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**Grotesque, or Queer? Homosexual Characters in Tennessee Williams's Selected Short
Stories**
**Groteskní, nebo queer? Postavy homosexuálů ve vybraných povídkách Tennesseeho
Williamse**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Abstrakt

Tato práce, čerpající zejména z poznatků literární vědy a genderových studií, se zabývá zobrazením postav homosexuálů ve vybraných povídkách Tennesseeho Williamse. Přestože se otázka homosexuality objevuje ve Williamsově díle opakovaně, jeho povídková tvorba je v tomto ohledu výjimkou, neboť se zde Williams s tímto často tabuizovaným tématem vypořádává otevřeně. Standardní pohled kritiků na Williamsovo zobrazení homosexuality poukazuje na primárně negativní vykreslení, které by dalo považovat až za hraničící s homofobií. Toto je úzce spjato s prvky jižanské grotesky, která je pro Williamsovo dílo typická. Práce tento náhled tedy z velké části potvrdí, zároveň se však bude snažit zjistit, zdali by se postavy homosexuálních mužů daly číst jako queer, tzn. jestli vykazují prvky, které by byly v protikladu s tradičním pojetím lidské sexuality jako stabilní a neměnné.

Druhá kapitola práce se bude zabývat teoretickým vymezením jižanské grotesky, jejíž specifický charakter tvoří zejména postavy, které z různých důvodů neodpovídají kategorii normality, a stávají se tak vyhnanci, které společnost nepřijímá. V prostředí silně konzervativního a nábožensky založeného amerického Jihu je bez pochyby mezi odchylky řazena i homosexualita. Pro úplné vymezení grotesky bude krátce osvětlen i rozdíl mezi jižanskou groteskou a gotikou a také specifický vztah grotesky a amerického Jihu. Třetí kapitola se pokusí nabídnout opačný pohled na homosexualitu. Jejím základem bude Foucaultova teorie homosexuality jako sociálního konstruktů, pomocí kterého většinová heterosexuální společnost upevňuje své hegemonné postavení. Tato myšlenka byla dále rozvinuta v akademické oblasti queer teorie. Jejím hlavním cílem je poukázat na bohatost lidské sexuality a odpoutat se tak od standardního binárního pojetí, které staví do opozice heterosexualitu a homosexualitu. Poslední kapitola teoretické části se krátce zaměří na homosexualitu v literatuře všeobecně. Cílem bude poukázat na to, že s ohledem na problémy definování homosexuality samotné může být obtížné danou povídku klasifikovat jako součást gay a lesbické literatury.

Následující kapitoly se budou zabývat analýzami jednotlivých povídek. Konkrétně jde o povídky Cucavé bonbóny, Záhady Joy Rio, Touha a černý masér, Jedna paže a také okrajově Podoba mezi houslovým pouzdrem a rakví a Anděl ve výklenku. Ve všech povídkách se zobrazení homosexuality opírá hlavně o tradiční negativní konotace a pracuje s obrazy perverze, násilí a smrti, která nakonec dostihne všechny homosexuální postavy či objekty jejich touhy. Williams klade důraz na fyzickou stránku stejnopohlavních styků, přičemž většinou připisuje svým postavám různé deformace či nemoci, které fungují jako

viditelná manifestace jejich chátrajícího a nenaplněného vnitřního života. Dále do povídek zapracovává křesťanské symboly, ty však nelze chápat pouze jako protipól homosexuálních vztahů, které jsou zaměřeny zejména na uspokojení sexuální touhy. Některé z povídek však obsahují prvky, které se při aplikaci poznatků z genderových studií také dají chápat jako queer. Jde zejména například o častý obraz deformovaného lidského těla, který poukazuje na omezené a nedostačující vnímání bohatosti lidské identity a sexuality.

V závěru bude vyzvednuto, že groteskní prvky v povídkách jednoznačně převažují. Bylo by však příliš krátkozraké tvrdit, že odrážejí Williamsovu vlastní homofobii. Spíše jde o reflexi dobového nepřátelského postoje společnosti, která neposkytuje homosexuálům pocit, že jsou její součástí. Určité prvky, které se na první pohled jeví jako groteskní, lze navíc vykládat i jako queer; tyto dva zdánlivě odlišné přístupy se tedy navzájem nemusí nutně vylučovat. Je tedy zřejmé, že Williamsovy povídky vykazují snahu osvobodit se od soudobého konzervativního pojetí homosexuality. To však neznamená, že musí být nutně na hranici aktivismu a zobrazovat homosexualitu jako čistě pozitivní.

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.

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Chapter 1 Introduction: Tennessee Williams Reconsidered

“The love that dare not speak its name.”¹ These words nowadays mostly serve only as a reminder of the persecution and oppression homosexual individuals had to face throughout the history. Until the latter part of the 20th century (at least in the West), love and desire between individuals of the same sex could not be voiced publicly without being condemned and the same fate awaited a work of literature, which also dismantled the conventional heteronormative image of human sexual behaviour. Particularly a country such as the United States (based on the belief of its exceptionalism as a God-chosen nation) could be unrelentingly hostile towards its ‘fags’ and ‘queens’. It does not, therefore, come as a surprise that “no American author who wished to establish reputation with a widespread audience could come out in public without facing censure or even rejection as an artist.”²

Although Tennessee Williams is nowadays regarded as one of the most prominent gay American writers, his work also managed to reach mainstream audience. He did not avoid addressing the taboo topic of homosexuality later in his life, yet his work is still interwoven with homophobic features, reflecting not only the hostile attitude of the era, but also Williams’s own internalized homophobia, as some critics suggest.³ This view is not shared by all, but the truth remains that Williams’s attitude towards his own sexual orientation was at least ambiguous (for which he was criticized by post-Stonewall gay activists, which resulted in him coming out on national television in 1970.⁴)

Williams is nowadays celebrated primarily as an author of plays – works such as *Streetcar named Desire* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* have become true classics of the American literary canon. The hugely successful dramatic work overshadowed his contribution in fiction and poetry. Besides the literary merit of his plays and the fact that they constitute the largest body of his work, another possible explanation for the neglect of his fiction might be that it was too shocking, too outrageous and explicit to be accepted into the mainstream canon.

¹ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 74.

² Dean Shackelford, “The Truth that Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,” *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* Issue 1 (1998): 103, Web, 25 Nov 2014.

³ John M. Clum, “‘Something Cloudy, Something Clear’: Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Winter 1989): 162, Web, 25 Nov 2014.

⁴ David Savran, “‘By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty’: Mapping the Closet with Tennessee Williams,” *Studies in Literary Imagination* (Fall 1991): 57, EBSCO, Web, 25 Nov 2014.

Yet this precisely is also the reason why this part of Williams's work is worth paying attention to, for "in his fiction Williams could be much more candidly confessional about the central experience of his life, his homosexuality."⁵ Although the plays are now also read in the light of William's homosexual orientation, the treatment of this controversial subject is very subtle and covert. The dramatic work, being more of a public medium, was obviously subject to a greater degree of censorship than a work of fiction intended for intimate reading. In the times when homosexual behaviour was still largely criminalized, any kind of open and explicit allusion to such a taboo topic could result in closing down the theatre and completely destroying the playwright's career.

For this reason, my thesis, in which I will deal with the portrayal of homosexual characters in Tennessee Williams's work, will focus solely on his short fiction. Its open and explicit nature will enable me to focus directly on the presentation of homosexuality and to avoid slipping into mere speculations. Moreover, only those stories for which the issue of homosexuality (or, more specifically, male homosexuality) is central will be analysed. The list of works selected for my thesis thus includes the stories "The Mysteries of Joy Rio", "Hard Candy", "Desire and the Black Masseur", "One Arm", "The Angel in the Alcove" and "The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin."

The peculiar aspect of Williams's short fiction is that the depiction of homosexuality does not meet the standard expectations. Unlike many gay activists of his era, Williams does not attempt to persuade his readers of the 'normality' and 'naturalness' of homosexual behaviour. Quite on the contrary, the stories are among the finest examples of his fascination with the grotesque. Having been born in Mississippi, Williams could not escape the haunting influence of the American South; it manifests itself frequently throughout his work, although often in contradictory ways, possibly reflecting William's own "love/hate relationship"⁶ towards his home region. The unmistakable impact of the South, along with the wide range of bizarre characters and events appearing in his work, puts Williams among the authors of the so called Southern grotesque – writers, who, using the specific nature of the Southern environment, tackle the issues of abnormality (both physical and mental), violence, brutality and other perverse and deviant aspects of human nature.

⁵ Jürgen C. Wolter, "Tennessee Williams's Fiction," *Tennessee Williams: A Guide to Research and Performance*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Greenwood Press, 1998): 220.

⁶ Kimball King, "Tennessee Williams: A Southern Writer," *The Mississippi Quarterly* (1995), Web, 25 Nov 2014.

In my thesis, I will thus demonstrate that the way in which homosexuals are portrayed in the stories constitutes a typical group of Southern grotesque characters, i.e. outcasts and misfits, whose deviation prevents them from fitting into the standard created by the mainstream society. This thus largely corresponds with the view of homosexuals as abnormal and diseased individuals, which dominated the discourse until the latter part of the 20th century. Yet the whole concept of homosexuality has undergone a radical change since it came to existence and my thesis will attempt to reflect this shift as well. I will therefore not rely merely on the grotesqueness of the characters, but will also make use of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) studies and queer theory. These relatively recent academic disciplines not only provided a new, radical view of human sexuality, but also later started questioning the very notion of identity itself and the thesis will attempt to discover whether Tennessee Williams's homosexual characters carry any features which would be also compatible with these theories.

The analyses themselves will be preceded by a theoretical part. In the second chapter of my thesis, I will make use of the vast research that has been done on the grotesque in literature and I will define aspects typical of a work of Southern grotesque. To illustrate that fully, I will also briefly compare the grotesque and the gothic (modes, which are often used synonymously, yet which also differ considerably) and finally I will also shed a light on the specific relationship between the grotesque and the Southern region of the United States.

