically iconographic features, he focuses more upon the mundane details pertaining to the fates of disenfranchised vagrants than on the sensational characters of traditional gangster plays.
Staging Techniques	Within the gang, each member follows a strict pecking order according to an established hierarchy of criminality.	The Gwendlebaum family, by contrast, appears hopelessly mired in chaos and dysfunctional relations.
Staging Techniques	Sensational staging techniques, such as lurid lighting and exaggerated props, are often utilized in such narratives in an effort "to retain the genre's popularity" (38).	By contrast, Williams, as his major staging strategy, relies mainly on the drabness of the flophouse.

NOT ABOUT NIGHTINGALES

**CHANDLER'S
CRITERIA**

Narrative	As a “wild adventure for the storybooks” (<i>Nightingales</i> 160), the “cliff-hanger” separation of Eva from Jim nonetheless presents the “chance” (160) of something new arising from the “damnation” of the prison riot (159).
Characterization	Williams introduces his audience to a collection of convicts and prison staff, including Warden Whalen, and his secretary, Eva Crane. The main character, Canary Jim, finds himself ideologically at odds with Butch, a fellow prisoner, in that Jim seeks to reform the system peacefully, whereas Butch takes action and incites a riot. Williams stages a love triangle that involves Jim, Whalen, and Eva. Key prisoners invoke the name of Mussolini in characterizing Whalen and Butch, both of whom are portrayed as overbearing tyrants.
Topics	Through the dialogue of several of the minor characters, Williams makes politicized statements concerning racism, homosexuality, religion, and the need for prison reform.
Setting	Within the confines of the large prison on an island situated within an isolated “harbour” (1) during the summer of 1938, Williams contrasts the overcrowded and cramped cells with Whalen’s well-appointed office.
Iconography	In contrast to the drabness of the prison, a large “excursion steamer,” the brightly lit Lorelei (1), blares out dancehall music. The vessel repeatedly circles the island while the Announcer entertains his dancing passengers with lurid tales of the prison and its captives. Whalen fills “The Klondike,” a room in the prison filled with radiators, with enough steam to torture, and even, to kill, any protesting prisoners (81).
Staging Techniques	On the island, a fireworks display, marking the Fourth of July and accompanied by Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture, contrasts ironically with the prisoners’ total lack of independence and freedom. Strains of seemingly-spontaneous jazz also mock the relentless predictability of the prison routine. Williams makes use of a scrim in order to heighten the indistinct horror of what takes place in the Klondike, intensifying the aural register with the sinister hiss of escaping steam. Other sound effects announce the onset of the prisoners’ uprising, and include the patter of rapid gunfire, sirens, and distant shouting. There are also dramatic lighting effects, including the “weird flickering of flame shadows” (159).

NOT ABOUT NIGHTINGALES

CHANDLER'S CRITERIA	GENERIC TRADITION	WILLIAMS'S INNOVATIONS
Narrative	Many prison texts do not "overtly acknowledge the political nature of their narratives" (Ek 75).	Williams openly acknowledges, and even dramatizes, the political nature of the play's events.
Characterization	The majority of "prisoner identities" are "constructed as 'them,' not 'us'" (7). Typical characterizations include "prejudiced perceptions of the racial other" (6).	Williams interweaves the demoralized plights of both prisoners and non-prisoners alike, which encourages the audience to appreciate the points of view of both groups. Williams includes characters of various ethnic origins, without resorting to socially-prejudiced preconceptions.
Topics	"The meaning of race as a governing notion in the discourse of prison policies is ... a tool of prison management" (91). Prison narratives generally depict homosexuality as a "perversion," and associate it with a show of weakness (7).	Williams's clear-cut criticism of Whalen's use of racially-motivated discrimination as a tool of prison management ends with the prisoners' revolt (following, among other offenses, Whalen's horrifying torture, indeed murder, of numerous characters). Williams does not portray the play's Queen as perverse. On the contrary, he displays a sympathetic, even heroic, disposition.
Setting	Auli Ek describes the majority of the settings in prison narratives as "naturalistic" (84).	Set at the end of the Great Depression, Williams confines the play's physical settings to the jail itself, which include the prisoners' cells, the warden's office, and the sinister steam chamber. Williams goes beyond naturalism in his depiction of Monroe Prison, leaning more towards Expressionism.
Iconography	The pervasive imagery in such narratives associates "criminal activity with prison gangs," and portrays "prison culture" as rife with the abuse of "drugs and gambling" (86). "Historically, African American manhood has been represented as primarily corporeal, exotic, and eroticized" (13).	By contrast, Williams portrays his characters more as individuals than as members of highly organized rival factions. By contrast, Williams eroticizes a white male inmate by presenting him as seminude (topless), and receiving a massage from a prisoner of color.
Staging Techniques	On the whole, the settings, lighting, and sound in prison plays and films tend to make for a "realistic" effect (Bordwell and Thompson 461).	Williams's staging techniques rely heavily upon the Expressionistic use of lighting effects, and include the use of both white "spots" and colored "glims" (<i>Nightingales</i> 1).

