

Abstract

This interdisciplinary thesis examines the portrayal of homosexual characters in Tennessee Williams's selected stories. Although the theme of homosexuality reoccurs throughout Williams's work, his short fiction constitutes a unique example, as it addresses this issue explicitly. The traditional scholarly view of Williams's depiction of homosexuality highlights the negative portrayal, which could be considered as verging on homophobia. This is closely related to the features of the Southern grotesque, which has become a mode typical for Williams's work. The thesis will largely confirm this view, yet at the same time, it will attempt to find out whether the male homosexual protagonists could be read as queer, i.e. whether they display any features, which would oppose the traditional concept of human sexuality as stable and unchanging.

The second chapter will provide the theoretical background of the Southern Grotesque, the specific nature of which stems primarily from the characters, who (for various reasons) do not meet the criteria of normality and thus become misfits excluded from the society. Taking into account the conservative and strongly religious environment of the American South, homosexuality undoubtedly is one of such deviations. To cover the theory of the grotesque fully, the subchapters will shed a light on the difference between the grotesque and the gothic and also the specific connection between the grotesque and the South. The third chapter will offer a different perception of homosexuality, drawing mainly from Foucault's theory of homosexuality as a social construct which serves to strengthen the hegemonic position of the heterosexual majority. This idea has been further developed in the field of queer theory, the aim of which is to point out the richness of human sexuality and abandon the standard binary model, based on the opposition of hetero- and homosexuality. The last chapter of the theoretical part will focus briefly on homosexuality and literature in general. The main aim is to highlight the problems which (due to the imprecise definition of homosexuality itself) inevitably arise when one attempts to classify the story as a part of gay and lesbian literary canon.

The following chapters will focus on the analyses of individual stories, namely the stories "Hard Candy", "The Mysteries of Joy Rio", "Desire and the Black Masseur", "One Arm" and also briefly "The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin" and "The Angel in the Alcove". All the stories operate with traditional negative connotations of homosexuality, presenting images of perverse behaviour, violence and death, which the protagonists (or the objects of their desire) cannot escape. Williams underscores the physical

aspect of same-sex relationships, ascribing to his characters various deformations or diseases, which serve as a visible manifestation of their decaying and unfulfilled inner life. The stories also contain Christian symbolism, which, however, cannot be read merely as standing in opposition to the homosexual intimacies, which primarily revolve around assuaging the sexual desire. Some of the stories also contain elements which can be understood as queer. This appears, for example, mainly in the frequent image of a fragmented human body, which illustrates the incomplete and insufficient conception of human identity and sexuality.

The conclusion will point out that the grotesque features prevail. Yet it would be too short-sighted to perceive them as a reflection of Williams's internalized homophobia. They rather mirror the hostile attitude of the society which does not provide homosexuals with a sense of belonging. Certain features, which seem to be merely grotesque, can be read as queer as well. These two modes thus do not necessarily exclude each other. Some of Williams's short stories do demonstrate a tendency to abandon the reactionary approach to homosexuality. However, that does not mean that they necessarily have to portray it in a completely positive light.