The following chapter of the theoretical part will deal with the phenomenon of homosexuality itself, scrutinizing it from a completely different point of view. While the concept of homosexuality as an element contributing to the grotesque exemplifies a typically reactionary approach, the academic fields of LGBT studies and queer theory (both closely related to gay liberation movements) offer a completely new perspective on what homosexuality is. I will cover the development of these fields, both of which stem primarily from Foucault's theory of homosexuality as a social construct. I will also point out the contestations made to LGBT studies, which resulted in the emergence of queer theory and illustrate the main points of dispute between these two theories.

The final chapter of the theoretical part will deal with gay and lesbian literature in general, specifying the problems of defining such a canon (which mainly stems from the inadequacy of the terms "gay" and "lesbian") and asserting why Tennessee Williams's short fiction can be classified as being a part of this long neglected subcategory of literary history.

The two main approaches – the theory of the grotesque and LGBT studies and queer theory – will thus create the theoretical core, on the background of which the stories will be

analysed. Although the characters of the stories will bear resemblances to each other, I will also attempt to highlight the specific aspects which can be found in the portrayal of the individual protagonists. As mentioned above, the main aim will be to identify the elements contributing to the grotesque, but at the same time attempt to find any aspects which could be read as queer.

The conclusion will sum up the results of the analysis, hopefully providing an answer whether Williams's homosexual characters are simply another instance of the Southern grotesque misfits or whether their portrayal also demonstrates any signs of 'queerness'.

Chapter 2 Defining the Grotesque

The question of how the grotesque can be clearly defined in the field of literary theory still remains unresolved. Although there have been numerous attempts to come up with a general definition, not all of them proved to be successful. My general account of the grotesque will thus draw from Maria Haar's dissertation *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of Its Form and Function*, which maps the development of the use of the term grotesque and provides a clear overview of the individual theories, attempting to create its own definition of the Southern Grotesque, which is based on the fusion of its predecessors.

The origins of the word "grotesque" can be traced to the Italian term "grotte", meaning caves. The term appeared in the 15th century when underground chambers from the reign of Augustus were excavated in Rome. The inside of these chambers was decorated with extraordinary paintings, which depicted "fantastic representation of intricately woven human, animal and vegetable forms creating distortions of the natural to the point of comic absurdity, ridiculous ugliness, or ludicrous caricature."⁷ These unusual features thus explain the specific character of the grotesque and cast a light on why current connotations of the term include attributes such as bizarre, absurd, abnormal, ugly or unnatural.

The term "grotesque" was originally used in the field of visual arts and it was not until the 18th century that it was adopted as a literary term as well. Yet due to its emphasis on the absurd and unnatural, it was primarily associated with low genres (such as caricature), being perceived as grossly exaggerated and absurd form of art. 20th century saw a shift in this view, suggesting that the grotesque can help "to make us see the real world anew, from a fresh perspective which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic."⁸

This idea was expressed in the work *The Grotesque* by Philip Thomson, who thus became one of the leading figures standing behind the re-evaluation of this mode. The strange and disturbing nature of the grotesque, according to Thompson, stems from "the mixture of two or more incompatible elements", which create the basic foundation of a grotesque work of fiction.

⁷ Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan, *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001): 321.

⁸ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), Web, 6 Jan 2014.

“One of these elements ought to be comic; the other or others might consist of the terrifying, the disgusting, the repulsive etc....the essential thing is that one perceives a conflict between the elements in question and, furthermore, that this conflict remains unresolved and is felt to exist both in the work itself and one’s reaction to it. The grotesque can thus be summarised as an unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response.”⁹

Although the presence of the comical element is not an aspect which would be later agreed upon by all theoreticians, Thomson’s theory still remains relevant. For instance, the present-day definition from *The Companion to Southern literature* (2001) also considers “the juxtaposition or fusion of contrasting, paradoxical, and incompatible elements”¹⁰ a crucial aspect of the grotesque.

A second important text which influenced today’s conception of the grotesque is Alan Spiegel’s “A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”. Spiegel’s attempt to define this mode of writing is of special relevance to my thesis for two reasons: firstly, it deals exclusively with the grotesque in the work of Southern writers and secondly, it places a primary focus on the characters of the grotesque fiction. According to Spiegel,

“the grotesque, as it appears in Southern fiction, refers neither to the particular quality of a story (noble or ignoble, beautiful or ugly, etc.), nor to its mood (light or dark, sad or joyous, etc.), nor to its mode of expression (fantasy or realism, romance or myth, etc.). The grotesque refers rather to a type of character that occurs so repeatedly in contemporary Southern novels that readers have come to accept – indeed, expect his appearance as a kind of convention of the form.”¹¹

It is then the characters, who must reflect the grotesque nature and its connection to the bizarre, absurd and unnatural. For this reason, a prototypical protagonist of a work of the Southern grotesque is usually physically or mentally deformed. “Such a character may be a cripple, a dwarf, a deaf mute, a blind man, or an androgynous adolescent. If he appears as one

⁹ Maria Haar, *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of Its Form and Function* (Stockholm: Almqvist-Wiksell, 1983): 8.

¹⁰ Flora 321.

¹¹ Alan Spiegel, “A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” *The Georgia Review*. Vol. 26, No.4 (Winter, 1972): 428, JSTOR, Web, 6 Jan 2014.

of the mentally deformed, he may be either an idiot or a mad-man, a half-wit or a psychotic – a sub-normal or an abnormal figure.”¹²

The obvious deviation from the standard inevitably turns the grotesque character into an outcast, a misfit, the ultimate Other, whose appearance or behaviour does not correspond to the traditional social norms and who is thus forced to live on the periphery of social life. He is turned into a scapegoat, on whom the society can not only project its deepest fears and anxieties, but also ensure itself of its presumed normality. By classifying some aspects of appearance or behaviour as abnormal, the society builds up a standard of normality, which then helps to enhance the social superiority of the majority above those who fail to fulfil its requirements.

Although Spiegel’s theory of the Southern grotesque contains many relevant points and will prove to be of huge importance to this thesis, his work has been criticized for its too large an emphasis on the character, neglecting other important aspects which contribute to creating a typical work of the Southern grotesque (such as situation, setting or style.) In light of the previous theories, Haar thus ultimately attempts to come up with her own definition of the grotesque, which fuses the main aspects of its predecessors and could be thus applied to all major works of Southern grotesque fiction. She claims that,

“by the Southern grotesque is generally meant a deformed or warped character, placed in an unmistakably Southern setting, whose physical or mental make-up or behaviour is such that it creates a sustained tension in both work and response. He is usually portrayed with compassion. The phenomenon of the Southern grotesque can also pertain to situation, setting, imagery, style or mood.”¹³

Chapter 2.1 The Grotesque versus the Gothic

Another important contribution of Spiegel’s article on the nature of the Southern grotesque is his attempt to distinguish and explain the differences between the terms Gothic and grotesque fiction. In many cases, these terms are used synonymously, representing a similar trend in the Southern fiction. The term Southern Gothic is frequently used in the relation to writers such as William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, who, however, are also prototypical examples of the Southern grotesque.

¹² Spiegel 428.

¹³ Haar 210.

Indeed, both modes of writing are usually associated with “vice and disorder, being preoccupied with the deviation from harmony and right morals.”¹⁴ Although the Southern grotesque does have roots in the classic Gothic novel, as Spiegel points out, “the Southern novel is not dependent upon its Gothic counterpart as far as the subject matter, technique or style are concerned: furthermore, that its entire philosophy of life is radically different.”¹⁵

This claim is supported by Maxmillian E. Novak, who claims that “the Gothic novel of the 18th century (as produced by Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe or Matthew Lewis) presents a strange, unfamiliar world full of ghosts, desolated castles and mysteries, which functioned as an outlet for feelings that could not be expressed in the realistic novel of the type of produced by Fielding, Hardy and Balzac.”¹⁶ The author of Gothic fiction therefore consciously avoids portraying a real world and resorts to a world of the supernatural. Southern writers, on the other hand, set their stories in a real, recognizable setting. While the Gothic world is obscured by the veil of mystery, the actions in the grotesque fiction “take place within society in the daylight setting of ordinary communal activity.”¹⁷

Since Spiegel sees the deformed character as the crucial element of the Southern grotesque, he also makes a distinction between the protagonists of the Gothic and grotesque fiction. While “the former is a dynamic non-conformist, the latter is a puppet, a misfit, an outcast and victim. The Gothic hero scorns, the grotesque protagonist is scorned.”¹⁸ This dichotomy is also reflected in the treatment of the main protagonist by the author. Unlike Gothic villains, the protagonists of the Southern grotesque are portrayed with pity and compassion.

This underscores a crucial feature of the grotesque characters - instead of being condemned by the author, they are rather presented as victims of the society’s rigidity and intolerance. As Spiegel points out, they often become superior to the ‘normal’ individuals since they are endowed with “a spiritual life that is morally richer than the lives of those people who reject [them] as a social aberration. [...] No matter how deviant [they] might be, [their] deformity never exceeds [their] humanity. [Their] deformity will not separate [them] from us, but rather bring [them] closer.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Maxmillian E. Novak, “Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979): 36, JSTOR, Web, 6 Jan 2014.

¹⁵ Haar 33.

¹⁶ Haar 33.

¹⁷ Spiegel 433.

¹⁸ Spiegel 428.

¹⁹ Spiegel 428.

Chapter 2.2 The Grotesque and the South

The account of Southern grotesque would not be complete without clarifying the relationship between the grotesque and the South. Why has this region of the United States become such a fecund ground for the rapid development of this specific mode of writing? Why have the several waves of the Southern literary renaissance become identified primarily with works in which freaks and idiots stand in the centre of the authors' attention?