SPRING STORM

**CHANDLER'S
CRITERIA**

Narrative	Williams subverts the hierarchical order which, in traditional Gothic narratives, punishes indiscriminately both the "good," submissive female character, that is nonetheless "rewarded with ... sanctification," and the "bad" assertive female (Stein 124) that faces punishment, in Port Tyler, by "ostracism" (<i>Spring</i> 94) and widespread resentment. Undeniably, in <i>Spring</i> , we see how Southern myths, divorced as they had become from their antebellum context of purported gentility, "have degenerated into a grotesque parody of their classic versions" (Turner 237).
Characterization	A love quadrangle is presented, involving four young adults: Dick, a heroic, blue collar character; Heavenly Critchfield, a beautiful Southern belle with a mother intent upon upward social mobility; Hertha Neilson, a highly intelligent and sensitive librarian from a poor family; and Arthur Shannon, an amateur poet and the son of wealthy parents.
Topics	A tragic sense of social determinism, expressed through the tradition of Southern gentility, is apparent throughout the play.
Setting	Williams identifies the Lover's Leap bluffs, frequented by both sets of lovers, with Golgotha, the place of Christ's crucifixion. The Critchfield home, filled with shabby antiques, stands as a mute witness to the underlying financial struggles of the family. At the Lamphreys' garden party, Heavenly falls from Port Tyler's social graces (a fall prompted by rumours of her sexual liaison with Richard Miles).
Iconography	A family portrait of a Gettysburg veteran features prominently in the Critchfield living room, an object they refer to with great frequency and pride (especially, Heavenly's mother). The ominous thunder of an approaching storm contrasts with the artificial radio sounds that hold Aunt Lila, a confirmed spinster, in thrall.
Staging Techniques	In uniquely combining the Gothic and Southern narrative traditions, Williams, through the use of both lighting and props, gradually transforms the natural environment from an idyllic haven into a morbidly sinister trap. For example, he transforms "a high bluff overlooking the Mississippi River" into a "Golgotha," upon which Hertha, situated between two grotesquely twisted trees, finds herself symbolically "crucified" (<i>Spring</i> 2, vi).

SPRING STORM

CHANDLER'S CRITERIA	GENERIC TRADITION	WILLIAMS'S INNOVATIONS
Narrative	In conventional Gothic narratives, we find the "inevitable travel sequence" (Conger 92), as well as a "traditional resolution through marriage" (Young 19). Traditional southern narratives appeal to "a code of honour" (118).	Williams avoids the obligatory inclusion of the journey typical of many traditional Gothic narratives. He also excludes the requisite resolution of conflict through marriage, common to traditional Southern narratives. In addition, Williams treats the notion of a code of honour in a satirical fashion.
Characterization	In conventional Gothic, and even in Southern narrative plots, we often encounter a typical triangle made up of a hero, a heroine, and a villain.	Williams avoids conventional male heroes, female stereotypes, and clear-cut depictions of villainy. Instead, he presents us with a quadrangle made up of two couples, rather than with the conventional triangle.
Topics	Conventional Gothic and Southern topics include the threat of corruption of "the innocent" (Fleenor 14), as well as underlying appeals to "traditional values" (Young 14).	Williams simply refrains from drawing sharp distinctions between good versus evil, or innocent versus corrupt characters. Rather, his characters display complex, and often conflicting, emotions and behaviour. He also characterizes traditional values as both anachronistic and oppressive.
Setting	In the Gothic tradition, abandoned "castles" (Ronald 176) and "ruins" (190) are the settings of choice. In the Southern tradition, on the other hand, we find an emphasis upon the holding of "land" (Young 7), without which identities are compromised: "[i]f people are not <i>where</i> they ought to be, they could not be <i>who</i> they ought to be" (7).	Williams eschews grandiose settings, such as fortresses and palaces, choosing instead to locate his plays in natural settings, and in the modest homes or humble establishments frequented by his characters. Also, he tends to equate leaving home with a gain, both in terms of a renewed sense of freedom, and in the strengthening of personal identity, whereas the characters that remain behind suffer the restrictive consequences of their choices.
Iconography	More generally, Gothic iconography incorporates the idea of "the monster," which "remains an apt symbol for turbulent inner compulsions [and] a physical emblem of inescapable stigma" (Stein 123). Southern iconography also alludes to the stabilizing rituals that inform and shape the conservative hierarchies of the aristocratic family, with their servants, and traditional homesteads (Davidson 60).	Williams tends to eschew those elements in the Gothic tradition that evoke supernatural monsters or demonic creatures. By contrast, he deliberately locates the so-called "dark" side within his characters, showing their human potential for cruelty and destructiveness. Williams also portrays the manners and morals associated with the Southern notion of the aristocracy as being stifling, outmoded, and oppressive.
Staging Techniques	Traditional Gothic drama emphasizes the sinister interplay between light and shadow, as well as claustrophobic symbols of imprisonment and physical "constraint" (Stein 125). In plays about the South, traditional staging techniques focus primarily upon natural scenery, especially that relating to the homestead and its surrounding lands.	In uniquely combining the Gothic and Southern traditions, Williams, through the use of lighting and props, gradually transforms the natural environment from an idyllic haven into a morbidly sinister locale, as in the transformation of Lover's Leap into a "Golgotha" (<i>Spring</i> vi), in which Hertha, abandoned upon a cliff situated between two grotesquely twisted trees, experiences the suffering of the ultimate outcast.

