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The Destruction of the Outsider in the Plays of Tennessee Williams

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The Destruction of the Outsider
in the Plays of Tennessee Williams

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in part completion for the degree of,
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Abstract

This thesis explores the theme of the Outsider in the plays of American dramatist, Tennessee Williams. My central line of argument is that these Outsiders are defeated and destroyed by a number of complex personal and societal forces.

After defining what it means to be an Outsider in a Williams play, I will proceed to investigate why and how the figure of the Outsider is destroyed in the following:

- 27 Wagons Full of Cotton
- Portrait of a Madonna
- A Streetcar Named Desire
- Orpheus Descending
- Suddenly Last Summer
- Sweet Bird of Youth

The first two plays are earlier lesser-known one-act plays and the next four are 'major' works written after Williams was established as an important literary figure.

In particular, I will examine the factors - both internal and external - that contribute to an individual becoming an Outsider and consider in turn how they cope with their plight. Whether the Outsider is insane, neurotic, sexually different, weak, a foreigner, a failure, or a Southern Belle (or a combination of these), they all put up a hopeless struggle against a world that violently destroys them.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature: ..................................................
Date: November 22nd 2000
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Introduction

In a letter written to his long-time friend and agent, Audrey Wood, Tennessee Williams remarked, "I have only one major theme for all my work which is the destructive impact of society on the sensitive, non-conformist individual" (Leverich, 1995, p. 332 – 333). It is this sensitive, non-conformist individual that has come to be known within his work as the Outsider.

Born in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, Tennessee Williams was a man who throughout his life experienced, on numerous levels, the sense of being an Outsider. Whether we look at him in light of being an artist, a gay outcast, or a 'mad' neurotic, we get the impression that he was very much set apart from the world around him. As he wrote in his Memoirs:

My place in society...always...has been in Bohemia. I love to visit the other side now and then, but on my social passport Bohemia is indelibly stamped, without regret on my part. (Williams, 1975, p. 100)

In his plays, Williams drew from his experiences as an Outsider. He was not a strictly autobiographical writer, but he shaped his own life and emotions into his plays. He comments:

People have said and said and said that my work is too personal: and I have just as persistently countered this charge with my assertion that all true work of an artist must be personal, whether directly or obliquely, it must and it does reflect the emotional climates of its creator. (Williams, 1975, p. 188)

As Colin Wilson suggests, "What can be said to characterise the Outsider is a sense of strangeness, of unreality" (1974, p. 15). The Outsider in the Williams play is the one who is particularly sensitive to the horrors of existence; there is something in the Outsider's psychological composition that makes reality difficult to endure and the modern world hard to survive.

The notion of the Outsider is closely linked to the discourse of the 'other.' As explained in the New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, a human subject becomes 'other' when they fail to conform to social norms or are disenfranchised through the activities of a state or institution in which power is vested. As a result they are marginalised and/or alienated (Bullock & Trombley, 1999, p. 620). Williams' characters are forced to live on the Outside because they do not conform to the dominant
conventions of society; more often than not, it is the cultural codes of the American South that function against them.

To say that Williams' characters are 'other' implies that there is something that they are defined against; if the concept of the Outsider exists there must be something in opposition to give it meaning - the Insider. Gerald Weales defines the Insider as "the man who is protected, by insensitivity or by a strong identification with the dominant group and its conventions, from knowledge of himself and the terrors around him" (1965, p. 23). The Insiders are protected from seeing the world the way the Outsiders do - to be Outside is to be able to see Inside - and thus their experience is different; they do not feel or see as deeply as the Outsider.

Julia Kristeva comments that "exclusions...are necessary...for the nation-state to exist....Like psychic identity, group identity forms itself by excluding what is other" (Oliver, 1993, p. 14). Thus Williams' Outsiders are unfairly excluded, categorised and labelled: they are ‘mad,’ ‘sexually perverted,’ ‘amoral,’ and ‘depraved.’ It becomes a means by which the Insiders are able to establish their own ‘normal’ identity. As Chris explains to Mrs Goforth in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, "Yes, you see, they hang labels, tags of false identification on people that disturb their own sense of reality" (p. 186). For the Insiders, the reality of those on the Outside disturbs the dominant order. In many cases, the Outsider has to be destroyed in order to perpetuate the governing system.

Whatever circumstances result in establishing a Williams character as an Outsider, one fact remains the same for them all - to be a Williams Outsider is to be sensitive and alienated and to be in a world that is cruel and inhospitable. As a result of these internal and external forces, the Outsider is unable to survive modern life; in the plays that I look at, they are destroyed in the most violent fashion. The tragedy for Williams' Outsiders is that their psychological nature makes it near impossible for them to remain alive (both figuratively and literally) in the kind of society they inhabit.
Chapter 1
27 Wagons Full of Cotton

In his one-act play *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* Williams dramatises the sexual struggle between Flora Meighan, a babyish cotton-gin owner's wife, and Silva Vicarro, an Italian superintendent of a neighbouring plantation. What is significant to note is that Williams seems to view this conflict as essentially 'comic,' for he labels the play a "Mississippi Delta Comedy." While conceding that the play does contain certain farcical or comedic elements, I would argue that a strong sense of the tragic surfaces throughout. Despite the comedy label the play ultimately provides us with an early indication of the theme that will preoccupy Williams in his 'major' works: the victimisation and destruction of the Outsider.

Gerald Weales comments that "It is a fact of American society – at least of the small-town southern society into which Williams was born – that the foreigner, even when he ceases to be foreign, is an outsider" (1965, p. 21). In light of this one would expect that being an Italian in the state of Mississippi would make Silva Vicarro an Outsider. However, in the context of this play, Silva's brutal masculinity outweighs the fact that he is a foreigner; it is gender, not race, which designates who is on the Outside. Williams' sympathies do not lie with the Italian who has had his plantation burnt down but with the helpless Southern woman who is viciously exploited by the corrupt forces around her. The dichotomy between the Outsider and the Insider therefore is not one between 'foreigner' and 'native,' as we might expect, but one between 'masculinity / strength' and 'femininity / weakness.' The true Outsider in this play is the weak-willed and ineffectual female – Flora Meighan.

Flora Meighan is an Outsider because she has been reduced by society, and by her husband, to the status of a dull-witted child. Her disempowerment results from the fact that she is a Southern woman who is the size of an "elephant" (p. 30). We can observe this most disturbingly in her relations with her husband, Jake. After burning down Silva's gin, Jake orders his wife to lie about his whereabouts at the time the gin was destroyed. When Flora fails to adequately follow his instructions, he replies, "A woman like you's not made to have ideas. Made to be hugged an' squeezed" (p. 14). The only
response Flora can muster is a childish “Mmmm....” (p. 14). Her large size and Southern femininity are used to justify her role as a doll who is simply there to be cuddled; she becomes Jake’s passive trophy, his “baby doll” (p. 17). It is this type of verbal subordination that prevents Flora from being anything but a cotton-gin owner’s wife who is simply “too lazy” (p. 19) to think. The tragedy of this ideology is the fact that it does not allow Flora to equip herself with the mental and emotional faculties she needs to survive in a threatening world; it is this patriarchal subjugation that ensures she is too feeble to defend herself against Silva’s aggressive sexual advances. Flora becomes an Outsider in a society where those on the Outside are easily exploited.

Jake also uses physical intimidation and violence to control and dominate her (this is taken to the very extreme by Silva). In order to make Flora understand that she must lie for him, Jake slaps and pushes her around. Even though there is an “impression...that the experience was not without pleasure for both parties” (p. 12), violence is being exercised to force her to comply with her husband’s wishes. When Jake later says he would like to “Gobble, gobble, gobble” her up as if she were a “Big white piece of....angel food cake” (p. 13), we are introduced to a theme that will take on a more explicit form in the play Suddenly Last Summer: the devouring, in a literal and metaphoric sense, of the Outsider. Jake may say this in the fervour of sexual excitement, but his words have a tragic resonance at the end of the play. After all, it is his subordination of Flora that eventually results in her being “gobbled” up by Silva.

Everything about Flora is coded in a language of infantilism. Her cottage is like a doll’s house; Williams writes, “At the windows are fluffy white curtains gathered coquettishly in the middle by baby-blue satin bows” (p. 9). When Jake returns from burning down Silva’s gin, she whines like a child because she wants a bottle of Coca-Cola. At the end of Scene 1 she descends the stairs “like a child just learning to walk” (p. 15). Even the song that Jake sings at the end of the scene alludes to her Outsider status:

'My baby don' care fo' rings
or other expensive things—
My baby just cares-fo'-me!' (p. 15)

Not only does the song reaffirm her role as baby but it also denies her any other possibility other than that of caring for her husband. Williams juxtaposes this song with
the image of Flora staring at the sky "vacantly and raptly" (p. 15), and it is at this point in the play where Williams clearly injects a note of tragedy into his supposed comedy. Flora is blind to the possibilities of her life; her role as a Southern doll does not allow her to envisage an existence other than the childish one she has. All Flora can do is accept her position on the Outside, since it is all she knows, with a vacant sense of bliss.

Many of Williams' female Southern heroines are doomed by an overwhelming need to be protected. As I will later show, the prime example is *A Streetcar Named Desire's* Blanche DuBois. In Flora Meighan, we can identify, albeit in a slightly different manifestation, the same desperate need to feel protected. At the beginning of the play, we see Flora in a state of panic because she has lost her white kid purse. When Silva later begins to analyse her relationship to the purse, we come to appreciate the pathos behind the opening scene of comedy. Silva explains:

> The afternoon sun is hot. It's no protection. The trees are back of the house. They're no protection. The goods that dress is made of - is no protection. So what do you do, Mrs Meighan? You pick up the white kid purse. It's solid. It's sure. It's certain. It's something to hold on to....It gives you a feeling of being attached to something. The mother protects the baby? No, no, no - the baby protects the mother! From being lost and empty and having nothing but lifeless things in her hands! (p. 19)

This image is one that predominates Williams' work - a lost and frightened human being who grasps onto whatever s/he can in order to feel safe. In this case the white kid purse is Flora's substitute for not having a baby. Because she is treated like a child and thus has the mind of a child, the world for Flora is a terrifying and perplexing place; she clutches her purse for protection like a little girl who clings to a doll. What is important to note is that Flora does not appear to be conscious of her situation; it is Silva who has to point it out to her. Unlike some of the other Outsiders I will later consider, Flora remains largely unaware of her position on the Outside.

It is also worthwhile to compare Blanche and Flora's need for protection. As noted by the first director of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Elia Kazan, Blanche is looking for "a gentleman, who will treat her like a virgin, marry her, protect [emphasis added] her, defend and maintain her honour" (Miller, 1971, p. 23). Flora has a man, yet he does not display any of these gentlemanly qualities. Thus she depends on her white kid purse to provide her with a sense of security and stability. Furthermore, it is her distinctly un-
gentlemanly husband who forces her into a dangerous situation where her weakness will see her destroyed.

The major parallel between *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the fact that both women are sexually assaulted by an aggressive masculine figure and it this fate that seals their destruction. Unlike Stanley, whose motives for despising and destroying Blanche are complex, Silva is primarily motivated by vengeance. When we first meet Silva he is lost in his own thoughts, brooding over what Jake means by the “good-neighbour policy” (p. 17). However, eventually he notices Flora’s beauty and remarks:

> There’s a lot of you, but every bit of you is delicate. Choice. Delectable, I might say….I mean you’re altogether lacking in any – coarseness. You’re soft. Fine-fibred. And smooth. (p. 23)

When he realises this he interprets Jake’s comment as an invitation to sexually assault Flora; he sees a vulnerable creature that can easily be exploited and used as a tool for revenge. With his whip in hand, Silva forces Flora into the house, and while the “gin pumps slowly and steadily” we hear Flora’s “wild and despairing cry” (p. 28) as she, like Blanche, is raped by her tormentor.