The American critic William Van O'Connor assumes in his work "The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction" that the rise of the grotesque, which occurred mainly in the 20th century, can be traced back to the 17th century's conception of man, namely the widespread belief in progress, superior intellectual capacities of the human mind and the almost scientific approach to human nature. The events of the 20th century, however, gave a major blow to such ideas. This era became

"an age of violence, with wars, genocide, atom bombs and great social changes. The century before ours learned that man had evolved from lower biological species, and certain of its philosophers stressed both the irrationality of human nature and the ways in which our actions were determined by forces beyond our control. The literature of the grotesque has been in response to these shifts."²⁰

The horrific atrocities of the 20th century, together with the death of God and the discovery of biological origins of man, shattered the general beliefs in human nature into pieces and left Western civilisation with a sense of alienation and despair. The grotesque became a suitable mode to express these new conditions, in which a modern man suddenly found himself.

Although this is undeniably true, the American South has bred an abnormal amount of the grotesque compared to the rest of the literary world and one must therefore focus on its peculiarities to be able to understand this phenomenon. This has been also attempted by Maria Haar in her account of the Southern grotesque, in which she lists possible reasons which might reveal the popularity of the grotesque among Southern writers. As she points out, the uniqueness of the American South stems from the double transition this region had to undergo throughout its history: apart from being affected by the shifts taking place on the global scale,

²⁰William Van O'Connor, "The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction," *College English*. Vol.20, No.7 (April, 1959): 342, JSTOR, Web. 6 Jan 2014.

the South was also subject to changes resulting from its effort to catch up with the rest of the country.

The South has always occupied a distinctive position in the United States. Already its specific geographical position sets it apart from other states. The tropical climate, with its unusually hot and humid weather plays an important part in the life of the Southerners. There even have been attempts to trace a connection between the climate and the unusually large amount of violence in the Southern states. Although this is disputable, the fact remains that the number of acts of personal violence is statistically higher in the South than in the rest of the country.²¹

The climate also stood behind the predominantly agricultural nature of the Southern states. The suitable climatic conditions gave rise to the big cotton plantations and the system of slavery. Racial discrimination, lynching of blacks and the widespread cruelty and violence thus became almost the daily bread in the life of a Southerner and shaped the nature of Southern culture. The rural character of the South and its agricultural system also resulted in a smaller degree of urbanization and industrial development. This contributed to the alienation and estrangement of many Southerners, who were completely isolated from the rest of the world. The insufficient industrial progress, on the other hand, led to underdevelopment and poverty, as a result of which illiteracy and lack of education became a common feature in the American South.

All of these factors prepared a good soil for the growth of abnormality, a primary focus of the Southern grotesque writers. Besides that, the mentally or physically afflicted inhabitants were not placed in asylums, but remained home, being looked after by family members. The frequent appearance of these people in normal everyday life thus explains the abundance of similar characters in Southern fiction.

From the historical perspective, it is the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War, which determined the future development of the South. Since the region got to know the bitter taste of frustration caused by defeat in the war, the pervading sense of loss and despair excluded the South from the rest of the United States, which technically never lost any war and constantly present itself as an almost mythical land of dreams and opportunities. Last but not least, as Haar points out, it is important to note that the South has been the most religious and the most conservative part of the United States. Flannery O'Connor went even further and claimed that the South is "not Christ-centred, but rather a Christ-haunted region."²² Whether it

²¹ Haar 10.

²² Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," Web. 15 January 2015.

is a total devotion to the word of God or the constant pressure emphasising the necessity of Christian belief, one cannot attempt to explain mentality of the Southerners without encountering the question of religion.

All these aspects (the climate, underdevelopment, the sense of isolation and defeat, and strong religious belief) might be seen as possible roots of the South's unequalled preoccupation with the grotesque. Contributing to the specific nature of the Southern literature, they might also prove to be helpful during the analyses of the individual stories.

Chapter 3 Homosexuality as perceived in LGBT studies and queer theory

Due to the reasons mentioned in the previous chapter, the Southern states are even nowadays seen as the most conservative part of the United States. It thus comes as no surprise that (as results from sociological surveys also suggest) “many conservative gender attitudes are more common in the South than elsewhere.”²³ Homosexuals, who manifest gender deviance most explicitly, would thus stand at the forefront of the Southern misfits. Although Haar does not discuss sexual deviations in much detail in her work, it seems almost impossible to discuss the presence of the grotesque in Tennessee William’s work without encountering his preoccupation with homosexuality. The following section will thus focus on the phenomenon of homosexuality itself, this time scrutinizing it through the lenses of LGBT studies and queer theory.

The mere attempt to define homosexuality proves how complex the whole issue can be. Speaking broadly, homosexuality is generally understood to describe “sexual attraction for those of one’s own sex.”²⁴ Although this might seem relatively unproblematic and many individuals would describe themselves as homosexual on the basis of their sexual attraction, one will encounter cases, in which such a definition fails. For instance, does a married man, who occasionally has an intimate sexual experience with another male, necessarily has to be called ‘gay’?

It is exactly the tendency to label people, to put them into categories on the basis of their sexual preferences, which has become the keystone of modern views of human sexuality and which also inevitably created the category of a homosexual. This obviously does not mean that no homosexual behaviour existed before these categories appeared. Yet the attempt to divide people into two binary groups – heterosexual and homosexual – is a late 19th century Western social phenomenon unprecedented anywhere in the world.

This so called constructionist approach towards homosexuality draws mainly from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault and the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, published in 1976. Foucault saw the rapid development of medicine, sexology and other related disciplines in the late 19th century as the period which provided the ground for a birth of the modern homosexual. With the rapid scientific advancement, the phenomenon of same-sex desire naturally also became the focus of scientific research. Although the presence of

²³ Tom W. Rice and Diane L. Coates, “Gender Role Attitudes in Southern United States,” *Gender and Society*. Vol.9, No.6 (Dec., 1995): 754, JSTOR, Web, 29 Dec 2014.

²⁴ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996):7.

various homosexual subcultures at the outskirts of larger cities was a well-known matter before, “it was only in the late nineteenth century that a substantial literature appeared which described recognizably contemporary notions of homosexual identities.”²⁵

One of the most prominent representatives of the growing interest in same-sex attraction was Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who coined the term a third sex as a way to describe homosexual individuals who were “neither totally male nor totally female”²⁶ and thus associated homosexuality with a “gender deviance.”²⁷

Other notable writings on homosexuality included Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal’s *Die conträre Sexualempfindung (Contrary Sexual Feeling, 1869)* and, most famously, Sigmund Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905)*, in which he extended the concept of sexual inversion. It was, however, the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 which spread the awareness of homosexuality among general public and eventually became “the nineteenth century’s greatest promotion of homosexuality.”²⁸ Judging by the suddenly awakened interest in same sex attraction, Foucault claims that:

“the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history [...]. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him [...]. We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted [...] less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself [...]. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”²⁹

In order to support the view of homosexuality as a social construct, the advocates of this theory turn back into the past and compare the previous evidences of homosexual behaviour with the view which began to dominate the discourse at the end of the 19th century. The most frequently cited case is that of Ancient Greek pederasty, an intimate sexual relationship which usually involved an older, widely respected man and a younger, socially inferior man/boy (or a slave). During this period, “sex did not express inward dispositions or

²⁵ Hugh Stevens, *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001):4.

²⁶ Simon LeVay, *Queer Science* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996): 13.

²⁷ Stevens 4.

²⁸ Stevens 5.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction.*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978): 44.

inclinations so much as it served to position social actors in the places assigned to them.”³⁰ In other words, same-sex sexual intercourse helped to underscore the social superiority of the active (penetrating) male citizen, as opposed to the passive (penetrated) younger male. This does not intend to suggest that there was no natural homosexual desire existing in Ancient Greece. The Greeks who practised homosexual activities did not, however, think of themselves as homosexuals and were not regarded as such by the society.

A similar pattern can be traced in the middle ages, a dark era for any kind of unchristian behaviour, among which homosexuality undoubtedly belongs. Again, one would not find any term which would denote specifically same-sex relationships. Instead, the overarching term “sodomy” was usually applied. Yet its scope was much wider, referring to a range of practices that were considered indecent or immoral. Like in Ancient Greece, an individual participating in same sex activities was not called a homosexual – he was simply seen as a sinner, who was unable to resist the temptation of the flesh.³¹

Claiming that the category of a homosexual individual is basically artificially created, Foucault’s theory (and its consequent elaboration in the field LGBT studies and queer theory) is sometimes seen as standing in opposition to the so called essentialism – “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions. Sexual essentialism is embedded in folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial and transhistorical.”³²

This binary distinction is sometimes regarded as rather obsolete, as it might imply that the construction model refuses to admit any kind of natural, biological force contributing to human sexuality. Yet the main difference lies elsewhere. Essentialists assume that “homosexuality exists across time as a universal phenomenon which has a marginalized but continuous and coherent history of its own. Constructionists, by contrast, assume that because same sex acts have different cultural meaning in different historical contexts, they are not identical across time and space.”³³

Foucault’s new radical conception, together with the increasing call for gay liberation movements and homophile movements of the 1950s and 1960s, sparked a new discussion and

³⁰ David M. Halperin, “Is There a History of Sexuality?,” *History and Theory*. Vol 28, No.3, (Oct., 1989): 261, JSTOR, Web, 24 Feb 2015.

³¹ Fernando Cascais, “Scrutinizing Historiography: Sexuality, Subjectivity and Identity from Pederasty to Sodomy to Homosexuality to LGBT/Queer,” *Queer Sexualities*, ed. Anne Worthington (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012): 39.

³² Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Web, 24 Feb 2015.

³³ Jagose 8.

gradually crystalized in the emergence of a new academic discipline – lesbian and gay studies (later referred to as LGBT studies). Although generally regarded as rather progressive, the area of lesbian and gay studies soon became criticized by the members of LGBT community themselves. Many claimed that lesbian and gay studies failed to free themselves from the constraints and conventions they originally set out to fight against. According to many, the academic discourse of lesbian and gay studies supported, rather than disrupted, the hetero and homosexual binary. Still drawing largely from the concept of the Cartesian subject, they tended to view “the self as a unified, self-determining, rational and coherent.”³⁴ They thus believed that it is possible to find a common and stable homosexual identity.