STAIRS TO THE ROOF

**CHANDLER'S
CRITERIA**

Narrative	<i>Stairs</i> consists of a non-linear fantasy narrative that is resolved through <i>deus ex machina</i> .
Characterization	Major characters react to the unfolding action in a naturalistic fashion, based upon the respective influence of their families, friends, and personal histories. However, Williams depicts minor characters, especially those associated with the carnival, Expressionistically. The stage directions call for an unusually large and diverse cast of characters, including two sets of young married couples.
Topics	Topics include the growing impersonality and standardization of American life; the humdrum existence of the play's numerous dissatisfied characters; their loss of youth and their lack of fulfillment; a satirical view of trust and friendship; an exploration of amorphous identities; and the hardships attendant upon the economic downturn during the Depression.
Setting	Williams sets <i>Stairs</i> in St. Louis, at an unmarked point in time between 1933 and 1936; more specifically, most of the action occurs in the following settings: an amusement park, a bar, a cramped apartment, a modest bungalow, an office, and upon the adjacent rooftop of an office building.
Iconography	At the end of each scene, we hear the eerie and disembodied laughter of the invisible Mr. E, while an office clock relentlessly tolls out the hour throughout the play. Williams makes use of Irving Berlin's "Blue Heaven" (<i>Stairs</i> 26) in order to satirically underline the fact that the marriage of the couple associated with it consists of a less-than-ideal arrangement. Benjamin, at least in his memory, revisits the statue of "Youth," which was a fixture upon the campus of his former <i>alma mater</i> . The stairs to the roof epitomize the 'ascension' that each character seeks, but that only two manage to obtain.
Staging Techniques	A blackout occurs between each scene, sometimes accompanied by the chiming of the "music of the spheres," to mark its ending (36). Cycloramic projections feature in both "The Carnival" scene and during Benjamin's flashback and, ironically, serve to evoke a carefree atmosphere that stands in stark contrast with the mundane and grim realities of the play's unfolding scenarios. Finally, during Benjamin's flashback, Williams adds certain sound effects, such as those of "lectures remembered" (31), the "distant singing" of the "Glee Club" (34) and "ghostly voices" (31), all of which heighten Benjamin's fragmented perceptions of his own past.

STAIRS TO THE ROOF

CHANDLER'S CRITERIA	GENERIC TRADITION	WILLIAMS'S INNOVATIONS
Narrative	A form of "apocalypse" (Puschmann-Nalenz 21) occurs at the end of the narrative.	Williams concludes the play with the divine intervention of a mythic character, and this prevents the apocalypse.
Characterization	Typical narratives portray civilizations beyond the stars as "alien" (64, 72), with "machine-like" traits (135).	Williams does not include typically alien creatures from outer space. On the contrary, Williams's characters appear, at least at first glance, to be fully human entities.
Topics	A topical "reliance on science and technological devices" (18) and a "fascination with gadgets" (Greenberg and Warrick 23) distinguish the science fiction narratives of the 1930s.	Throughout <i>Stairs</i> , Williams makes reference neither to mechanical devices, nor to other forms of futuristic technology.
Setting	Various forms of "time-travel" back to the past, as well as projected toward "the future," make regular appearances through the agency of advanced technology (Puschmann-Nalenz 60).	Williams's protagonists also revisit the past, but only through memory and without the aid of technology.
Setting	Many science fiction narratives unfold upon "amorphous," unknown, and distant planets (72).	The entire action of the play occurs in an American city. Only at the conclusion do the main protagonists fly out into outer space, although their ultimate destination remains unknown.
Iconography	Significant events often include "scientific discoveries," or "invasions from Mars" (98).	No iconography in <i>Stairs</i> relates to, nor indicates, visits from "UFOs" or "ETs" from outer space. However, a godlike character requests that Benjamin and The Girl disappear in order to colonize and populate a distant star.
Staging Techniques	Quite often, science fiction narratives preserve a "conventional presentation" (98) and generic techniques, by way of contrasting traditional approaches with other-worldly subject matter.	Williams, by contrast, employs surreal lighting, props, and effects, such as those that accompany the couple's magical leap into outer space.

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