At the end of the play we are left with the disturbing image of a physically and emotionally damaged woman. Williams describes:

> [Flora’s] appearance is ravaged. Her eyes have a vacant limpidity in the moonlight….She moves with her hands stretched gropingly before her….Her hair hangs loose and disordered. The upper part of her body is unclothed except for a torn pink band about her breasts. Dark streaks are visible on the bare shoulders and arms and there is a large discoloration along one cheek. A dark trickle, now congealed, descends from one corner of her mouth. (p. 28)

Even the environment acquires a menacing quality. Williams writes, “*A moon of garish intensity*” (p. 28) now gives the little ‘doll’s house’ – previously her haven from the world – a “ghostly brilliance [and dogs howl] like demons across the prostrate fields of the Delta” (p. 28). What is disastrous is that Flora is unable to tell Jake what has happened to her – all that she can say is that she “made him a pitcher – of nice cold – lemonade” (p. 31). We are also given the impression that this psychological and physical torture will continue: “I guess it’s – gonna go on fo’ – th’ rest of th’ – summer....” (p. 32) she tells Jake. However, he is so absorbed by his hard day’s work that he is oblivious to
the true meaning of her statement; he can only see the economical benefits of the situation that he has so intelligently created. If the song that closes the play, "Rock-a-bye-baby," is any indication, Flora is not going to survive her predicament. Even though Flora believes in her tortured state she is now not Baby but Mama, she still remains a baby at heart. And, as in the lullaby, the wind has come (Silva) and the baby (Flora) has fallen. The manner in which she smiles, sways and rocks her purse is fairly suggestive of an impending state of lunacy, which reminds one of Portrait of a Madonna's Lucretia and A Streetcar Named Desire's Blanche.

In 1951 Williams and Elia Kazan decided to combine 27 Wagons Full of Cotton with another one-act play, The Unsatisfactory Supper, to make a film. The end result of this creative effort was the controversial, Baby Doll. While the essential story of 27 Wagons Full of Cotton survived transition to the screen – Jake burning down Silva’s gin and Silva’s quest for revenge – the characters changed dramatically. Weales comments that Silva is "softened a little for Baby Doll" (1965, p. 21). However, I would argue that he is softened considerably more than a little. Unlike the Silva of 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, Baby Doll’s Silva elicits sympathy and his own plight as the Outsider is raised to the fore. The burning down of his gin becomes an act of destruction against him, the foreigner. He explains to Baby Doll (Flora):

They’re evil spirits that haunt the human heart and take possession of it, and spread from one human heart to another human heart the way that a fire goes springing from leaf to leaf and branch to branch in a tree till a forest is all aflame with it – the birds take flight – the wild things are suffocated...everything green and beautiful is destroyed....I was defeated! When I came to, lying on the ground – the fire had won the battle, and all around was a ring of human figures! The fire lit their faces!...They were illuminated! Their eyes, their teeth were SHINING!! (p. 52)

The speech is characteristic of the type of predicament faced by Williams’ later Outsiders who confront a world of evil and corruption. One of the only things that they can do is take flight – like the birds (here a symbol of the Outsider, and thus one of beauty) – to escape from destruction. In Baby Doll, Silva is the bird of the above speech; he is a foreign Outsider who is under threat from the murderous Insiders (in the same way that Papa Romano and Lady Torrance are in danger in Orpheus Descending). Furthermore, he does not rape Baby Doll (Flora); rather, she is brought to life by his virile and
attractive Italian masculinity. Instead of the large woman of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* who is brutally violated and destroyed, *Baby Doll's* heroine is a slender, virginal woman who is rejuvenated and momentarily rescued from an unhappy marriage. Thus, in *Baby Doll*, the dynamics are changed; instead of it being about the destruction of the Southern woman, it becomes a story, in part, about the encounter between two Outsiders.

*27 Wagons Full of Cotton* is different to the other plays I discuss in this thesis because it is specifically written as a 'comedy.' Roger Boxill describes it as follows:

> [Flora's] humiliation takes a comic form. A retaliatory rape is at the centre of a vengeful Oedipal vision cast in the guise of a ribald tale....[27 Wagons] has a raucous spirit....[Flora] is a farcical character touched by pathos [whereas Williams' other Southern Belles] are poignant figures touched by farce (1987, p. 53)

However, despite the fact that it is a comedy, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* still examines Williams' tragic vision of reality. His theme of the destruction of the Outsider is still embedded within the farcical nature of the play, and, in my opinion, ultimately overshadows it.
Chapter 2

Portrait of a Madonna

In *Portrait of a Madonna* Williams continues his sympathetic portrayal of the Southern woman as Outsider, this time chronicling the final moments of a middle-aged spinster’s life before she is taken to a mental asylum.

The play opens with Lucretia Collins running out into her living room in a state of agitation. She picks up the phone and insists on speaking to the manager of her apartment complex. She tells him that she is being raped night after night by a man she once knew. However, as the play unfolds, what seems to be another example of the Williams heroine being sexually assaulted actually turns out to be something more complex. When the Porter and the Elevator Boy arrive to supervise her before she is confined to a mental asylum, we slowly begin to realise that the “mysterious intruder” (p. 88) does not really exist, and that Lucretia has conjured the whole sordid episode in her mind. What we are presented with is not a woman who is ravaged by a sexually aggressive masculine figure—as is the case in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*—but with a woman whose mind has collapsed under the pressure of daily existence. Like Amanda in Williams’ first major success, *The Glass Menagerie*, who says she is “bewildered... by life” (p. 242), Lucretia also experiences an acute sense of bewilderment, the difference being that Lucretia deals with it—or does not deal with it—by surrendering to blissful madness. In this play the female Outsider is not only weak and fragile, but she is also insane.

Lucretia’s downfall is that she is unable to deal with the painful reality that she has failed in her role as Southern Belle. As she tells the Porter and the Elevator Boy, “in the Sow’uh it was never considered essential for a girl to have anything but prettiness and charm” (p. 91). Like Flora, who is taught simply to be hugged and squeezed, Lucretia is trained only to be pretty and charming. But despite her efforts at fulfilling this role, as she tells her ‘guests,’ she loses her beau Richard to a more brazen lover. It is this incident that initiates Lucretia’s journey to the Outside. Lucretia recalls an incident in which she, Richard (both teachers), and her rival, the “Cincinnati girl” (p. 97), were out on a school faculty picnic. She remembers that while they were playing games with the
children, Richard and the "Cincinnati girl" disappeared and when they returned much later it was obvious what they had been up to. Regardless of the affection that Richard seemingly has for Lucretia, he ends up being seduced by the "Cincinnati girl" and eventually marries her. Unlike Lucretia, the "Cincinnati girl" is sexually forthright; she is ungoverned by the restrictive Southern codes that Lucretia is enslaved by. It is her carefree sexuality that Richard appears to admire and this is perhaps why she is able to win his affection. However, what is a victory for the "Cincinnati girl" is an agonizing defeat for Lucretia; many years later Lucretia can still not forget that the "common little strumpet" (p. 93) triumphed over her refined Southern gentility. As a result of this personal and social failure, she is unable to move on with her life; as Boxill remarks, she becomes "locked within her role as lovelorn maiden" (1987, p. 42). There is something in Lucretia's nature— which makes her an Outsider—that prevents her from coping with the sorrow of this event.

She recounts to the Porter and Elevator Boy that life from then on became too gruelling to bear. Even walking on a sidewalk in summer is too much for her. She painfully describes one experience:

I left my parasol once....so I didn't have anything to cover my face with when I walked by, and I couldn't turn back either, with all those people behind me—giggling...poking fun at my clothes! Oh, dear, dear! I had to walk straight forward—past the last elm tree and into that merciless sunlight. Oh! It beat down on me, scorching me! Whips!...Oh, Jesus!...Over my face and my body!...I stumbled, I nearly fell, and all of them burst out laughing! My face turned so horribly red, it got so red and wet, I knew how ugly it was in all that merciless glare—not a single shadow to hide in! (96-97).

It is on this particular occasion that Lucretia remembers that she saw Richard and his wife who was "round with a baby, the first of six" (p. 97). However, unable to face them, the only thing she can do is run. Lucretia experiences the Outsider's sense of being lonely, alienated and persecuted. Every experience for her becomes sharpened; she is hypersensitive to each little detail (even the sunlight contributes to her mental torment). When she sees Richard and his pregnant wife, she is directly confronted with her failure as an unmarried and childless woman; her status as what is 'other'—"a poor old maid" (p. 96)—rises to the surface. Not forgetting that the "Southern tradition is a family tradition" (Porter, 1969, p. 154), Richard and his wife represent a grotesquely successful
capitulation to the Southern family code. Yet, rather than accept this reality, at this point all Lucretia can do is play the part of the Williams fugitive figure: she runs out of town and into an apartment where she creates her own illusory world.

Despite Lucretia’s degeneration into something antithetical to the idea of the Southern Belle, she tries desperately to remain a ‘lady.’ However, in light of what we know about her, Lucretia’s performance of Southern gentility becomes nothing but a tragic and dismal parody. Her “hair is arranged in curls that would become a young girl,” she wears a “frilly negligee” (p. 87) and when she meets her ‘guests’ she “touches her ridiculous corkscrew curls with the faded pink ribbon tied through them,” and her “manner becomes that of a slightly coquettish but prim little Southern belle” (p. 91). In order to tolerate her position on the Outside, Lucretia must fool herself into thinking that she is a Southern Belle on the Inside of society; it is the only way she can give her life meaning. Unfortunately, however, it is this psychological need that propels her into the realms of insanity and eventually into a mental asylum.

Towards the end of the play, Lucretia proudly informs the Porter and Elevator Boy that she is expecting a child. In her mind, not only does she think Richard loves her, but she also believes that he has raped her and made her pregnant. She establishes herself as the moral protector of the child and says:

A child is innocent and pure. No matter how it’s conceived. And it must not be made to suffer! So I intend to dispose of the little property Cousin Ethel left me and give the child a private education where it won’t come under the evil influence of the Christian church! I want to make sure that it doesn’t grow up in the shadow of the cross and then have to walk along blocks that scorch you with terrible sunlight! (p. 98)

The reality of course is that Lucretia does not have any child to protect. She is so devastated by life that she creates an illusory world where she is the proud expectant mother who is going to do everything that she can to prevent her child from being persecuted like she has been. As Ruby Cohn suggests, Lucretia can only exist through her “brave, bright words [but it is] contradicted by the sexless pathos of [her] visual stage reality” (1987, p. 59). The pathos of the situation rests not in the fact that she has had to lie but in the fact that she honestly believes the lies her mind have fabricated.

The tragic dramatic irony of Lucretia’s invented rape and pregnancy lies in Lucretia’s name itself and in the play’s title, Portrait of a Madonna. In the Roman
legend, Lucretia was a woman who committed suicide after being raped by her husband's
cousin. The Augustan historian Diodorus saw Lucretia as a woman deserving of
"immortal praise" for the "nobility of her choice." In choosing to kill herself, she was an
"authentic example" of a woman who decides to maintain morality and purity (Grant,
1971, p. 169 & 170). However, Williams' Lucretia is a stark contrast to this image of
supreme honour. It is while saying she is "completely above reproach in her moral
behaviour" (p. 94) that Lucretia projects a lurid fantasy in which she is repeatedly raped.
In Williams' play, Lucretia is not a woman who feels that she must kill herself after being
raped, but instead, and most ironically, she is a woman who in her deluded state simply
imagines she has been raped. The contrast between ultimate female purity on one side
and deranged sexual fantasy on the other could not be more striking. Similarly, in
comparing Lucretia to the Virgin Mary, Williams highlights the tragic means by which
Lucretia has been psychologically destroyed. Like Mary, Lucretia experiences a virgin
birth, but instead of being impregnated by the spirit of God, she is impregnated by her
imaginary lover.