According to the critics, however, one cannot speak about homosexual identity in general terms and treat it as a phenomenon that could be applied to all homosexual individuals. As lesbian feminists pointed out, for example, men and women experience homosexuality in different ways, while scholars and activists of colour argued that in LGBT studies, “homosexuality was studied through the lens of white, middle-class males.”³⁵

The need for reconceptualization of the discourse resulted in the emergence of the so called queer theory in 1990s. As suggested above, queer theory in many ways grows out of LGBT studies, but at the same time opposes them in several aspects. Queer theory can be problematic to sum up, as it does not have a single specific goal or direction. The most important aspect is that “queer theory primarily aims to continuously destabilize and deconstruct the notion of fixed sexual and gender identities.”³⁶ Since it is seen as a postmodern and poststructuralist critique of LGBT studies, “queer theory has contributed to the final de-centring of the Cartesian subject [...], perceiving the very notion of identity as a sustaining and persistent cultural fantasy or myth.”³⁷ Instead of assuming the existence of a large category which would be representative of the whole gay and lesbian community, queer theory aims to emphasize the rich and multi-layered varieties of the category gay or lesbian. While LGBT studies often advocate the policy of assimilation, queer theory has gone in the opposite direction – it celebrates the difference and highlights the rich spectrum of human sexuality.

The semantic shift the word “queer” has undergone parallels the changing attitude towards non-standard sexual behaviour. Originally, the word referred to qualities such as

³⁴ Jagose 78.

³⁵ Karen E. Lovaas et al., *LGBT Studies and Queer Theory: New Conflicts, Collaborations and Contested Terrain* (New York: Harrington Press, 2007): 6.

³⁶ Lovaas 6.

³⁷ Jagose 78.

“strange”, “odd”, “peculiar” or even “bad” and “contemptible”.³⁸ Nowadays, the term not only works as an inclusive term for all kinds of sexual minorities (and thus opposes the exclusiveness of the terms such as gay or lesbian), but also serves as a symbol of pride, confirming one’s satisfaction in not conforming to the artificially created standards.

One of the most prominent queer theorists is Judith Butler and her ground breaking work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. Although being preoccupied largely with feminism, the book has had a far-reaching influence on the whole area of gender studies. Its most important contribution is the concept of gender performativity. Drawing from Foucault, Butler applies the concept of social constructedness on gender in general, assuming that gender is not what one is, it is something one does.³⁹ Refusing any natural basis of gender, Butler claims that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”⁴⁰ Butler thus not only helped to uncover the artificiality of homosexuality, but also dismantles the presumed naturalness and normality of heterosexuality.

Another important contribution came from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*, published in 1985, is now seen as one of the founding texts of queer theory. Unlike Butler, Sedgwick works exclusively in the territory of male homosexual desire. In accordance with queer theory, Sedgwick points out to the gaps in the standard binary model ‘either hetero- or homosexual’ and challenges the very notion of homosexuality itself.

Sedgwick also scrutinizes the concept of the closet as “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century”⁴¹ and “as a structure that has come to define the tension between (to name a few) public and private, secrecy and disclosure, knowledge and ignorance.”⁴² Following the theories of Foucault, Sedgwick claims that at the end of the nineteenth century, sexuality was placed in relation to constructs of individual identity, truth and knowledge. “Knowledge thus began to mean sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets. There had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted as secrecy.”⁴³ The

³⁸ queer, adj.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 2 May 2015.

³⁹ Sara Salih, “On Judith Butler and Performativity,” *Judith Butler*, ed. by Sarah Salih. (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 33.

⁴¹ Sedgwick 71.

⁴² Linnea A. Stenson, “Epistemology of the Closet”, *American Literature* (Fall 1992): 626, JSTOR, Web, 18 March 2015.

⁴³ Sedgwick 73.

notion of secrecy as an integral part of any reference to homosexuality is mentioned here as it will be demonstrated during the analysis of the individual short stories as well.

Naturally, there have been many others who contributed to the expansion of the diverse field of queer theory. What all of them share is that they oppose traditional ideas of sexuality and gender. Queer theory does not aim to provide a new definition of what it means to be homosexual. Such an effort would run contrary to its goal, which is to deconstruct the overarching general terms and concepts that undermine the position of an individual and his subjective experience.

Chapter 4 Homosexuality and Literature: Defining the Gay Canon

Since there has always been same sex desire throughout the history (albeit viewed in radically different perspectives across cultures and times), there has also been literature, which (more or less explicitly) reflected this issue. Yet it was not until the latter half of the 20th century that this controversial subject matter came to be recognized as an integral part of literary history. Since the beginnings of gay and lesbian liberation, scholars and critics have attempted to compensate for the lack of critical attention, coming up with canons and anthologies, which would cover the development of gay and lesbian literature. Such a task is, however, not an easy one. Although there might be a vague, general notion of what constitutes gay and lesbian literature, it is hard to determine which work of literature fulfils the necessary standards to be classified as one. As suggested above, the very terms gay and lesbian are subject to ongoing discussions and some advocates of queer theory even refuse to use them, as they only support the homophobic discourse.

It is difficult to set the criteria which would clearly identify a work of gay and lesbian literature. Does it have to be written by a gay or lesbian author? Many authors, whose work is now discussed in relation to homosexuality, would not (or even could not) identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Does this kind of literature have to represent same-sex desire then? Although this distinction might seem more effective, it proves how difficult it is to draw a line between a same-sex desire and non-romantic relationship between males or females. The most famous example of this ambiguity is represented by the work of Shakespeare – both his sonnets dedicated to “Fair Youth” and the strongly emotional relationship between Antonio and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* could suggest that there is homoerotic undertone present in Shakespeare’s work.

If we paraphrase the words of Gregory Woods, an author of *A History of Gay Literature: A Male Tradition*, we might say that “in the broadest sense, [lesbian and] gay literature is that which expresses, describes or otherwise represents a spectrum of intense friendship, love, erotic desire and sexual contact or relationship between individuals of same sex, as well as engaging with the social context of how these matters are received by the broader society.”⁴⁴

Nevertheless, some would argue that it makes sense to trace the beginnings of lesbian and gay literature only after the category of sexual identities (among which homosexuality

⁴⁴ Gregory Woods, “Gay Literature: An Introduction,” *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), Web, 25 March 2015.

was most prominent, as illustrated above) was created. Such a view would thus limit the range of works primarily to the 20th century and current literary production. An even more restricting view is that “[lesbian and] gay literature dates from 1960’s in the West and is written only by lesbian and gay authors who [...] subscribe to the aims and ethos of the gay liberation movement, which demanded equality of rights and treatment for gay people across the spectrum of social institutions.”⁴⁵

The aim of this chapter is not to provide a complete overview of the history of Western gay and lesbian writing, but to point out how difficult (and maybe also constraining) it is to classify a work of literature as belonging to a gay and lesbian canon. From the openness of Greek poetry and philosophy, across the Renaissance’s rediscovery of the human body to the subjectivity and intimacy of modernism, any sign of homoeroticism in literature (and art in general) cannot be judged solely from our 21st century point of view. This also influenced the choice of Tennessee Williams’s short stories for this thesis, as they constitute a part of gay literature. Firstly, Tennessee William was (what we call nowadays) a gay author. Also, having written mainly from 1940’s to 1970’s, he was conscious of his position as a homosexual man and was fully aware that he was perceived as such. And most importantly, his short stories do address the issue of same sex desire. The specific way in which the do so will be a matter of the following analyses.

⁴⁵ Woods.

Chapter 5 Birds of a Different Feather: “Hard Candy” and “The Mysteries of Joy Rio”

The two stories “The Mysteries of Joy Rio” (1948) and “Hard Candy” (1954) are often discussed together, mainly due to the resemblances they bear in terms of plot and characters. “Both stories are set in the run-down cinema called the Joy Rio and both concern elderly men who haunt the cinema in search of sex with other men.”⁴⁶ Although Williams deliberately avoids any graphical description of the sexual scenes (and the terms such as gay or homosexual are never used), the obvious allusions to the work of Thomas Mann (specifically the German names of the protagonists and the almost pederastic relationship resembling Mann’s notorious *Death in Venice*) only underscore the fact that Williams consciously wrote a story with homosexual characters.⁴⁷

The earlier of the stories, “The Mysteries of Joy Rio”, witnesses the final day of Pablo Gonzales, who inherited from his late guardian Mr. Kroger not only a watch repair shop, but also the habit of frequenting the dusky upper galleries of “the third rate cinema Joy Rio.”⁴⁸ Kroger constitutes a prototypical example of a Southern grotesque character – he is an old man with a tendency to gluttony, as a result of which he suffers from “a chronic disease of the bowels.”(104) Similarly to other instances in Williams’s work, this specific type of disease “points toward a sexuality organized around the anus.”⁴⁹ The disease of bowels becomes emblematic of gay male desire, reflecting the supposed degenerated nature of homosexual behaviour. Kroger falls in love with young Pablo, whose exotic Hispanic origin, youthful beauty and slimness stands in sharp contrast to his own appearance. Yet Williams does not let his characters enjoy the moments of bliss for long. The inescapable force of time leaves its mark on both men.

The death of Kroger catalyses Pablo’s gradual transformation into a type of person largely reminiscent of his late guardian. Besides inheriting the repair shop,

“[Pablo] had also come into custody of his old protector’s fleeting and furtive practices in dark places. [...] The old man had left Mr. Gonzales the full gift of his shame and now Mr. Gonzales did the sad, lonely things that Mr. Kroger had done for

⁴⁶ Robert K. Martin, “Gustav von Aschenbach Goes to the Movies: Thomas Mann in the Joy Rio Stories of Tennessee Williams,” *International Fiction Review* 24.1-2 (1997). *Literature Resource Center*, Web, 30 March 2015.

⁴⁷ Martin.

⁴⁸ Tennessee Williams, *Collected Stories* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989): 105. All the future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

⁴⁹ Martin.

such a long before his one lasting love came to him. Kroger had confessed all his sins to Pablo, and it was as if he breathed the guilty soul of his past into the ears and brain and blood of the youth.”(106)

Along with the regular visits to Joy Rio, Pablo begins to demonstrate the physical feature typical of Kroger – he starts to accumulate fat. Williams thus again underscores the physical, almost carnal nature of homosexuality. Pablo’s body becomes infected with the burden which inevitably emerges when he succumbs to the temptation of same sex desire. The tumour which he develops only conforms to the deathly and malign nature of his deviant behaviour.

The description of the cinema Joy Rio (or more specifically its mysterious upper galleries) at first sight only enhances the negative attitude towards homosexuality. The decline from a highly artistic theatre into a cinema playing cheap movies might be seen as emblematic of the decaying moral values of its visitors, who are attracted by the opportunity of forbidden sexual practices. The detailed description of the galleries, which includes the emphasis on “the faded gilt” (with its pun on the word ‘guilt’⁵⁰), “abused red damask”, “a greasy and rotting length of old velvet rope [... with] a sign Keep Out” (107) only supports the negative connotations of homosexuality.

The cinema specializes in “cowboy pictures and other films of the sort that have a special appeal to children and male adolescents.”(105) The acts of moral delinquency which take place in the upper galleries thus stand in contrast to the idealised model of American masculinity, which is projected on the screen. While the cowboys presumably bravely venture into the untamed Wild West, Kroger’s and Pablo’s journeys to the cinema are solely for the purpose of assuaging their sexual needs.

Another opposition to the standard image of masculine behaviour is evident in the character of the Jewish usher George. His youth and masculine virility is demonstrated through his regular sexual intercourse encounters with the coquettish girl in the bathroom. When interrupted by Gonzales during one of their love-makings, George resorts to an aggressive attack and calls Pablo a “morphodite” (112), a slang term for hermaphrodite. His homophobic remark alludes to the presumed effeminacy and lack of masculinity, which are typically ascribed to gay male individuals

Despite all the negative connotations, for Pablo and Kroger the old derelict cinema becomes a place of ultimate freedom, the only resort where their dreams can come true. It stands in opposition to the watch repair shop, “which indicates one’s place in the material

⁵⁰ Martin.

world of mortality, in which desire is always defeated by death.”⁵¹ Therefore it comes as no surprise that for the two protagonists, the cinema constitutes “an earthly heaven.” (112) Drawing a parallel between the spiritual needs and the desire of the flesh, “Williams admits the simultaneous possibility of even the most degraded forms of desire as nonetheless participating in the search for the ideal.”⁵² This points out to an essential feature of the freaks and misfits which appear in Williams’s work. As will be shown later, their inability to match the requirements of the society and the sense of incompleteness and alienation they inevitably suffer from forces them to embark on a “quest for completion”⁵³. The standard act of spiritual completion is, of course, rendered impossible for those such as Gonzales or Kroger. Ultimately, “the only key which would unlock their personal prison is sex.”⁵⁴ Pablo’s journey thus can be completed only through a sexual encounter with Kruger, the only person towards whom he has ever felt a genuine emotional affection.

Despite the undertone of pity and compassion, “it is difficult to defend the story [“The Mysteries of Joy Rio”] against the charges of homophobia. [...] An analysis focused on the characterization and conflict will find little in the story beyond a rehearsal of homophobic discourse.”⁵⁵ It is thus interesting to compare “The Mysteries”⁵⁶ to the story “Hard Candy”, which was written and published several years later. Although it operates with a very similar theme, it also demonstrates a significant shift in the reflection of homosexuality. The character of Kroger and Gonzales is paralleled here by Mr. Krupper, a former candy shop owner. Similarly to other homosexual protagonists, his lust for individuals of the same sex is accompanied by other physical deviations. Krupper is straightforwardly referred to as “fat and ugly.”(363) Along with his unattractive physical appearance, it is the disease of bowels which excludes him from the category of “clean old men of the world” (357) and classifies him as “a bird of a different feather.”(357)

He is also a constant bother to his relatives, who are driven insane by his habit to come to the candy shop and pack his pocket with candies. These are, in Krupper’s own words, intended for “birds” (354), a euphemism referring to young males who are willing to provide

⁵¹ Martin.

⁵² Martin.

⁵³ Robert Skloot, “Submitting Self to Flame: The Artist’s Quest in Tennessee Williams, 1935-1954,” *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol.25. No.2 (May, 1973): 201, JSTOR, Web, 1 June 2014.

⁵⁴ Luke M. Grande, “Metaphysics of Alienation in Tennessee William’s Short Stories,” *Short Story Criticism*, Vol. 81 (2005), Literature Resource Center, Web, 2 June 2014.

⁵⁵ David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992): 77.

⁵⁶ The short story “The Mysteries of Joy Rio” will be later referred to only as “The Mysteries”.

Krupper with sexual services. The largely negative portrayal of homosexuality is again underscored by the peculiar environment which allows these forbidden acts to take place. To feed his little birds, Krupper also resorts to visiting the cinema Joy Rio, the description of which is almost identical with that of “Mysteries” and does not introduce any new perspective.

On his last visit to the place, Krupper encounters a sleeping shadowy youth, a true embodiment of his sexual desires. This meeting witnesses the evolution of Krupper from “a bird of different feather” into “a raptor”⁵⁷, which feeds on the needs and innocence of the youth. Making use of the boy’s hunger, Krupper can assuage his own hunger for a young attractive male body. The image of hard candy “reflects William’s ongoing concern for the links between food and sexuality”⁵⁸, becoming a pun on the erected phallus. Just as eating candy will result in rotten teeth, sealing the contract between Krupper and the boy will result in ruining the boy’s innocence.

Krupper’s dream come true seems to have, however, a rather tragic ending. In the morning, “his body is discovered in his remote box of the theatre with his knees on the floor and his ponderous torso wedged between two wobbly gilt chairs as if he had expired in attitude of prayer.” (364) Krupper’s death, which probably occurred during the act of fellatio, is thus again juxtaposed with strong spiritual connotations.⁵⁹ Similarly to the previous story, the misfit has achieved the act of completion through the confrontation with exquisite physical beauty and sexual act.

On one hand, the story thus only seems to confirm the view of homosexuality as an aspect which heavily contributes to the grotesque nature of the characters. Such a homophobic reading has been promoted by John Clum, who perceives the connection between disease/ugliness and homosexual desire as indicative of Williams’s internalized homophobia, which “reduces homosexuality to a form of bodily corruption.”⁶⁰ To resort to such a conclusion would be, nevertheless, short sighted. The seemingly homophobic tone is undermined by the following passage, in which the author intervenes in the story:

⁵⁷ Joseph R. Leahey, “John Horne Burns and Tennessee Williams’s ‘Hard Candy,’” *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews*. Vol 23. No.2.(2010): 72, Web, 30 March 2015.

⁵⁸ Martin.

⁵⁹ For a comparison, see the analysis of “Desire and the Black Masseur” in chapter 6.

⁶⁰ Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1997): 108.

“In the course of this story, and very soon now, it will be necessary to make some disclosure about Mr. Krupper of a nature too coarse to be dealt with very directly in a work of such brevity. The grossly naturalistic nature of a life, contained in the enormously wide context of that life, are softened and qualified by it, but when you attempt to set those details down in a tale, some measure of obscurity or indirection is called for to provide the same, or even approximate, softening effect that existence in time gives to those gross elements in the life itself.” (355)

For Clum, the deliberate avoidance of any graphical explicit scenes is only further evidence of Williams’s internalized homophobia.⁶¹ It is true that the evasive tone also helps to reproduce the “epistemology of the closet”, a space based on the interplay of openness and secrecy. Although Williams takes the readers on an almost voyeuristic journey through Krupper’s final day (“But naturally we are not going to follow him only that far, we are going to follow him past the ticket window and into the interior of the theatre” [359]), the final sexual act is never fully disclosed. Closet is thus not only maintained by what one says or does, but also by what one does not say.⁶² The deliberate silence, the need to suppress specific events of the narrative, is ultimately as telling as an explicit graphic depiction.

The emphasis on the homophobic subtext also fails to acknowledge the wry, almost parodic tone of this passage. It seems that Williams almost deliberately mocks the standard fuss and secrecy which usually surrounded this unspeakable taboo. The wide range of interpretations which arise after Krupper’s death support the ambivalent attitude towards his secret practices. The news of the death appears in newspaper, composed by “a spinsterly reporter who had been impressed by the sentimental values of a seventy-year-old retired merchant dying of thrombosis at a cowboy thriller with a split bag of hard candies in his pocket and the floor about him littered with sticky wrappers, some of which even adhered to the shoulders and sleeves of his jacket.”(364) His relatives, seeing the news in the paper, celebrate, with the little girl exclaiming: “Just think, Papa, the old man choked to death on our hard candy.” (365)

The contrast between the different versions of Krupper’s death seems to suggest that Williams refuses to settle on a single interpretation of the events and thus hints at the impossibility of reaching a complete and absolute truth. “In its determined polyvocality, in its analysis of the different codes of reading and writing, “Hard Candy” testifies to the violence

⁶¹ Clum 167.

⁶² Sedgwick 73.

that almost inevitably marks all sexual representations in a squeamish and censorious culture intent on policing sexuality.”⁶³ Williams thus seems to be aware of the constraints and shortcomings which would inevitably occur during an attempt to provide a neat, unified and coherent image of homosexuality (whether positive or negative) and “Hard Candy” seems to be a fine example of his reluctance to do so.

⁶³ Savran, *Communists* 81.

Chapter 6 An All-consuming Passion: “Desire and the Black Masseur”

While in “The Mysteries” and “Hard Candy” Williams touches upon the issue of same sex desire rather gently, the short story “Desire and the Black Masseur” (1946) stands at the opposite side of the scale. As one of the most outrageous and shocking works in Williams’s career, it also became one of his most well-known short stories. Because of its peculiar nature, it has attracted a high degree of attention from the critics, with some condemning it as a mere piece of sensationalist fiction, which lacks any thematic coherence.⁶⁴ Although this is not a commonly shared view, it is true that the juxtaposition of complex issues of race, sexuality and religion does not facilitate the interpretation of the story.