It is by losing herself so far in madness that Lucretia ultimately relegates herself to
the most extreme position on the Outside – the mental asylum. Just before the doctor and
nurse arrive, the Porter suggests to Lucretia that it would be better for her to be living
somewhere else. To this Lucretia replies, "If only I had the courage – but I don't. I've
grown so used to it here, and people outside – it's always so hard to face them!" (p. 98).
It is interesting to notice the way she refers to everybody as the "people outside," not
realising that to them it is she who is the peculiar person on the Outside of normality.
Lucretia has withdrawn herself from society to such a point where reintegration is
unfathomable. Her apartment is her refuge from the world and she is far too frightened to
leave it.

Yet, at the end of the play, Lucretia does leave her apartment – she is taken away by
the "weary, professional" doctor and the "hard and efficient" nurse (p. 98). As she
leaves her apartment assuring her 'guests' that her mother – who in reality is dead – will
bring them a cool drink, we are left with a tragic sense of the demise of the Outsider. The
elevator door that "clangs shut with the metallic sound of a locked cage" (p. 100)
prefigures the deathly final sound of the asylum door. When the soft music plays and the
lights fade out, we have no uncertainty as to where Williams' sympathies lie. As the Porter says:

If you ask me the world is populated with people that's just as peculiar as she is....Tonight they're takin' her off 'n' lockin' her up. They'd do a lot better to leave 'er go an' lock up some a them maniacs over there. She's harmless; they ain't....[She's] pitiful, not disgusting. (p. 90)

It is worth pointing out that Lucretia Collins bares many resemblances to Williams' most famous Outsider, Blanche DuBois, from A Streetcar Named Desire. In fact, Williams notes in his Memoirs that when he saw Jessica Tandy as Lucretia in a Los Angeles Actors Laboratory Production of the play, it became "instantly apparent" to him that Tandy was ideal for Blanche - as he writes, Tandy "was" Blanche (1975, p. 132). Like Blanche, Lucretia possesses a neurasthenic personality, is a Southern Belle who lives in an illusory world, and is confined to a mental asylum at the end of the play. Out of all of Williams' female stage characters that precede A Streetcar Named Desire, it is Lucretia Collins that most clearly anticipates the character of Blanche DuBois.
Chapter 3
A Streetcar Named Desire

When John Timpane argues that Williams' heroines are "defeated or destroyed not by male dominance, patriarchy, or misogyny but by their own predilection for destruction – that is, by their own desires" (1989, p. 175), he is only partially correct when it is applied to Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire. When evaluating Williams' most well known heroine, Blanche DuBois, we must take into account all the forces – including her inherent weakness and male dominance – that play a role in her inevitable destruction.

The issue for many critics seems to be a question of how accountable is Stanley for Blanche's demise. For example, Arthur Ganz, although acknowledging Stanley's ambiguities, writes, "Kowalski's primary mission [is] to destroy Blanche....the apelike Kowalski [is] the brutal, male torturer of a lonely spirit" (1987, p. 104) whilst Bert Cardullo places the ultimate responsibility on Blanche herself when he argues that "[Her] struggle throughout Streetcar is...more with herself than with Stanley" (1988, p. 80). While both comments are partly correct we cannot privilege one interpretation over the other; to do so would be to deny the number of complex forces that result in Blanche's destruction. Even though Ganz is right to suggest that Stanley is central to Blanche's collapse, we must remember that he is, as Williams commented, not a "black-dyed villain" (Murphy, 1992, p. 24). Similarly, even though Cardullo's comment is true in part, Stanley's role in destroying Blanche should not be underestimated. After all, it is his callousness that ultimately sees her confined to a mental institution at the end of the play.

Before discussing Blanche as the Outsider it would be unfair not to point out that Stanley can be read on one level as an Outsider in terms of race. However, it is a reading that eventually collapses when we remember that being a Williams Outsider is more to do with possessing a particular kind of psychological quality than it is to do with, as in this case, a matter of race.

Stanley is Polish, which to Blanche is simply "something like Irish....only not so - highbrow" (p. 124). Several times she derogatorily refers to him as a "Polack" (p. 124, 127, 196). Although, what is important is that Stanley does not allow himself to be
subjugated by Blanche’s discriminatory views. When Blanche accuses him of not knowing what anxiety feels like because he is a “Polack,” he replies: 

I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don’t ever call me a Polack. (p. 197)

Stanley does not allow his sense of being on the Outside to place him in an inferior position; he rejects his Outsider status and boldly asserts his Americanism as a way of affirming his place on the Inside of society. This is one of the crucial differences between Stanley and Blanche. Stanley will not allow himself to become oppressed and it is because of this that he remains a survivor; his racially dictated position on the Outside is entirely negated because he refuses to be undermined. The very fact that he is able to “survive in and even dominate contemporary society” (Bigsby, 1971, p. 108) shows that he is not a true Williams Outsider; Stanley ultimately remains the Outsider’s antagonist rather than an Outsider himself. In Williams’ world the Outsider is always the one who has trouble surviving in, let alone dominating, contemporary society. And in this play it is Stanley’s sister-in-law, Blanche DuBois.

As Marc Robinson remarks, “A Streetcar Named Desire portrays only the final moments in the long history of Blanche’s decline” (1994, p. 38). It is important not to forget that Blanche enters the action in a condition in which she is predisposed to destruction. When she is left alone in Stella’s home just before she is about to be reunited with her sister, we see Blanche in a state of high anxiety. Williams writes, “BLANCHE sits in a chair very stiffly with her shoulders slightly hunched and her legs pressed close together and her hands tightly clutching her purse as if she were quite cold.” (p. 119). When a cat screeches she “catches her breath with a startled gesture...pours a half tumbler of whiskey and tosses it down,” and then says to herself, “I’ve got to keep hold of myself” (p. 119). The point here is that Blanche is in an utterly fractured state of mind before she meets Stanley. The loss of her plantation, Belle Reeve, the guilt over her gay husband’s suicide, the death of her relatives, her exile from Laurel, her “intimacies with strangers” (p. 205), and the fact that she is “fading” (p. 169) have all contributed to her increasing state of alienation. It is part of the play’s tragic irony that Blanche comes to Stella seeking solace — “I want to be near you, got to be with
somebody, I can’t be alone” (p. 124) she tells her sister – only to find herself in the same house with a man who does not understand her needs.

From the very moment Blanche enters she is set up as the Outsider. At the beginning of the play, the occupants of Elysian Fields are engaged in their bawdy and earthy daily habits. The Negro woman and Eunice sit on the steps of the building making sexual jokes and Stella follows Stanley to watch him bowl. Into this easy-going environment arrives Blanche, who is clinging desperately to the idea of herself as a Southern Belle. Williams writes, “She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat, as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party” (p. 117). This image of the refined Southern Belle is entirely at odds with the lower-middle class New Orleans setting that Blanche finds herself in. As Mary Ann Corrigan argues, “Primitive tastes and pleasures are the norm in the Kowalski set, and those who fail to conform to this norm have no chance of survival” (1988, p. 51). Even though we can consider Blanche a conformist in terms of her capitulation to the idea of Southern female gentility, she is a non-conformist when placed in the setting of her brother-in-law’s home.

One of Blanche’s problems is that she wants her Southern gentility to be constantly affirmed by those around her; it is one of the ways in which she attains a sense of self worth. Yet, what she does not realise is that there is no room for her grandiose pretensions in the Kowalski home; she plays the part of the Southern gentlewoman in an environment where her role no longer exists. Knowing both her husband and her sister’s temperaments, Stella has to specifically ask Stanley to indulge Blanche’s vanities. At the beginning of Scene 2 she says to him,

> When she comes in be sure to say something about her appearance....And try to understand her and be nice to her, Stan....And admire her dress and tell her she’s looking wonderful. That’s important with Blanche. Her little weakness!” (p. 131 – 132).

But, despite Stella’s request, Stanley does not participate in Blanche’s world of Southern decorum. When Blanche talks about how she once attracted considerable admiration from her beaus, Stanley simply says, “Your looks are okay” (p. 136). Blanche replies that she was “fishing for a compliment” and Stanley remarks, “I don’t go in for that stuff” (p. 136). Another example of this can be observed when the men are drinking and
playing poker at the beginning of Scene 3. When Blanche enters their virile, masculine world, the first thing she says is, “Please don’t get up” (p. 145). Stanley, however, immediately undercuts her performance of the Southern tradition by responding with, “Nobody’s going to get up, so don’t be worried” (p. 145). In writing about Blanche, Elia Kazan commented in his notebook:

*Her problem has to do with her tradition.* Her notion of what a woman should be. She is stuck with this “ideal.” It is her. It is her ego. Unless she lives by it, she can not live; in fact her whole life has been for nothing....The thing about the “tradition” in the nineteenth century was that it worked then. It made a woman feel important with her own secure positions and functions, her own special worth. It also made a woman at that time one with her society. But today the tradition is an anachronism which simply does not function. *It does not work.* (1971, p. 22)

The very thing that has meant everything to Blanche is taken away and Stanley will not do anything to preserve it. Blanche finds herself in a society where the antebellum myths of the Old South have been superseded by a pragmatic and proletarian way of life; it is a culture that is not merely in transition – it has changed. The tragedy of course is that Blanche has not changed with it and therefore becomes an Outsider in a society that once was so familiar. Ultimately she has to retreat into her own mind to sustain the traditions that have governed and validated her life. As Bigsby comments, Blanche becomes “a symbol [of the] South destroyed by its own myths” (1984, p. 58).

In order to reinforce her worth as an individual, Blanche constantly claims superiority over her surroundings and its people. However, rather than work to her advantage, it further exacerbates her alienated state of mind and pushes her to the Outside. When she is reunited with her sister, one of the first things that she asks is why she was not informed about Stella’s dismal living conditions. Familiar with her histrionics, all Stella can say is, “Aren’t you being a little intense about it?” (p. 121). The morning after the disastrous poker night, Blanche expresses horror at the fact that Stella went back to Stanley after he hit her. Blanche cries, “You’re married to a madman!...your fix is worse than mine is” (p. 158). She tries to convince Stella that she should leave Stanley and that her beau, Shep Huntleigh, can set them up in a “shop of some kind” (p. 160). However, Stella simply dismisses her sister’s ridiculous suggestions. What Blanche does not take into account is that Stella is not in a situation
that she wants to get out of and that “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant” (p. 162). Yet Blanche continues to claim superiority over Stanley – the superiority of the Old South, her plantation, aristocracy, mind over body, art, poetry, music, and ultimately, herself – and to do so she ‘reads’ Stanley as a common “ape-like” animal who is a “survivor of the Stone Age” (p. 163). At the end of this famous speech, Blanche pleads to Stella, “Don’t – don’t hang back with the brutes!” (p. 164). In reading Stanley as an ape, Blanche attempts to secure her sister’s alliance, but instead of drawing Stella closer to her, it pushes her away. In short, Stella chooses to hang back with the “brutes.” When Stanley walks in after overhearing Blanche’s insults, Stella “embrace[s] him with both arms, fiercely, and full in the view of BLANCHE” (p. 164). By not understanding the relationship between her sister and Stanley, Blanche drives herself further into the margins. The final image of this scene is very much one of Blanche on the Outside, apart from the contented and sexually satisfied union of husband and wife.