“Desire”⁶⁵ presents Williams’s taste for the grotesque at its most extreme. The non-standard character of the main protagonist Anthony Burns is hinted at from the opening sentence of the story, when one is acquainted with his “submissive temperament”⁶⁶:

“From his very beginning this person, Anthony Burns, had betrayed an instinct for being included in things that swallowed him up. In his family there had been fifteen children and he the one given least notice, and when he went to work, after graduation from high school in the largest class on the records of that institution, he secured his job in the largest wholesale company of the city. Everything absorbed him and swallowed him up, and still he did not feel secure.” (216)

Burns’ timid character is further supported by his childish appearance and behaviour:

“He still had in his face and body the unformed look of a child and he moved like a child in the presence of critical elders. In every move of his body and every inflection of speech and cast of expression there was a timid apology going out to the world for the little space that he had been somehow elected to occupy in it.”(217)

From the description, it is obvious that Burns’ passive and meek behaviour, along with his immature appearance, does not conform to the traditional image of masculinity. His physical and mental inadequacies are further offset by the character of the Negro masseur. He is portrayed as a black muscular giant, with a loud voice and “great black palms” (219), which

⁶⁴ William H. Peden, “Mad Pilgrimage: The Short Stories of Tennessee Williams,” *Short Story Criticism*. Vol.81 (2005), *Literature Resource Center*, Web, 2 June 2014.

⁶⁵ The short story “Desire and the Black Masseur” will be later referred to only as “Desire”.

⁶⁶ David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003): 172..

puts him into a direct contrast with Buns. The depiction of the masseur's physical appearance is highly eroticized and exaggerated, which turns him into "an object of both desire and fear."⁶⁷

Unlike Burns, the masseur does not even have a name and is thus stripped of any signs of humanity. Taking into account Williams's Southern background, the Negro resembles the stereotypical image of the "black beast rapist"⁶⁸, whose uncontrolled animalistic lust was widely believed to pose a threat to the innocence of white Southern Belles. Williams seems to be mocking this notion as well, as Burns demonstrates qualities which are traditionally associated with effeminacy (his feet are, for example, described as "small-boned and womanish" [219]).

For the Negro masseur, Burns becomes a perfect opportunity to vent the frustration and aggression he feels towards white people. "He hated white-skinned bodies because they abused his pride."(220). For Burns, however, the violent and painful treatment he experiences during the massage evokes the feelings of sexual pleasure and satisfaction. "As the violence and the pain increased, the little man grew more and more fiercely hot with his first true satisfaction, until all at once a knot came loose in his loins and released a warm flow."(220)

Although the massage is a dream-come-true for both Burns and the masseur, Williams does not hesitate to confront them with the harsh nature of the reality. Through the minor character of the manager of the baths, Williams voices the general judgment of the majority society and emphasises the deviant nature of the conduct. The manager, after finding out that Burns has been severely injured, calls him "a perverted little monster" (221), while the giant Negro comes under a racist attack, being lowered to an animal from "the jungle" (221). The manager's outburst encompasses all that is warped around the relationship between Burns and the masseur. The controversial character of the story lies in the fact that Williams is not afraid to address several taboo issues at once; besides the homosexual and masochistic twist, it is the idea of interracial sexual relationship⁶⁹ which runs against the image of a standard male and thus classifies Burns (and the masseur as well) as a genuine representative of the grotesque.

Yet it is only during the painful massages that Burns finally discovers what his true desire is. And similarly to the old men who visit the theatre of Joy Rio, Burn's quest for

⁶⁷ Savran, *Queer Sort* 173.

⁶⁸ Nathaniel Tipton, "What's Eating Anthony Burns? Dismembering the Bodies that Matter in Tennessee William's 'Desire and the Black Masseur,'" *Southern Literary Journal* (Fall 2010): 40, JSTOR, Web, 2 June 2014.

⁶⁹ Tipton 41.

satisfying his desire is fulfilled only when he meets his death. The manner in which he dies is, however, radically different. The incorporation of the cannibalistic ritual can be seen, in the light of the previous analyses, as a brutal extension of the close link between food and sexuality, an act of total and absolute consumption.

The relationship between homosexuality and cannibalism is not, however, specific for Williams's work only. Although it was probably introduced as a part of homophobic agenda to increase the horror of same sex behaviour, critics have traced the interplay of these two concepts in the work of Herman Melville, for instance. As Caleb Crain points out in his essay, both "cannibalism and homosexuality violate the distinction between identity and desire; between self and other; between what we want, what we want to be, and what we are."⁷⁰

The explicit link between desire and devouring is established in "Desire" as well. "[Burns'] desires, or rather his basic desire, was so much too big for him that it swallowed him up." (217) It is also evident from his passion for movies, where "he loved to sit in the back rows of the movies where the darkness absorbed him gently so that he was like a particle of food dissolving in a big hot mouth." (216) By putting the emphasis on the process of devouring and swallowing, Williams seems to be stressing the overwhelming character of the desire. "The literal devouring of the individual subject is [thus] paralleled with the symbolic devouring or consuming of the individual by desire."⁷¹ A person like Burns, who is defined by a sense of smallness and insignificance, cannot possibly resist the awakened desire which was lurking inside him and has no other option but to succumb to its force.

The very concept of desire is, as the title already suggests, of central importance to the story. Yet it should not be seen only as operating on the most basic level, as sexual lust. It can also be read as a desire of a man "to be related to his fellow men, his need to identify with other members of the society."⁷² Since it is impossible for Burns to conform to norms and become a part of the mainstream, his desire "can only be alleviated by sacrificing himself totally to the demands of society."⁷³ Here Williams relates the act of fulfilling one's desire to the question of atonement. In the story, he explicitly declares his view of human condition as a state of incompleteness, which is covered up by "some kind of makeshift arrangements." (217)

⁷⁰ Caleb Crain, "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels," *American Literature* (Mar., 1994): 34, JSTOR, Web, 2 June 2014.

⁷¹ Annette J. Saddik, "The (Un)Represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire and the Black Masseur' and Suddenly Last Summer," *Modern Drama* (Fall 1998): 349, ProQuest Central, Web, 25 Nov 2014.

⁷² Paul J. Hurley, "Williams' 'Desire and the Black Masseur': An Analysis," *Studies in Short Fiction* 2.1 (Fall 1964), Literature Resource Centre, Web, 2 June 2014.

⁷³ Hurley.

The sense of incompleteness (or fragmentation), which affects all Williams's misfits, can be resolved through "the principle of atonement, the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby clearing one's self of his guilt." (217)

This brings into play another element which inevitably haunts the warped characters of Williams's fiction – the Christian faith. One might again scrutinize this aspect in the light of the previous analyses; while the image of eating candy turns into a cannibalistic ritual and a death of natural causes is substituted by the violent sadistic act, the indication of spiritual connotations in the previous stories is paralleled here by an ecstatic Christian communion. It is by no chance that Burns's act of final completion occurs "towards the end of the Lenten season" (221). Burns is devoured in the Negro's home located not far from a church in which "the fiery poem of death on the cross was repeated." (222): "Suffer, suffer, suffer! the preacher shouted. Our Lord was nailed on a cross for the sins of the world! They led him above the town to the place of the skull, they moistened his lips with vinegar on a sponge, they drove five nails through his body, and He was The Rose of the World as He bled on the cross!" (222)

What Williams suggests is a parallel between the dying Burns and the Christ suffering on the cross. This is further supported by the manner of Burns' death, which strongly resembles the Christian ritual of eating the Host as the body of Christ. The close connection of these two seemingly unlike deaths sheds a new light on the nature of Burns' fate. The cannibalistic devouring of Burns should not be seen merely as the only possible way of assuaging his desires or as a punishment for his perverted behaviour, which defies the boundaries of social control. The ritual also constitutes "a sacrificial act"⁷⁴; Burns is transformed into a Christ-like figure of a martyr⁷⁵, who suffers not because of the sins he has committed, but rather because he atones for all the sins of the society whose "limiting approach to non-conventional romantic options"⁷⁶ has driven him into such a state.

Although the story is more explicit when it comes to the issue of male-male desire, Williams again reproduces the notion of the closet, the place of interplay between knowledge and secrecy, between what is said and what is not. Burns' homosexuality, for example, is only indirectly referred to as "unusual something" (219). The closet like impression is supported by the description of the underground baths, which constitute "a tiny world of its own.

⁷⁴ Savran, *Queer Sort* 171.

⁷⁵ John S. Bak, "Suddenly Last Supper: Religious Acts and Race Relations in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire'" *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* (Fall, 2005): 132, Web, 2 June 2014.

⁷⁶ Brian M. Peters, "Queer Semiotics of Expression: Gothic Language and Homosexual Destruction in Tennessee Williams's 'One Arm' and 'Desire and the Black Masseur'" *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* (2006), Web, 2 June 2014.

Secrecy was the atmosphere of the place and seemed to be its purpose.”(218) The chambers with “opaque doors” and “milky glass”, “labyrinths of partitions” and “sheathings of vapour” (218) contribute to the atmosphere of concealment. The macabre undertone and the image of inevitable doom and death are also evoked through the ghost-like figures of patrons, who move silently around the baths, wrapped around in the sheets.

The story thus without any doubt does operate with the grotesque imagery; Williams resorts to notions of physical and mental abnormality, loneliness, suffering, violence, horror and death as an inevitable consequence of same-sex desire. Yet it cannot be said that he resorts to portraying homosexuality in such a straightforward, unified fashion only. One of the indicators that Williams wants to avoid classifying homosexuality as otherness might be the final passage of the story. Burns is not portrayed as the only one who has to undergo the painful process of torment and suffering in his quest for atonement: “And meantime, slowly, with barely a thought of so doing, the earth’s whole population twisted and wreathed beneath the manipulation of night’s black fingers and the white ones of day with skeletons splintered and flesh reduced to pulp, as out of this unlikely problem, the answer, perfection, was slowly evolved through torture.”(223)

But it is also the most outrageous feature of the story, cannibalism, which does not yield to a single unified interpretation. Undoubtedly a grotesque element, it reflects the gradual destruction of Burn’s fragile identity by his unspeakable desire. Yet the fragmentation of the body, the gradual loss of unity, can also be seen as a way of pointing out to the incoherencies and gaps in understanding human nature, or more specifically, in understanding homosexuality.⁷⁷ A similar notion has been advocated by queer theory, which, in the light of poststructuralist theory, attempts to dismantle the belief that (homosexual) identity is stable and coherent, as an attribute one is simply born with.⁷⁸

As David Savran points out in his work on Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, this notion is encoded in the fragmentary, crumbled and almost inhuman description of the characters, particularly Maggie: “Insistently, Williams destabilizes and ruptures the coherence of the self-identical subject, turning all his characters into subhuman creatures or else human beings so radically fragmented, diseased or wounded as to be barely recognizable as human.”⁷⁹ Although he traces the process of destabilization in the play only, I believe that it could be applied to “Desire” (and the story “One Arm”, which will be discussed in the following chapter) as well. Similarly to Maggie’s disrupted body, Burns is also subject to the

⁷⁷ Savran, *By coming suddenly*.

⁷⁸ Jagose 78.

⁷⁹ Savran, *By coming suddenly*.

gradual process of fragmentation and destabilization. The violence of the massages gradually increases, from 'mere' slapping to broken ribs to the final act of complete devouring. In the end, only a heap of "bare white bones" (223) serves as a reminder of what used to be Burns' fragmented identity. Although it cannot be said that such a depiction stands in direct opposition to the homophobic agenda, it is obvious that Williams attempts to take his homosexual characters beyond the limits which has been circumscribed for them by the heteronormative society.

Chapter 7 A Broken Body, A Broken Soul: “One Arm”

Another work of fiction, which echoes Williams’s peculiar relationship towards homosexuality, is the short story “One Arm” (1945). Set primarily in New Orleans, the story reflects the dependence of Southern grotesque literature on the specific nature of the Southern setting. The city of New Orleans has occupied a unique position in the whole of the United States. As a former French colony and a major port, the city was known for its cosmopolitan environment and bohemian atmosphere, which was not, unlike the rest of the South, heavily burdened with the legacy of Puritanism. As a result, it also became a perfect place for the growth of a gay subculture, which did not encounter here such a high degree of hostility as in the rest of the country.

It thus comes as no surprise that the story revolves around the (homo)sexuality of Oliver Winemiller. He constitutes a distinctive character among Williams’s misfits discussed in this thesis as he displays signs of omnisexuality⁸⁰, oscillating between heterosexual and homosexual sexual intimacies. This could be seen, on one hand, as a sign of fluidity of sexuality, a conception which has been proposed by queer theorists. According to them, the non-existence of a fixed sexual identity naturally entails that human sexuality should not be perceived through the fixed categories of exclusive hetero- or homosexuality, but rather as changing and unstable.

Some critics, however, opt for a different, more homophobic reading of Oliver’s sexual experience, pointing out that he ‘turns’ gay only after the car accident in which he loses his arm. Not being able to continue his career as a boxer, he is forced to resort to hustling. This marks the beginning of his journey towards “destruction” (185). The sharp downfall from a macho heterosexual heavyweight champion to a crippled hustler, who provides sexual services for other men, is reflected in Oliver’s personality as well. “He knew that he had lost his right arm, but didn’t consciously know that with it had gone the center of his being.”(185)

Oliver’s transformation into a cold and indifferent (almost statue-like) character with “a genuine lack of concern” (184) is only disrupted by the violent outburst, which results in a murder. The uncontrolled, aggressive behaviour is, according to some critics, the inevitable

⁸⁰ Gary Richards, “Southern Drama,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South*, ed. Sharon Monteith (Cambridge: CUP, 2013): 181.

The word ‘omnisexuality’ could be replaced with its synonym ‘bisexuality’. While the term ‘bisexuality’ still operates on the basis of traditional homo- and hetero- distinction, ‘omnisexuality’ (under the influence of queer theory) advocates an attraction to all people, regardless of their gender or gender identification.

consequence of Oliver's suppressed homosexual desire: "Williams depicts homosexual experience as clandestine and violent, and this can be seen as a metaphor for hidden desires and the intensity of repressed homosexual yearnings."⁸¹

The loss of humanity is inextricably linked to the reduction of Oliver into a commodity⁸². This underscores the economical aspect which pervades the story; as a hustler, Oliver is simply bought by his clients. Williams employs a similar idea in "Hard Candy" as well, when Krupper has no option but to resort to paying his young boys with candies. It is thus evident that same sex intimacies, as non-standard practices, have to be paid for. The necessity of buying sex marginalizes homosexuality, forcing the encounters to occur in dark and furtive places, outside the socially accepted circles.

Oliver, a malformed cripple without any social background, who makes money selling his body, is portrayed as a mere object of both physical desire and economical deal. This makes him a typical grotesque character. He is condemned for his moral decay, yet this would not occur without the society, whose rigid norms do not tolerate any kind of deviance from the standard. Oliver also bears the other important aspect of a grotesque character which has been proposed by Alan Spiegel; he arouses pity. The physical deformation turns Oliver's life upside down, yet it also heightens his physical beauty. Although Oliver does not actively seek out his clients, it is "the charm of the defeated" (188) which makes him a sought after hustler. Paradoxically, the missing arm thus symbolizes both "Oliver's desirability and abjection."⁸³

The anonymous clients, or more specifically, their letters to Oliver, will, however, eventually also trigger Oliver's emotional and sexual awakening. Paradoxically, it is the confined space of the prison (which is again reminiscent of the closet) that witnesses the resurfacing of Oliver's repressed emotions and desires. The process of writing replies to the letters, which brim with sympathy and affection, brings back into life the need for self-interest, which was missing throughout Oliver's life. Just as his writing feels initially clumsy and then gains confidence, Oliver also gradually discovers his own sexual desires and establishes a new relationship towards his own body. As David Savran points out, "the symmetry between ...homosexuality and writing"⁸⁴ is of central importance to the story and Williams's fiction in general. Through the process of writing, Oliver is able to release the sexual tension, which has unavoidably built up under the influence of homophobic agenda, and thus remains faithful to his true emotional and sexual needs.

⁸¹ Peters.

⁸² Peters.

⁸³ Savran, *Communists* 108.

⁸⁴ Savran, *Communnists* 157.

Yet, as in the previous stories, where an assuaged desire inevitably leads to death, Oliver's awakening is not meant to last for long. The vision of the forthcoming execution is looming everywhere: "Too late, this resurrection. Better for all those rainbow of the flesh to have stayed with the arm cut off in San Diego." (192) By bringing the letters with him to the place of execution and stuffing them "in the fork of his thighs" (198), Oliver in his final gesture ultimately subverts the traditional connotations of mortality, religion and sex. Williams again incorporates a Christian dimension into the story, although this time more implicitly. For Oliver, the traditional Christian belief in "salvation and resurrection"⁸⁵ comes in very physical terms, more explicitly through "sexual sharing."⁸⁶

His wish to repay the emotional debts before he dies could be fulfilled through the character of a young Lutheran minister. Although he feels a strong sexual attraction towards Oliver, the internalised homophobia does not allow him to cross the strict religious boundaries he has adopted. The meeting with Oliver reminds him of the shameful erotic fantasy, in which a golden panther licked his groin. Similarly to the cannibalism in "Desire", the direct parallel to zoophilia serves to heighten the horror and perversity of the already deviant homosexual behaviour.

Being painfully aware of the impossibility of a reconciliation between traditional Christianity and same-sex desire, Williams seems to be searching for an alternative and finds it in Greek mythology; Oliver's deformation gives him a look of "a broken statue of Apollo" (184), while the use of the word "flower" (192) to describe Oliver's sexual awakening might refer to the mythical characters of Narcissus and Hyacinth.⁸⁷ Ultimately, the frequent allusions to Greek mythology are completely natural as far as homosexuality is concerned. As mentioned before, same-sex behaviour was a well-established phenomenon in the era of Ancient Greece. Although one cannot claim that Greek society was unequivocally tolerant towards same-sex behaviour, it certainly did prove more open-minded than the seemingly developed and progressive society of mid-20th century America.

In the story, Williams thus oscillates between homophobic discourse (homosexuality is seen as a change of social and moral status, almost a fall from grace) and the less explicitly voiced wish for tolerance and sympathy. For this reason, "One Arm" presents a prototypical example of the grotesque; Oliver is "ostracized, feared and finally destroyed"⁸⁸, yet at the

⁸⁵ Wolter 220.

⁸⁶ Wolter 220.

⁸⁷ Peters.

⁸⁸ Peters.

same time, Williams manages to evoke feelings of pity and sorrow for the character, who only strives for sympathy and genuine human connection.

The homophobic undertone is further undermined by Oliver's ambivalent sexuality, which cannot be classified as exclusively homosexual. Yet it is also the missing arm, the most notable feature triggering Oliver's degeneration, which might also be seen as encoding another potential element of queerness. Oliver is subject to an identity crisis, which does not affect his moral values only. Similarly to Anthony Burns, Oliver's physically malformed body is a visible manifestation not only of his incompleteness as "a fugitive kind" ("186), but also of his unstable sexual identity, which does not fit into the socially created binary model of human sexuality.

Chapter 8 Monsters and Degenerates: “The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin” and “The Angel in the Alcove”

The short story “The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin” (1950) constitutes a peculiar example among Williams’s short fiction discussed here; the homosexual yearning for a male body is described through the eyes of a child. The story could be read as autobiographical,⁸⁹ reflecting Williams’s memories of his early childhood, when his sister’s coming into puberty marks the beginning of separation of the two siblings. A sense of loneliness engulfs the narrator, as his only true companion drifts away from him. Yet it is not only her estrangement which leads to feelings of alienation. Getting tangled up in a love triangle, the narrator, for the first time, becomes aware of his homosexual orientation. He falls in love with the young and handsome Richard Miles, who regularly comes to their house to practise violin.