As Kazan noted, Blanche is driven by a desperate need to “find Protection” and that the “tradition of the old South says that it must be through another person” (p. 22). Blanche is at a period in her life where her need for protection is at its most heightened; the horrors of her life, being confronted with the intimacy of Stella and Stanley (i.e., her sister’s ‘success’), and the fact that she is getting old have made it absolutely necessary for her to find “a cleft in the rock of the world” (p. 205) to hide in. In the course of the play it is Mitch that represents her hope for peace. As Blanche tells Stella before her date with Mitch, “I want to rest! I want to breathe quietly again! Yes – I want Mitch...very badly! Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone’s problem” (p. 171). But, in continuing to play her role as a Southern Belle, Blanche aggravates Stanley to such an extent that he destroys all her hopes for finding psychological tranquillity.

Stanley is the one person who refuses to be undermined by Blanche’s claims to superiority. Whereas Mitch is impressed and seduced by Blanche’s Southern nature, Stanley regards it as a threat to his lifestyle and marriage. During Scene 6, while they are celebrating Blanche’s birthday, Stella taps into Blanche’s anthropological discourse and labels Stanley a “pig” because of his disgusting table manners. In response to this, Stanley hurls his plate to the floor and roars,
Don't ever talk that way to me! 'Pig -- Polack -- disgusting -- vulgar -- greasy!' — them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here! What do you think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said — 'Every Man is a King!' And I am the king around here, so don't forget it! (p. 194 – 195)

From Stanley's perspective, Blanche is a destructive woman; her performance of the aristocratic Southern Belle subverts his stable sovereignty. Stanley is forced to use aggressive physical intimidation to re-establish the power he has lost due to Blanche's intrusion into his home. It is because of Blanche that Stella — perhaps for the first time in their marriage — is challenging his behaviour, and for this reason Stanley needs to expel Blanche from his house. Unfortunately, in order to regain his supremacy, Blanche has to be thoroughly degraded, destroyed and pushed to the farthest position on the Outside — the mental asylum.

The way that Stanley gains ultimate ascendancy over Blanche is by destroying the very illusion that has supported her existence — the illusion of herself as a Southern gentlewoman. By investigating her past, Stanley discovers that Blanche has led a promiscuous lifestyle in Laurel and that she lost her teaching position and was exiled for having an affair with a 17 year-old student. It is ironic that whilst striving to give the impression of respectability and decorum, Blanche ends up in the beds of strangers.

When Stanley unearths this information, he uses it to prove that Blanche's performance of traditional Southern womanhood has been nothing but a facade. The tragedy of this situation is that Stanley does not view this as a sad indictment of a woman who knew no other way of coping with the suicide of her gay husband. Blanche later defends her sexual experiences to Mitch as follows:

After the death of Allan — intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with....I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection — here and there, in the most — unlikely places — even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy. (p. 205)

However, Stanley does not even try to understand her. For him, the information is purely a reflection of her deceiving nature; it nullifies everything that Blanche has said about him and reinstates his position of dominance. One of the cruellest things that Stanley does with this information is pass it on to Mitch, and by doing this he completely ruins Blanche's chances of securing Mitch as a husband. It is worth remembering at this stage

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that Blanche is intent on reassimilating into the society that she has been expelled from, and it is Mitch that offers her the hope of doing this. As a contrast to some of the Outsiders that I will later discuss, who take pride in their position on the Outside, Blanche needs to conform to society’s expectations. When Mitch rejects her as a possible wife, Blanche’s chances at re-entering the world are destroyed.

If we are going to partly blame Stanley for Blanche’s destruction, we cannot forget that there are other characters that are at least partly accountable. When Mitch finds out about Blanche’s promiscuity, he does not play the part of the sympathetic and sensitive gentleman, but he adopts a role similar to the one Stanley has been playing throughout the play. He firstly accuses Blanche of not allowing him to see her during the day. To this Blanche replies:

The dark is comforting to me....I don’t want realism....I’ll tell you what I want. Magic! [MITCH laughs.] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! – Don’t turn the light on! (p. 203 – 204)

However, regardless of Blanche’s emotional appeal, Mitch does turn the light on and, in doing so, he strips her of her illusions of gentility and youth. Blanche has come into the Kowalski home and tried to make herself an Insider by downplaying her age and overplaying her refinement. But even when Blanche tries to make Mitch understand, he, like Stanley, cannot look past the fact that he has been lied to. Furthermore, Mitch is appalled at her past sexual behaviour. Instead of being the man who earlier tells her “I like you to be exactly the way you are, because in all my – experience – I have never known anyone like you” (p. 177) he demands that he get “what [he’s] been missing all summer” (p. 207). As McDonough writes, at this stage the only role Mitch can enact is that of the “sexually aggressive male guided by the principle that women are only either angels or whores” (p. 26). In this scene, one of the most brutal things Mitch says to her is that she is not clean enough to bring into his mother’s home. It is this comment that causes Blanche to throw Mitch, her prospective salvation, out of house by screaming hysterically, “Fire! Fire! Fire!” (p. 207). For a woman who has spent the entire play bathing in order to purify herself of her past promiscuity, the last thing she can handle is to be told she is unclean.
After Mitch's cruelty, Blanche loses her grip on reality and creates a world where she is on the Inside. She dresses herself in a "soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers with brilliants set in their heels" (p. 208). She places a tiara on her head and waits for her Shep Huntleigh, who is never going to come. When Stanley enters he destroys Blanche's fantasy world. He says:

I've been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes! You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling my liquor! I say — Ha — Ha! Do you hear me? Ha — ha — ha! (p. 213)

After fiercely tearing down Blanche's illusory world, Stanley performs his most brutal act towards her — he rapes her. Whether we read Blanche's rape as an act of "incidental, inadvertent cruelty" (Cardullo, 1988, p. 80) or as an expression of Stanley's hatred of Blanche and his desire to dominate her (Kernan, 1988, p. 19), we must concur that in raping Blanche, Stanley takes unfair advantage of an emotionally frail woman. Even if we conclude that Blanche in a sense complies with her attacker — after all, Stanley does carry her "inert figure" [emphasis added] (p. 215) to the bed — we cannot forget that it is this final act that permanently destroys her. Stanley may be a "Lawrencian figure" (Bigsby, 1984, p. 60) whose "sexuality...is unmental, unspiritual, and therefore, in some way free from taint" (Brustein, 1988, p. 9), but his "animal joy" (p. 128) only degenerates into a destructive sexual aggrandisement.

In the last scene of the play Blanche completely submits to insanity; it is the only place where she feels she is on the Inside. She puts on her Della Robbia blue jacket and waits in vain to be rescued by Shep Huntleigh. However, the reality is that she is going to be taken away to a mental asylum. The only way Stanley can discredit Blanche's story of rape is by insisting that she is mad. In order to prevent Blanche from telling her sister what happened, Stanley must expel her as far as possible out of society.

What is so tragic about Blanche's confinement is that she clings to her illusory world until the very end. It is her blind reliance on the Southern code that causes her to grab the Doctor's arm and utter the now famous line, "Whoever you are — I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (p. 225). Blanche is so desperate for protection
that she eventually finds it, in her mind, on the arms of a man who is about to lock her in an asylum.

Despite all of Blanche’s lies and deceptions, her confinement at the end of the play is ultimately a denial and suppression of truth – the truth of Stanley’s vicious violation of her. Anca Vlasopulos comments that what makes Blanche’s incarceration so troubling is that “while the characters gathered on stage significantly mark Blanche’s passing, they also accept their complicity in her expulsion by witnessing it without protest” (1989, p. 165 – 166). This statement can most pointedly be directed at Stella. Once again, it is not only Stanley who we can blame for Blanche’s destruction. It is probably Stanley who has suggested confining Blanche to an asylum, but it is a decision that in the end has Stella’s consent. Stella refuses to believe that her husband could sexually molest Blanche on the very night that she gives birth to their child. In fact, Stella cannot believe it: if she did, her stable existence would be ruined. It is Eunice that supports her choice. She says to Stella, “Don’t ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep on going” (p. 217). Stella may experience sorrow and regret at what she allows to happen to Blanche – “What have I done to my sister? Oh, God, what have I done to my sister” (p. 224) she cries – but in order to ensure her survival, she must believe that the only place for Blanche is the asylum.

Referring to Blanche’s demise, John von Szeliski accuses Williams of not understanding “that there are other alternatives for the sick and the sensitive than brutal suppression or destruction” (1971, p. 69). In saying this, he neglects to appreciate Blanche’s spiritual crisis. As Williams himself commented, “the size of [Blanche’s] feeling is too great for her to contain without the escape of madness” (Williams, 1975, p. 235). Blanche’s very nature makes it difficult for her to survive in an ever-changing modern world; hers is the plight of the Outsider who experiences life deeply and intensely.
Chapter 4
Orpheus Descending

Even though Williams’ first professionally produced play, *Battle of Angels*, was a failure when it opened in Boston in 1940, Williams never stopped working on it and 17 years later the play resurfaced in its revised form as *Orpheus Descending*. Whereas the other plays I have discussed focus primarily on a single Southern woman as the Outsider, *Orpheus Descending* presents a gallery of Outsiders (one man, three women) who are all disenfranchised and defeated by a corrupt and life-denying system of power. As Bigsby comments, this play is one of Williams’ fables about the “victory of the impotent but brutal materialist over the spiritually sensitive and sexually vital” (1984, p. 95).

In this play Williams uses the Greek myth of Orpheus – among many others, including the loss of Eden, the battle of angels, Christ, and Adonis (Traubitz, 1987, p. 4) – as a basis for the dramatic structuring of events. In one particular version of this myth, Orpheus is a poet and musician who can make the “trees uproot themselves, boulders melt and rivers change their courses” when he sings his “beautiful songs” or plays his “inspiring music” (Bartlett, 1998, p. 204). When his wife, Eurydice, dies and is taken to Hell, Orpheus must journey to the Underworld to bring her back to life. In *Orpheus Descending* Williams retells this myth as a modern-day tale about a guitar-playing bohemian, Val Xavier (Orpheus), who descends upon a conventional small Southern town (Hell) and “creates the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop” (Williams, 1976, p. 238). In doing so, Val – the Outsider – reawakens and rejuvenates Lady Torrance (Eurydice), who has been imprisoned in a loveless marriage with her dying husband, Jabe (Death).

From the very beginning Williams establishes the artificiality, darkness and emotional barrenness of the Torrance Mercantile Store that functions as the play’s setting. A “great dusty window” can only offer a view of “disturbing emptiness” while “the black skeleton of a dressmaker’s dummy stands meaninglessly against a thin white column” and a “sinister-looking artificial palm tree” sits on the landing (p. 245). This is Williams’ version of Hell; a capitalist and consumerist orientated culture that denies
everything meaning and life. It is in this hellish landscape that Williams' Outsiders will wage their war against the forces of death and sterility.

When Weales comments that Jabe is an Outsider who "is set apart by the disease that is killing him as obviously as Val is by his priapic aura, his guitar, and his snakeskin jacket, as Lady is by being Italian, as Carol Curttere is by her unconsoling wealth and self-lacerating sex, as Vee Talbott is by her painting and religious visions" (1983, p. 303), he misses an important point about what makes a Williams character an Outsider. Being an Outsider has more to do with a particular sensibility than it is to do with an obvious physical difference. Certainly Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie* is an Outsider because of her physical disability, but it is also her intense shyness that makes her one as well. Jabe may be a 'cripple' in the sense that he is dying from cancer, but this does not make him an Outsider in the context of my use of the term. It is Val, Lady, Carol and Vee who are the true Outsiders.

Val Xavier is the central Outsider of the play. It is after Uncle Pleasant's Choctaw cry (a cry that signifies beauty, mystery and wildness) that Val enters the play's action. Immediately there is a strong suggestion that there is something different about this man; he has an 'otherness' that establishes him in opposition to the norm. He has a "wild beauty about him that the cry would suggest" (p. 257), he wears a snakeskin jacket, and carries a guitar that is covered in inscriptions. When Val says he is looking for work, Lady replies, "Boys like you don't work" (p. 273). According to Lady, men that "play th' guitar and go around talkin' about how warm they are" (p. 273) do not belong in the world of 'normal' society. Whereas Blanche was instantly set up as an Outsider because of her heightened Southern gentility, Val finds himself on the Outside because of his radical bohemianism. But it is this attractive 'otherness' that ignites the flames of life in the town that have been extinguished – or are on the verge of being so – by the destructive forces of the play.

Colin Wilson makes the claim that the Outsider is one who:

...cannot live in the comfortable, insulated world of the bourgeois, accepting what he sees and touches as reality. For the bourgeois, the world is fundamentally an orderly place....For the Outsider, the world is not rational, not orderly....The Outsider is a man who has awakened to chaos....For the sick soul, the man outside, this 'new world' produces a feeling of horror; it is
a symbol of a mechanical civilisation that runs in grooves like a gramophone record, precluding freedom. (p. 15 & 46)

It is this spiritual dilemma that Val faces as an Outsider. He is unable to function as part of the dominant society because he has been exposed to its corrupt and chaotic nature; his past as a gigolo has made him sensitive to the world’s ills. Due to this he stands apart; he is, as Carol remarks, “wild” and “alone” (p. 294). Val cannot help but express horror at the fact that, “there’s people bought and sold in this world like carcasses of hogs in butcher shops!” (p. 278). This is why Val is part of the “fugitive kind” (p. 347); roaming from place to place allows him to remain free from the taints of society. It is this image of spiritual freedom that is alluded to when Val tells Lady about the bird with no legs that spends its life high in the sky. Val is an Outsider because he tries to achieve this same quality of liberation. It is his guitar that “washes [him] clean like water when anything unclean has touched [him]” (p. 274).

Lady, however, does not believe the bird exists. Her rejection of the bird’s existence is a rejection of the freedom that it embodies. Unlike Val, who believes that he has “never been branded” (p. 278), Lady has been held captive in a relationship that has not allowed her to have a “single good dream” (p. 279). She, like Blanche, is a defeated woman before the events of the play take place. And like Blanche, who can only find a brief period of peace with Mitch before she is raped and taken to an asylum, Lady can only find momentary salvation with Val before she is shot and killed.

Lady’s subordination goes back to the event of her father’s death. As Beulah informs the audience at the beginning of the play, her father, Papa Romano, whom people just called “The Wop,” was a man who came to the small Southern town from the “old country” (p. 248) with a mandolin and a monkey. He bought a cheap piece of land, planted an orchard and built little white wooden arbours where people would “court up a storm” (p. 248). However, all this was destroyed when a racist band of locals called the Mystic Crew (led by Jabe) burned everything down after finding out that Papa Romano has sold liquor to some African Americans. Whereas the image of fire is a symbol of love and passion when it is used to describe the sexual liaison between Lady and David Curtrete (p. 247), in this instance it is a symbol of destruction. Everything that Papa
Romano brings to the small Southern community—song, healthy sexuality, music, and life—is systematically brought down to ruins.

It is in Kristeva’s discussion of the foreigner that we can understand why these Outsiders are excluded and silenced. In explaining Kristeva’s theory, McAfee argues that “The foreigner threatens the borders of the symbolic—and national—order” and therefore a “nation-state constitutes its own boundaries by excluding what is other” (1993, p. 123 & 124). McAfee also points out, most significantly, that “any imagined threat the foreigner poses to national identity pales before the violence that nations can and do commit against foreigners” (1993, p. 124). From this perspective it can be said that Papa Romano is destroyed because his foreignness—which essentially represents (an)other way of life—destabilises the fixed “Protestant puritanical morality” (Lipset, 1972, p. 200) of the American South. In order to reaffirm their own ‘normal’ identity, the Mystic Crew burn down Papa Romano’s orchard because it is symbolic of an ideology that does not comply with their own strict standards. However, not only do they burn down the orchard but they also destroy a human life in the process. What started out as a Methodist Minister denouncing Papa Romano’s activities manifests into a breed of violence that not only ‘others’ the Outsider but eradicates him as well.

By marrying a “Dago bootlegger’s daughter” (p. 296) Jabe perpetuates a damaging power over the ‘strange’ foreigner. Lady is utterly defeated by being married to such a man. She “verges on hysteria” and “her voice is often shrill and her body tense” (p. 262). At the beginning of Act 1 Scene 2 she mutters, “I wish I was dead, dead, dead” (p. 270). However, as Williams indicates, when Lady is in repose “a girlish softness emerges again and she looks ten years younger” (p. 262). It is Val who is able to bring back this “girlish softness”; he liberates her from death and takes her back to a life-affirming emotional state. As she later says to him, “I was touched by your—strangeness, your strange talk” (p. 312). Not only does he give her life metaphorically but he also gives her life literally by making her pregnant: “I have life in my body, this dead tree, my body, has burst in flower! You’ve given me life,” (p. 343) she tells him. Through Val—who is an Outsider like herself—Lady finds the power to be alive once again.
Lady is not the only woman in the town who is drawn to Val’s ‘otherness.’ Carol Cutrere, the sexual outcast, and Vee Talbott, the artist, are also attracted to him for their various reasons. Both women, like Val and Lady, are Outsiders at odds with their society.

Carol Cutrere goes to great lengths to perform an identity that is not governed by the conventional morality of her Southern society. She may have the “oldest and most distinguished” (p. 252) name in the country, but she does everything she can to tarnish it. Of her appearance Williams writes:

...she has an odd, fugitive beauty which is stressed, almost to the point of fantasy, by a style of makeup with which a dancer named Valli has lately made such an impression in the bohemian centres of France and Italy, the face and lips powdered white and the eyes outlined and exaggerated with black pencil and the lids tinted blue. (p. 252)

By presenting herself in such a way Carol distances herself from ‘normal’ society; doing this provides her with her own distinct identity. Furthermore, she defies the authorities of the town, regularly engages in activities that are considered amoral (“jooking”), and stirs political tensions. Unlike Blanche, who tries desperately to be part of society and fails, Carol Cutrere revels in her place on the Outside of conventionality. To submit to the dominant ideology would be to become part of the world that is “sick with neon” (p. 334). When Val questions her as to why she has to act the way she does, she replies, “I’m an exhibitionist! I want to be noticed, seen, heard, felt! I want them to know I’m alive!” (p. 266). As she says, the only thing the dead people in their graves tell her is to “Live, live, live, live!” (p. 267). For Carol, to “live” is not to be enslaved by society.

Carol’s overt sexuality is also a factor that places her on the Outside. In a similar fashion to Blanche, Carol uses sex as a cure for loneliness. She admits to Val:

The act of love-making is almost unbearably painful, and yet, of course, I do bear it, because to be not alone, even for a few moments, is worth the pain and the danger. It’s dangerous for me because I’m not built for child-bearing. (p. 294)

But, like Blanche, Carol is condemned for her sexual behaviour. She is labelled by the townsfolk – whom Williams satirises by imbuing their actions and words with a sense of the ridiculous – as “not normal,” “absolutely degraded,” and “corrupt” (p. 268). However, whereas many of Williams’ other female Outsiders that I have discussed are
irrevocably destroyed (Flora, Lucretia, Blanche), Carol fights back at her oppressors. Even though she is exiled for destabilising the repressed sexual identity of her town, she refuses to disappear quietly. She is constantly going to places where she is unwanted just to show people that she is ‘alive.’ In doing so, she maintains her integrity in a sick and deceitful world.

Significantly, it is Carol who most clearly recognises that Val’s vitality as an Outsider is under threat in the diseased and homogenised world of the Insiders. When she thinks that Val has compromised his ‘otherness’ by settling down in society, she tells him, “You’re in danger here, Snakeskin. You’ve taken off the jacket that said: ‘I’m wild, I’m alone!’ and put on the nice blue uniform of a convict!” (p. 294 – 295). This comment draws into focus the way in which conformity jeopardises the distinctive magnetism of the bohemian Outsider. According to Carol, by becoming part of the capitalist work system, Val risks being contaminated by the very values he detests. In Val, Carol finds a kindred spirit, a fellow member of the “fugitive kind” (p. 347), whom she does not want to see infected.

One of the characteristics that make Carol Cutrere notably different to the other Outsiders that I have looked at is that she is a deliberate political subversive. She tells Val that she has protested against the “gradual massacre of the coloured majority” (p. 267) by delivering speeches, writing letters and organising demonstrations. She describes one political protest as follows:

And when that Willie McGee thing came along – he was sent to the chair for having improper relations with a white whore – [Her voice is like a passionate incantation.] I made a fuss about it. I walked barefoot in this burlap sack to deliver a personal protest to the Governor of the State....You know how far I got? Six miles out of town – hooted, jeered at, even spat on! -- every step of the way – and then arrested! Guess what for? Lewd vagrancy! (p. 267)

There is something in Carol’s nature that makes her sensitive to the racial prejudice that she sees around her. Rather than become a member of society who perpetuates racial discrimination, she decides to fight against it, even though in doing so she further ostracises herself. As an Outsider she has the ability, like Val, to look at society from the Outside and witness its corruption.

Carol is not the only woman in the town who is an Outsider because she is acutely aware of the corruption around her. The Sheriff’s wife, Vee Talbott, “a heavy, vague
woman in her forties” (p. 257), is also sensitive to society’s ills. The difference with Vee is that she sublimates the horrors of her world into art and religion. At the beginning of Act 2, Vee explains to Val that her primitive-style religious paintings originate from experiencing ‘visions.’ Being an Outsider like Vee, Val intuitively understands that her paintings symbolise her repressed spiritual dilemmas:

VAL: You don’t have to explain. I know what you mean. Before you started to paint, it didn’t make sense.
VEE: - What - what didn’t?
VAL: Existence!
VEE [slowly and softly]: No - no, it didn’t....existence didn’t make sense....[She places canvas on guitar on counter and sits in chair.]  
VAL [rising and crossing to her]: You lived in Two River County, the wife of the county sheriff. You saw awful things take place.
VEE: Awful! Things!
VAL: Beatings!
VEE: Yes!
VAL: Lynchings!
VEE: Yes!
VAL: Runaway convicts torn to pieces by hounds!  
[This is the first time she could express this horror.]
VEE: Chain-gang dogs!
VAL: Yeah?
VEE: Tear fugitives!
VAL: Yeah?
VEE: - to pieces....(p. 301 – 302)

Unlike Carol, who subverts and protests against the forces of corruption and sexual repression around her, Vee unconsciously displaces her anxieties into her religious paintings (it is also worth observing that her paintings seem to express a repressed sexuality – the red church steeple that she paints can be interpreted as a phallic symbol). What is so significant about the above exchange is that this is the first time Vee has been made consciously aware of her feelings. Being the Sheriff’s wife, and thus married to a man that represents the corrupt forces at work in the town, Vee is forced to psychologically erase the unremitting violence of her existence. It is only through Val, a fellow Outsider – and a man she later refers to as her saviour – that she is made aware of her anxieties and can embrace her place on the Outside.