The narrator begins “to dream about [Richard] as he had formerly dreamed of storybook heroes.” (288) His obsession “[is] of a shy and sorrowful kind, involved with [his] sense of abandonment” (289) and induces feelings of guilt. The growing passion for Richard gradually turns the innocent child narrator into “a monster.” (291) When Richard comes round, the narrator hides in the shadows of his bedroom, lurking and secretly watching Richard play. The act of playing the violin, more specifically, the bow, might be seen as bearing connotations to phallus, which underscores the erotic sensations Richard arouses in the boy narrator.

Even here, Williams evokes the link between eating and homosexual desire, as the narrator’s eyes “feast on Richard’s beauty.” (291) Putting the emphasis on the visual sensation of a male body, Williams also subverts the traditional notion of male gaze as an instrument through which heterosexual males objectify women. He not only eroticizes a male body, but also does so through the perspective of another male, or even more outrageously, a boy, who is tormented by the battle between his Puritan soul and the craving of the flesh.

As in the rest of Williams’s stories which address the topic of homosexuality, succumbing to the force of homosexual desire will have negative consequences. The vision of inevitable death is clearly evident in the image of Richard’s violin case, which “resembled a little coffin, a coffin made for a small child or a doll.” (289) After a few years, the narrator discovers that Richard died of pneumonia. Williams thus again equates male desire for

⁸⁹ Alycia Howard-Smith and Greta Heintzelman, *Critical Companion to Tennessee Williams* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2005): 379.

another male with death and destruction, possibly due to the general hostility, which renders any future continuation of such relationships impossible.

Symbolically, the coffin-like case also marks the death of the narrator's childhood; as the sin is born, his innocence is lost. "Living in an era bombarded with the ideas of Freud, Williams came to see the discovery of sexuality [...] as the end of innocence."⁹⁰ Since this moment onwards, the narrator will always be haunted by the omnipresent influence of his sexual lust. Yet the fact that Williams presents the events through the eyes of a child prevents the reader from resorting to a harsh judgement or condemnation of his behaviour. The story thus most strongly exemplifies the necessity of feeling pity and compassion for the grotesque characters, who ultimately fail not because of the deviations, but because they live in an environment, which refuses to accept any kind of non-standard behaviour.

The autobiographical features are present in the story "The Angel in the Alcove" as well,⁹¹ as the New Orleans setting saw the unsuccessful beginnings of Williams's artistic career. In the story, which revolves around an old lodging house, the narrator encounters a homosexual artist, who suffers from tuberculosis. The disease, which gradually destroys his body, is his most obvious bodily deformation and becomes emblematic of homosexual desire. The serious lung condition (together with homosexuality) forces the artist to live on the margin of society. The social alienation awakes in him negative feelings to anyone else around him. As the narrator says, "he did not trust anybody or anything. He lived in a world completely hostile to him, unrelentingly hostile, and no other being could enter the walls about him for more than the frantic moments desire drove him to." (302)

One of such moments leads to a one-night sexual encounter between the artist and the narrator. The time when these sexual intimacies take place might also reveal more about the portrayal of homosexuality in the story. The darkness of the night provides the only opportunity when the artist does not have to be afraid to openly express his desires. Yet the image of darkness and invisibility can also be related to the Puritan view of the night as a time during which the most deplorable behaviour (which would undoubtedly include physical intimacies between two men) takes place.

This view is also shared by the narrator, who is doubting whether the mysterious (and almost motherly) figure of an angel, which he sees regularly in the alcove, will tolerate such "perversions of longing" (302) and appear again. Yet he is mistaken. The angel appears again,

⁹⁰ Nancy M. Tischler, "Romantic textures in Tennessee Williams's plays and short stories," *Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, ed. Matthew C. Roudané. (Cambridge: CUP, 1997): 160.

⁹¹ Howards-Smith, 26.

“her cool and believing grey eyes in the faint pearly face immobile and statuary...she had permitted the act to occur and had neither blamed nor approved.” (302) Although the Christian element incorporated here underscores the contrast between the orthodoxy of Christian faith and the physical desire, it does not primarily serve to condemn and judge.

Despite the presence of this unbiased and non-judgemental view Williams does not let his gay characters find their place in the society. The artist is finally expelled from the house and his clothes and bedsheets are burned in an almost ritual-like scene. He is destined to die on the street, deplored by the others. Both “The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin” and “The Angel in the Alcove” thus predominately operate with grotesque imagery; unlike the previous stories, they do not seem to provide any new perspective, which would fundamentally divert from the view of homosexuality as a disease-like deformation, which results in death. They thus demonstrate the indicated major tendency in William’s short fiction, which primarily relies on the grotesque and which is only in several cases disrupted by an element which allows an interpretation defying the standard conception of human sexuality and identity in general.

Chapter 9 Conclusion: Grotesque and Queer

When discussing Williams's short fiction, it is easy to be tempted by the outrageous events and appalling imagery, which pervade the dark and mysterious atmosphere of the stories, and harshly label them as merely sensationalist. Indeed, Williams's short fiction does continue in the rich tradition of the Southern grotesque literature, which aims to challenge the conception of what is generally considered normal. As one of the defining modes of Southern fiction in general, the grotesque reflects the unique position of the South as a backward region, heavily burdened with the legacy of slavery and Puritanism. The theory of the grotesque has attracted the attention of a range of critics, who, however, differ in their opinions on which features primarily contribute to the grotesque. The final conclusion offered by Maria Haar is that the grotesqueness is mainly a matter of the characters, who in some way defy the standards of normality. This proved to be particularly fruitful for the thesis, as it confirms that in a heteronormative and strongly religious environment, homosexual orientation does constitute a deviation, which is seen as a threat to the dominant position of the heterosexual majority.

The homosexual protagonists of Williams's short fiction thus become prototypical alienated misfits, who roam the world in search of spiritual and sexual completion. Yet the homosexual orientation is not the only feature which prevents them from reaching their equal position. Williams makes them suffer from another kind of (usually physical) deformation; while Anthony Burns's physical appearance is merely childish, the malformed ex-boxer Oliver is straightforwardly described as a cripple. Williams goes even further and develops his own specific imagery which becomes emblematic of homosexual behaviour. Putting the emphasis on the carnal nature of same-sex desire, he relates the acts of homosexual intimacies to the bodily processes of consumption. For this reason, Pablo Gonzales and Kruger from "The Mysteries" suffer from cancer of bowels and Krupper chokes himself to death on the hard candy. The most extreme example of this association then occurs in "Desire", when Burns is eventually ritualistically devoured by the black masseur.

Furthermore, in all the stories analysed, homosexual intimacies yield to the conventional negative connotations of same-sex desire as immoral and perverse. This can be seen as being highlighted by the presence of a Christian element, which, however, does not serve to merely condemn. Williams aims to subvert traditional Christian connotations and re-evaluates them under the influence of his fascination with the complexity of human sexuality. Yet it is the omnipotent presence of death which is the most powerful (and haunting) aspect of

all the stories discussed. Whether it is the protagonist himself or the object of his lust, same-sex desire is deprived of any possibility of a meaningful future continuation and death thus stands as the only possible conclusion of such relationships.

Due to these aspects, the grotesque features can be easily perceived as homophobic. This scholarly approach, which also constituted one of the points of departures for this thesis, is exemplified by John Clum, whose reads the presence of the grotesque features as a reflection of Williams's internalized homophobia. Such a view, however, ignores the fundamental aspect which distinguishes the grotesque characters from mere villains: they arouse feelings of pity. Their very often deplorable behaviour stems from their lonesome position as outcasts, who cannot find their place in the society.

A different approach towards Williams's portrayal of homosexuality is exemplified by David Savran, who, although not disproving the homophobic undertone, attempts to read Williams's work through the lenses of post-structuralism, which also includes the queer theory. Queer theory, growing out of the increasing lesbian and gay activism of the second half of the 20th century, naturally opposes the reactionary view, pointing out to the fact that the category of homosexuality was invented in the 19th century as an instrument of strengthening the hegemonic position of heterosexual behaviour. To be queer, in its most general sense, means to destabilize the notion of a fixed sexual identity based on the binary model.

The two different approaches, however, do not necessarily have to exclude each other. The stories should not be read in black and white terms, i.e. as either grotesque or queer. As was shown above, these two seemingly opposite poles can overlap. In the stories, this is demonstrated, for example, in the image of the fragmented body, which serves as a visible manifestation of the unfulfilled soul longing for completion. Yet it might also be emblematic of the limited view of human sexuality and identity, which, under the dominance of the binary model, is inevitably full of gaps and incoherencies. Although it cannot be claimed that this particular mode of description would run directly against the widespread homophobia of his age, the stories "Hard Candy", "Desire and the Black Masseur" and "One Arm" illustrate that Williams does attempt to provide a fresh new perspective on what it means not to conform to the heteronormative model.

The thesis has thus hopefully not only helped to expand the scarce volume of scholarly work on Williams's short fiction, but also proved that the stories can offer more than a mere reiteration of homophobic discourse. Despite this, the truth remains that grotesque features are still dominant. The analyses of the individual stories only confirm this tendency; all the

stories portray homosexuality primarily as a deviance, which borders on perversity. This might contribute to cementing the common view of Williams as a self-hating homosexual. Yet the reason for the prevalence of the grotesque mode might lie elsewhere; Williams simply did not know how to approach the issue of homosexuality from a different perspective. The strongly homophobic atmosphere of his era, along with his Puritan upbringing, did not provide any alternative to the deep-rooted view of homosexuals as diseased individuals.

This does not intend to suggest that Williams would revel in using clichés or stereotypes. Ultimately, in his short fiction, he took a brave step and challenged the conformist view of what is considered normal, natural or standard. Even though he did so in a very unconventional and controversial manner, which does not always yield to an easy interpretation, there is one thing which cannot be denied: the love, that for so long did not dare speak its name, gained its voice here.

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