In the world of the Torrance Mercantile Store the Outsiders are given little chance for survival; it is death and destruction that prevails. Towards the end of the play, after
Val is caught in a compromising position with Vee, he is taunted by the town’s men and then asked to leave the county. Sheriff Talbott says to him:

They’s a certain county I know of which has a big sign at the county line that says, ‘Nigger, don’t let the sun go down on you in this county’....You ain’t a nigger and this is not that county, but, son, I want you to just imagine that you seen a sign that said to you: ‘Boy, don’t let the sun rise on you in this county....’S that understood, now, boy?....I hope so. I don’t like violence. (p. 328)

This exemplifies the way in which the Outsider is exiled for not conforming to the governing ideologies of the dominant society. Val is banished out of the county because he represents not only a peculiar ‘strangeness’ but also a potent eroticism that the men of the town do not know how to deal with – it is interesting that many of the town’s men single out Val’s good looks as grounds for damnation (p. 318, 326). Lady and Vee, both of whom are married, are attracted to his magnetic sexuality and in coming to him the “boundaries of patriarchal authority and marriage” are distorted (Clum, 1997, p. 136). In this small Southern town, a man as ‘erotic object’ is regarded purely as a threat. It is also revealing to note that once again Val is likened to the African-American (he is always associated with the magical quality of Uncle Pleasant). Not forgetting that “after World War II, African-Americans remained an intensively subjugated and, particularly in the South, legally segregated group” (Savran, 1992, p. 128), Val’s alliance with them seems to suggest that they hold the same subordinate and disempowered position on the Outside of society. In fact, in the earlier Battle of Angels, Val explicitly aligns himself with the African Americans when he comments that they share the fact they are “dispossessed” (p. 72).

Val’s mistake is that he delays his departure. Rather than immediately leaving the county, he is held back by Lady. Bigsby reads this is as a central dilemma for Williams’ characters. He writes, “To stand still, to become involved in a relationship which appears to offer redemption, is to become vulnerable, liable to corruption and, finally, destruction” (1984, p. 97). Val’s mistake, however, is not so much the fact that he “stands still,” but that he does it in a society that will not tolerate or accept him. Perhaps at this stage we are reminded that when Val earlier commented that he had never been “branded,” Lady replied by saying, “Well, then, you better not settle down in this county” (p. 278). Her comment is a warning; it illustrates the threat that corruption poses to the
Outsider when he chooses to stop fleeing. At the end of the play, Lady’s prediction is proven; Val is tortured and perishes – like Lady’s father – in a fire that is deliberately started. Lady also does not escape ultimate destruction – it is sadly fitting that what finally kills her is a bullet from Jabe’s revolver.

Despite Jabe’s violent triumph over Val and Lady, *Orpheus Descending* does not conclude on an utterly defeatist note. In this play, two things are allowed to survive – Carol, and Val’s snakeskin jacket. As we hear Val’s cry of anguish in the distance, Carol takes Val’s jacket from Uncle Pleasant and says:

> Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind… (p. 347)

Carol, unlike the other Outsiders, is allowed to depart from the store, and, furthermore, she carries an object that we have come to associate throughout the play with vitality. Nancy Traubitz interprets Carol’s “exit from the hell of the store...as close as Williams can come to assent and affirmation” (1987, p. 9). While I partly agree with this, it should also be noted that the ending is laced with irony – Carol’s exit does not signify complete survival; in fact, it only represents *momentary* survival. From what we know about Carol’s lifestyle, we can hardly hold much hope for her future (it is worth remembering that in the earlier *Battle of Angels* it is alluded to in the epilogue that Carol/Cassandra may have eventually committed suicide). For Carol’s survival to really mean anything, there would have to be a fundamental change in the way society treats the “fugitive kind” (p. 347).

Julie Adam argues that it is,

> [Val’s] anguished surpassing of the common concerns and [his] reaching for the unattainable that elevates [him] above the rest; [Val’s] doomed struggle against [his] own insignificance and against meaninglessness and [his] refusal to remain as ordinary as fate had decreed [him] to be endow [him] with dignity (1991, p. 39).

I would stress that not only does Val attain this level of dignity, but Lady, Carol and Vee achieve it as well. Despite the play’s overwhelming sense of destruction, Williams’ Outsiders remain heroic in their relentless battle for survival.
Chapter 5
Suddenly Last Summer

It was after the unexpected failure of *Orpheus Descending* and Williams' subsequent term of Freudian analysis that his play *Suddenly Last Summer* was produced Off-Broadway. It can be argued that all of Williams' plays are to an extent tied up with his own experiences, but *Suddenly Last Summer* in particular seems to be a deeply personal exploration of his own unresolved sexual, artistic and familial anxieties. In this play the Outsiders are once again destroyed, but this time in an even more vicious fashion. Sebastian, the homosexual poet, and Catharine Holly, the so-called 'mad' woman, find themselves violently sacrificed to a cruel and greedy world.

From the very beginning Williams sets the scene for what is going to be a nightmarish journey into the realms of madness. Williams writes that the set, which represents part of a Victorian Gothic-style mansion in the Garden District of New Orleans, "may be as unrealistic as the decor of a dramatic ballet" (p. 113). The interior of this mansion is blended with a "fantastic garden" which Williams describes as follows:

> The colours of this jungle-garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents, and birds, all of savage nature.... (p. 113)

Through the set design Williams establishes a striking image of violence, lunacy and savagery. However surreal this backdrop may seem, it is used to reflect Williams' tragic vision of reality. For a man who thought that the era that he lived in was plagued with a growing sense of "violence and horror" (Williams, 1988, p. 99), the garden-jungle becomes an appropriate metaphor. It is against this frightening background that Williams' Outsiders will struggle to remain alive.

What makes *Suddenly Last Summer* stand out from Williams' other plays is the fact that its main Outsider is absent from the action of the play. In fact, Sebastian Venable, who in many ways resembles Williams himself (a shy writer, a gay man, and an overanxious pill-popper), is dead and destroyed before the play even begins. It is through
his mother, Violet Venable, and his cousin and fellow Outsider, Catharine Holly, that we learn about the circumstances of his destruction.

The play begins with Mrs Venable telling Dr. Cukrowicz about her son Sebastian. As she talks she relates an incident that had a profound and disturbing effect on her son’s life. When visiting the Encantadas on the Galapagos Islands, she and Sebastian witnessed a female sea turtle crawling out of the Equatorial Sea on to the beach of a volcanic island to deposit her eggs. Sebastian knew exactly when these eggs would hatch, so he returned with his mother to observe the event. But rather than witness the extraordinary birth of the sea turtles, they were confronted with a ghastly display of death and destruction. Mrs Venable recalls:

...we returned...in time to witness the hatching of the sea-turtles and their desperate flight to the sea....The narrow beach, the colour of caviar, was all in motion! But the sky was in motion, too...Full of flesh-eating birds and the noise of the birds, the horrible savage cries...the just-hatched sea-turtles scrambled out of the sand-pits and started their race to the sea....And the sand all alive, all alive, as the hatched sea-turtles made their dash for the sea, while the birds hovered and swooped to attack and hovered and - swooped to attack! They were diving down on the hatched sea-turtles, turning sides open and rending and eating their flesh. (p. 117 - 118)

I have cited Mrs Venable’s recollections at length for two reasons. Firstly, the image of the newly-hatched sea-turtles running away from their adversaries is very similar to the way the Outsider must run from forces that threaten to destroy them. Like Lucretia, Blanche and Val, no matter how hard the turtles try to scramble free, they cannot escape. Secondly, it is this occurrence that affected Sebastian to the point where he was delirious with fever for several weeks. It is in this horrifying exhibition of the sea-turtles being devoured that Sebastian sees the face of God. Rather than the madman’s proclamation in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* that “God is dead” (Magnus & Higgins, 1996, p. 36), for Sebastian, God exists — but it is a heartless and savage one. Once again, the Outsider, this time a homosexual poet, is the one intensely aware of the cruelty and barbarism of the modern world.

However, unlike Val, who takes flight in the hope for freedom, Sebastian surrenders himself to his corrupt Universe. It becomes a means by which he seeks atonement for his homosexual sins. As Catharine says, she desperately tried to save him from

Rather than actively fighting against the cruelty that surrounds him, Sebastian chooses to passively accept it. As Bigsby comments, in “compounding the cruelty of existence and of natural process by his own passivity” Sebastian becomes a “source of evil” (1984, p. 101). It is a sacrifice that he eventually pays for with his life.

It is worth pointing out at this stage that in saying that Sebastian comes to embody a sense of ‘evil’ does not necessarily negate his status as an Outsider. He remains an Outsider; his sensitivity to the world and his sexual nature clearly casts him out of society. Yet, at the same time, the method in which he chooses to deal with being on the Outside certainly makes him less sympathetic than some of the Outsiders I have discussed so far.

In sacrificing himself to his terrible God, Sebastian exploits the people around him. When Catharine later remarks that “we all use each other and that’s what we think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what’s – hate” (p. 142), she refers to the way Sebastian mercilessly used and abused the people around him. Sebastian is a homosexual outcast and, unable to befriend young men on his own due to his shyness, he uses his mother, and later Catharine, to lure young handsome men to him for his sexual gratification. The extent to which he has withdrawn into this heartless world is shown when he forces Catharine to wear an almost transparent white swimsuit to procure men for him.

Catharine and Mrs Venable are not the only ones to be exploited by Sebastian – the poverty-stricken young men of Cabeza de Lobo are also taken advantage of by him. However, it is at this point that Sebastian’s sacrificial lifestyle culminates in a death that he seems to have been searching for; it is the ultimate expiation for transgressing his society’s laws of sexual behaviour. In a manner that recalls the annihilation of the sea turtles, Catharine reveals the ‘truth’ of Sebastian’s demise. She says:

...he was lying naked as they had been naked against a white wall, and this you won’t believe, nobody has believed it, nobody could believe it, nobody, nobody on earth could possibly believe it, and I don’t blame them! – They had devoured parts of him. [MRS VENABLE cries out softly.] Torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with, they had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs. There wasn’t a sound any more, there was nothing to see but Sebastian, what was left of him, that
looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been torn, thrown, crushed! – against that blazing white wall. (p. 158 – 159)

Although we have no way of confirming the truth of her story, we are swayed, like the Doctor, to “at least…consider the possibility that the girl’s story could be true” (p. 158). If we do accept the story (as I do), we must concur that by being killed and eaten, Sebastian has offered himself as the ultimate bodily sacrifice to a cold and indifferent world. Sebastian receives atonement for his homosexual sins in the most macabre way: via death and destruction.

As Annette Saddik quite correctly points out cannibalisation is reserved only for the homosexual Outsiders in Williams’ work (Anthony Burns is likewise consumed in Williams’ short story Desire and the Black Masseur). While acknowledging that in such plays as A Streetcar Named Desire, Orpheus Descending and Sweet Bird of Youth “unbounded desire is punished as well,” Saddik argues that, “while violent [it] does not involve physical incorporation.” It is only homoerotic activity that is punished “through the tearing apart and cannibalistic incorporation of the transgressive body” (1998, p. 347 – 354).

With such a horrifying punishment dealt out to its homosexual Outsider, it is not surprising that for many the play was a “highly moral fable” where the homosexual poet was conceived as a “monstrous aberration of nature” (de Jongh, 1992, p. 79). In fact, when the film version of the play was released, the Catholic Legion of Decency surprisingly did not condemn the movie for its representation of homosexuality. Variety (December 30, 1959) explained this as follows:

The matter of the Legion’s appraisal that “Suddenly” is a moral tale is defended by the Legion spokesman who last week defined the theme….as thus: a man who uses others and their love to his own end is finally devoured by the very corruption which he has sown. Spokesman asked: what could be more moral? As for the homosexual nature of the unseen protagonist, spokesman said that the film, which is never explicit or obscene, also does anything but make homosexuality appear attractive or emotionally profitable. (Donahue, 1964, p. 109)

According to the Catholic Legion of Decency, the film (and, by extension, the play) conforms to the conventional morality of the time because it suitably, and most violently, punishes its homosexual character. However, rather than reading Sebastian’s death as
Williams’ disavowal of homosexuality and his own homosexual nature, I would read the play as a critique of the devastating impact of a sexually restrictive society. It is important to remember that Sebastian’s corruption lies not in his homosexuality (although Sebastian may feel this is the case); he is corrupt because he cruelly perpetuates the violence that he sees around him. Sebastian is unable to suppress his sexual urges in a society that does not have a pro-homosexual discourse; his only option is to completely sacrifice himself to an ideology that proclaims him sick, evil and amoral. Certainly Sebastian is punished, but he seeks punishment because of the nature of the society that he inhabits.

Sebastian’s destruction is not only his ‘story’ but it is also Catharine’s. She has been a knowing participant in his sexual procuring and has witnessed his gruesome murder. However, when she goes back to New Orleans, she insists on telling a story that nobody wants to hear. In fact, her family will do anything – including labelling her ‘insane,’ confining her to a mental institution, and performing a lobotomy on her (an operation that was performed with tragic consequences on Williams’ sister, Rose, in 1943) – to prevent the truth from being spoken. She is an Outsider because she cannot help but tell the truth in a society that denies the complexity of human experience.

Suddenly Last Summer can be looked at as being divided into two parts. In the first half of the play Mrs Venable presents her version of Sebastian’s demise, and in the second Catharine presents her own. Each woman presents a contrasting version of the man they knew, but it is Catharine’s story that disturbs the established heterosexual identity of Sebastian’s character.

According to Mrs Venable, it is Catharine who is responsible for Sebastian’s breakdown and death. She exclaims to the Doctor:

I’ll tell you. A poet’s vocation is something that rests on something as thin and fine as the web of a spider, Doctor. That’s all that holds him over! – out of destruction...Few, very few are able to do it alone! Great help is needed. I did give it! She didn’t. (p. 149)

In Mrs Venable’s system of meaning, it is she who was able to prevent Sebastian from yielding to utter mental desolation; she was, in her mind, Sebastian’s life support and spiritual backbone. Even though her behaviour towards Sebastian seems monstrous, domineering and incestuous, according to her it is Catharine who is the “destroyer” (p. 41)
Mrs Venable honestly believes that if it were she who had accompanied Sebastian to Cabeza de Lobo he still would be alive. However, we can only accept Mrs Venable's accusations as a vengeful and grief-stricken diatribe. Regardless of what she says, it is difficult to fathom how anybody, let alone Mrs Venable, could protect Sebastian from destruction. From everything that we are told about Sebastian's sensitive nature, we can only sadly deduce that his self-destruction was inevitable. Furthermore, as the play progresses, it is clearly not Catharine who is the figure of the "destroyer"; it is, in fact, Mrs Venable.

Catharine is aware that her story is shocking and unfathomable but she still has to tell it; she says to her mother, "I know it's a hideous story but it's a true story of our time and the world we live in" (p. 134). However, the truth for Mrs Venable is far too unsettling and she uses a strong discourse of insanity to discredit Catharine's story. In order to convince Dr. Cukrowicz that Catharine should be lobotomised, she calls her a "vandal....with [a] tongue for a hatchet" who has gone around "smashing [the] legend" of her and her son (p. 123). According to Mrs Venable, all Catharine does is simply "babble" (p. 124) a story that is a "hideous attack on [Sebastian's] moral character" (p. 122). When asked by the Doctor what she thinks Catharine's reason is, she replies, "Lunatics don't have reason!" (p. 123).

In explaining Michel Foucault's theories about insanity, McNay points out that madness in a post-enlightenment society has always been associated with "unreason" (1994, p. 27) and that it is therefore "withdrawn from the world and from truth and by that very fact is imprisoned in evil" (1994, p. 23). Mrs Venable employs a powerful discourse that relegates Catharine to the farthest position on the Outside — to the space of 'madness.' By repeatedly reinforcing Catharine's insanity, Mrs Venable undermines the truth of Catharine's story; if Catharine is labelled 'mad,' her story — and its homosexual implications — cannot be true because in the dominant ideology truth and madness do not co-exist. Mrs Venable insists that Catharine's "...lies will collapse — not my truth — not the truth" (p. 115). For Mrs Venable her truth is the truth — in fact, for Mrs Venable to survive, her truth has to be the truth.
For telling the story that she feels compelled to tell, Catharine is at risk of being lobotomised. The reason for Mrs Venable demanding this procedure can be observed in the following exchange:

**DOCTOR:** Well, it will be ten years before we can tell if the immediate benefits of the operation will be lasting or — passing or even if there'd still be — and this is what haunts me about it! — any possibility, afterwards, of — reconstructing a — totally sound person, it may be that the person will always be limited afterwards, relieved of acute disturbances but — limited, Mrs Venable....

**MRS VENABLE:** Oh, but what a blessing to them, Doctor, to be just peaceful, to be just suddenly — peaceful....

*A bird sings sweetly in the garden.*

After all that horror, after those nightmares: just to be able to lift up their eyes and see — *[She looks up and raises a hand to indicate the sky.]* — a sky not as black with savage, devouring birds as the sky that we saw in the Encantadas, Doctor.

**DOCTOR:** Mrs Venable? I can’t guarantee that a lobotomy would stop her — babbling!!

**MRS VENABLE:** That may be, maybe not, but after the operation, who would believe her, Doctor? (p. 125 – 126)

Despite the Doctor’s hesitancy about the long-term benefits of the lobotomy, Mrs Venable remains adamant that the procedure is the only avenue left to take. She is unconcerned about the fact that the operation may result in irrevocably destroying her niece; all that matters to her is that Catharine’s story is thoroughly discredited. Confining Catharine to an asylum and labelling her ‘mad’ is not enough to maintain Mrs Venable’s illusions about her son; she must push Catharine to the very outer limits. Whereas Sebastian sacrificed himself to repent for his sins, Mrs Venable is willing to sacrifice another human life for her own selfish purposes.

One factor that Mrs Venable exploits to her advantage is her financial hold over the family. Mrs Venable holds a dangerous and very real power over Catharine because she has retained her wealthy aristocratic position. When Catharine remarks that Mrs Venable will have to receive her mother’s permission to perform a lobotomy, Mrs Venable exclaims, “Your mother’s dependent on me. All of you are! — Financially....” (p. 139). If Catharine does not stop telling her story, her family risks losing the money that Sebastian has bequeathed to them. Her brother George is enraged that Catharine continues to tell her story:
She's crazy like a coyote!... We won't get a single damn penny, honest t' God we won't! So you've just GOT to stop tellin' that story about what you say happened to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo, even if it's what it couldn't be, TRUE! — You got to drop it, Sister, you can't tell such a story to civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country! (p. 134)

The irony of George's statement is that Mrs Venable represents the "civilized people" that he is talking about, and nothing can really be less "civilized" than Mrs Venable's actions throughout the play. George shows little concern for his sister's plight; in fact, it is only the Doctor that shows Catharine any humanity. George is simply worried that Catharine may prevent him from acquiring Sebastian's money. The horror of this situation is that Catharine risks being destroyed simply because of petty human greed. Catharine may seal her own fate by insisting on her telling story, but it is the nature of her society — as it is with Sebastian — that makes this an unfortunate reality.

At the close of the play, Catharine's future hangs in jeopardy. Even though the Doctor's last line expresses the need to listen to her story, the nature of the society that Williams portrays seems to be so corrupt, greedy and, ironically, 'mad' — It is, after all, Mrs Venable that appears on the verge of insanity when she screams, "Lion's View! State asylum, cut this hideous story out of her brain!" (p. 159) — that we must remain fearful for Catherine's future. The danger for Catharine is that her life will end, like Sebastian's, in violent irreversible destruction.
Chapter 6
Sweet Bird of Youth

In *Sweet Bird of Youth* Williams brings together two Outsiders who are incapable of preventing themselves from being victimised by a brutal and materialistic society. Ravaged by their blind commitment to success, the escalating violence of their environment, and the relentless ticking of the clock, failed actor Chance Wayne and fading movie queen Princess Kosmonopolis become lost in a frightening world.

In a discussion of the "Sensitive and the Predatory" as conflicting forces in Williams' work, Signi Falk classifies Chance Wayne as an example of the "Sensitive" and Alexandra Del Lago (Princess Kosmonopolis) as an example of the "Predatory." Falk writes:

> Williams has always placed his protagonist, a sensitive and lonely individual...in an unfriendly world....he is Chance Wayne, a failed artist who like Val is aware of the enemy time, fleeting youth, and imminent death....The predators, the destructive mammoth figures, take several forms....The predator may be a dominant woman like....the Princess Kosmonopolis. (1978, p. 158 & 159)

This analysis would seem to imply that Chance and the Princess hold a place on opposite ends of the spectrum, where Chance is the typical Williams Outsider and the Princess is the Insider. Gerald Berkowitz, whilst not exactly suggesting that they are opposing forces, does make a similar argument. He claims that, "while Williams can admire the monstrous energy of Alexandra Del Lago as he did Stanley Kowalski, his sympathies are with the doomed Chance Wayne" (1992, p. 97). While acknowledging that there is something monstrous and predatory about the Princess (like Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer*), she is in my opinion an Outsider like Chance, albeit one of a different kind. As Williams hints in a stage direction, it is a play about the "huddling-together of the lost" (p. 109).

At the centre of *Sweet Bird of Youth* is the figure of Chance Wayne, the exiled "criminal degenerate" (p. 22) who is eventually castrated for his sexual misconducts. According to Darryl Haley, in Chance Wayne we observe another retelling of the classic Orpheus myth where Chance, as Orpheus, descends upon a hellish Southern town and...
because he engages in "illicit sex...[he is] punished by yet another corrupt champion of conventional morality" (1999, on-line).

In Act 1 Scene 2, Chance explains to the Princess that there was something 'different' about him from the moment he was born. He remarks:

I was a twelve-pound baby, normal and healthy, but with some kind of quality 'X' in my blood, a wish or a need to be different....The kids that I grew up with are mostly still here and what they call 'settled down', gone into business, married, and bringing up children. (p. 44)

Chance is part of a Southern society that regards such things as going into business, getting married and bringing up children as signifiers of success and achievement. However, he is not interested in submitting to this ideal; it is something that he considers distinctly "square" (p. 85). Chance wants to be part of "THE parade! The parade...[of] boys that go places...not a parade of swabbies on a wet deck" (p. 46).

Yet it is not this sense of being 'different' that necessarily makes him an Outsider in the context of the play. At first glance it may seem that his desire to be a Hollywood star sets Chance up in opposition to the norm – perhaps if he wanted to be an 'artist' as such this would be the case, but Chance only wants the status and 'success' that comes from being a star. The fact is that Chance still wants to be part of mainstream society – he just wants to be greater and better than everybody else. Therefore, in spite of what he says, Chance is not radically 'different'; he just wants to be a heightened version of what is 'normal.' But it is this very dream of success that Chance cannot live up to. Chance is an Outsider not because he wants to be a Hollywood actor, but because he is a failure at actually becoming one.

Chance is destroyed by the very dreams that he tries to realise. Because Boss Finley thinks his daughter, Heavenly, deserves somebody better than him, Chance feels compelled to go out into the world of Hollywood to achieve fame and wealth at any cost. Chance's predicament is that he pursues materialistic success in order to prove his worth as an individual to Heavenly and her father, and ultimately, to himself. However, as Morey-Gaines argues, this type of "harsh materialism...makes men either very big or very small" (1982, p. 94). When Chance is unable to make the 'big-time' he is confronted with his own 'smallness' and experiences a debilitating sense of alienation
and failure. As the Princess remarks, he becomes “Lost in the beanstalk country...the country of the flesh-hungry, blood-thirsty ogre – ” (p. 87 – 88).

When the play begins, Chance is in the process of making one final attempt to secure Hollywood stardom. The desperation of his actions illustrates the extent to which he has been destroyed by his dream of success. Chance has fallen to the very lowest levels; he will do anything, no matter how monstrous, to become famous. He latches on to the Princess Kosmonopolis in order to exploit her stardom and to secure a movie deal for himself and Heavenly - a film that is ironically called “Youth.” But when he blackmails her with the fact that he has recorded an incriminating conversation between them, she retorts, “You are trembling and sweating...you see this part doesn’t suit you, you just don’t play it well, Chance” (p. 40). The pathos of this situation lies in Chance’s clumsy desperation. For whatever reason, Chance has not been able to secure the future he has dreamed of, and he feels his only recourse is to become false, selfish and hard to get what he wants. However, as the Princess comments, Chance is not even able to play the part of the monster; he lacks the ability to be unashamedly nasty. No matter what Chance seems to do, he cannot help but remain on the Outside of a society he very much desires to be part of.

Even though Chance has not achieved success, he arrives in St. Cloud with the intention of showing everybody that he has made a name for himself. To do this he has to create an illusion. He says to the Princess:

I want this big display. Big phony display in your Cadillac around town. And a wad of dough to flash in their faces and the fine clothes you’ve bought me, on me...That’s the deal for tonight, to toot those silver horns and drive slowly around in the Cadillac convertible so everybody that thought I was washed up will see me. (p. 51)

Chance feels the need to prove to everybody in his old hometown that he is not a failure. However, when he enters the Royal Palms Hotel, his illusion of success is undercut by the reality of his destruction. To make it easier for him to lie to everybody, he drinks excessively and continually swallows pills (a habit that reminds one not only of the Princess but of Williams himself). When Aunt Nonnie questions him as to what he washed down with a glass of liquor, he replies, “Yes, I took a wild dream and – washed it down with another wild dream, Aunt Nonnie, that’s my life now....” (p. 73). For
Chance, his entire life has become a miserable travesty of what it should have been, and it is this reality that is scarcely hidden in his conduct. Instead of winning everybody’s admiration, he further alienates himself from them: nobody sings along with him, he speaks too loudly and he insults his past acquaintances. When he tells them that he has landed a major movie deal, they can only look at him “with hostility, suspicion, and a cruel sense of sport” (p. 83). Chance is in such a devastated frame of mind that he can barely maintain the illusion that he has created; he deteriorates among the very people he feels he needs to impress.

The great tragedy of Chance’s pursuit of success is that he adopts any means possible to attempt to achieve it. As Heavenly makes clear to her father:

...so Chance went away. Tried to compete, make himself big as these big-shots you wanted to use me for a bond with. He went. He tried. The right doors wouldn’t open, and so he went in the wrong ones...(p. 63)

In his uncompromising quest to find stardom, Chance becomes a gigolo to the famous. By doing this, he thinks he can eventually achieve his dream of success. However, instead of acquiring his position on the Inside, all Chance is able to obtain is a venereal disease that he passes on to Heavenly. It is this act that results in Boss Finley ordering Chance to be castrated.

Chance’s fatal flaw is that he wants to re-enter a society that now considers him a threat to the purity of the chaste Southern woman. From Boss Finley’s moralistic perspective, Chance is nothing but a sexual degenerate; he is a corrupter of “the pure white blood of the South” (p. 67). But when he is told to leave town, Chance says:

This is my town. I was born in St. Cloud, not him. He was just called here. He was just called down from the hills to preach hate. I was born here to make love. Tell him about that difference between him and me, and ask him which he thinks has more right to stay here (p. 90)

Chance becomes estranged from his hometown because he does not conform to its strict sexual laws. Chance makes the same fatal mistake as Val – he remains in a society that considers him a sexually subversive ‘other.’ However, Chance is different to Val in a very significant way. Chance is not able to redeem Heavenly, like Val does Lady, because he is tainted by the values of the materialist dream. He may be a symbol of sexuality, but it is perverted at its core by his struggle to become an Insider.
Not only is Chance defeated by his inability to reach the heights of success, but he is also destroyed by the violence, hatred and sexual intolerance of the conventional morality. To punish Chance for transgressing the South’s sexual mores and infecting his daughter with a venereal disease, Boss Finley orders that Chance be robbed of the very thing that is considered such a threat — his sexuality. The only way the ‘moral’ enforcers of Saint Cloud can eradicate the danger of Chance’s ‘otherness,’ and in turn reassert their puritanical ideology, is by castrating him.

When Chance accepts his fate of castration, Williams specifies in a stage direction that his “attitude should be self-recognition but not self-pity — a sort of deathbed dignity and honesty apparent in it” (p. 109). In response to this Robert Heilman remarks, “Chance has appeared both so shallow and so preposterous that the self-recognition is hardly plausible in terms of character” (1987, p. 76). It is a statement that I fundamentally disagree with. I would argue that Chance is aware of his situation from the very moment we see him brushing his slightly thinning hair at the beginning of the play and therefore his speeches of self-realisation at the end are perfectly consistent with his character. What Heilman does not acknowledge is that the play in fact dramatises Chance’s attempt to rise above the very acute awareness of his failure; he tries to hide from what he knows deep down. When he says that he has gone past his youth, it is something that he was aware of from the very beginning. It is simply that by the end of the play, with his last attempt at success a miserable failure, Chance can no longer maintain his performance. Chance must finally and permanently accept his status as an Outsider by submitting to the destruction that has been prescribed for him.

Chance Wayne may be the primary Outsider of the play, but Alexandra Del Lago — who uses the alias Princess Kosmonopolis not only to hide from the world but also to give her a sense of illusory status — is also established as an Outsider worthy of our sympathy. She may hold a powerful (however transitory) place within the world of stardom, but she possesses a neurotic sensitivity to her surroundings that sees her cast out of society. As Chance remarks, she is a “nice monster” (emphasis added, p. 27).

In the Princess we observe one of Williams’ most amusing and yet most unsettling depictions of the way the Outsider copes with a reality that is too difficult to endure. At the beginning of the play the Princess wakes up in a state of intense hysteria. As she
struggles for breath, she orders Chance to fetch her oxygen mask. When she tells Chance to hurry because she is dying, we get the impression that this is a woman who is already, in a sense, dead. The Princess is so defeated by her own personal set of anxieties that she needs the aid of an oxygen mask to bring her back to consciousness. Reality is so painful for the Princess that she constantly needs to escape, and she later loses herself in a haze of pills, alcohol, hash and sex. To escape from a situation that disturbs her greatly, the Princess will do everything to forget. When Chance asks her if it is so easy for her to control her memory, she replies, “Yes. I’ve had to learn to” (p. 26).

Despite her desire to forget everything, the Princess eventually does remember the awful event in her life that saw her propelled out of the society she was part of. She explains to Chance that “the legend of Alexandra Del Lago couldn’t be separated from an appearance of youth” (p. 32) and so she stopped starring in films and plays once she saw herself as a middle-aged woman. However, finding out that the only place she could retire to was to the “dead planet the moon” (p. 33), she felt compelled to make a comeback film years later – but she was only confronted with her worst fears. She explains:

> There’s a thing called a close-up. The camera advances and you stand still and your head, your face, is caught in the frame of the picture with a light blazing on it and all your terrible history screams while you smile....after that close-up they gasped....I heard them whisper, their shocked whispers. Is that her....After that? Flight, just flight, not interrupted until I woke up this morning. (p. 34)

This revelation draws into focus the reason behind the Princess’ anguish. Like Williams, who later in his life was obsessed and terrified of getting old (Spoto, 1985, p. 324 – 325, 340 – 341), the Princess experiences a sharp and debilitating depression as she ages. Rather than accept the inevitability of time, she does what so many of Williams’ characters do: she runs. In fact, the Princess cannot conceive of any other solution to her predicament than becoming a fugitive – as she later tells Chance, “after failure comes flight. Nothing ever comes after failure but flight” (p. 93). It is in choosing to run from her situation that she becomes an Outsider, as opposed to Blanche, Val, Carol and Chance who are all forced into exile.

The Princess, however, does not wish to remain apart from the world she has known – the world of stardom, wealth and success. Furthermore, when she wants to, she is
allowed to re-assimilate. Towards the end of the play, when Chance orders her to ring Sally Powers, the Princess actually finds out that the film has broken box office records and that Sally thinks that her talent has grown in depth and power. Upon hearing this she instantly becomes the movie star once again. She says:

...I can't appear, not yet. I'll need a week in a clinic, then a week or ten days at the Morning Star Ranch at Vegas. I'd better get Ackermann down there for a series of shots before I go on to the Coast...I'll leave the car in New Orleans and go on by plane to, to, to - Tuscon. I'd better get Strauss working on publicity for me. I'd better be sure my tracks are covered up well these last few weeks in - hell! (p. 106)

This immediate transition from Outsider to legendary movie star reveals a very important point – the fact that the Princess can so easily shift from a position on the Outside to a position on the Inside reminds us that her initial expulsion from society was in some way self-imposed. The Princess casts herself out of society after feeling she has made a fool of herself but when she learns that she hasn't, she can immediately attempt to reclaim her place on the Inside. For the other Outsiders, however, reassimilation is not that simple.

Even though the play ends with the Princess making her way back to the world of stardom, Williams makes it clear that she will not be able to successfully reintegrate into the world she was part of. In a stage direction Williams writes:

...the Princess is...doomed. She can't turn back the clock any more than can Chance, and the clock is equally relentless for them both. For the Princess: a little, very temporary, return to, recapture of, the spurious glory. The report from Sally Powers may be and probably is a factually accurate report: but to indicate she is going on to further triumph would be to falsify her future. The PRINCESS makes this instinctive admission to herself when she sits down by CHANCE on the bed, facing the audience. Both are faced with castration, and in her heart she knows it. They sit side by side on the bed like two passengers on a train sharing a bench. (p. 109)

I have quoted Williams' stage directions at length because it provides a significant insight into the Princess' plight as an Outsider. Williams' words are strong: like Chance, she is "doomed" and "castrated." Time and age have caught up with her and the effect of it is irreversible. The Princess may be making her way out of the margins and back into the centre but, as Williams shows, this is only an illusory act; inside her heart she will always remain an Outsider to the glory and stardom she once knew.

Of the Princess and Chance, John Lahr writes:
She is a big winner in the American sweepstakes who is terrified of losing; he is a big loser who is terrified that he'll never win. She is trying to hide from the memory of achievement; he is trying to manufacture achievements to hide in. (1996, p. 152)

As Lahr makes clear, the Princess and Chance are at different stages in their quest to be part of the world of stardom. Yet, what links them together as Outsiders is the fact that they are both defeated by the very dreams that sustain their existence.
Conclusion

The tragedy for Williams' Outsiders is that there is something within their nature that predisposes them to an existence that at its best is uncomfortable and at its worst is incredibly painful. Whether it is in the inconsiderate and vengeful masculine world of 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, or the society based on wealth, power and success in Sweet Bird of Youth, Williams' Outsiders cannot function or cope. They are on the Outside of society because they cannot, or will not, or are not allowed to, function within.

However, there are multitudes of ways that the Outsider attempts to escape from their reality, for example; Blanche, Carol and the Princess use sex; Lucretia, Blanche, and perhaps even Flora and Vee surrender to 'madness'; Lucretia, Blanche, Val, Carol, and the Princess play the part of the Williams 'fugitive'; and Blanche, Lady, Carol, Sebastian, Chance and the Princess all use pills and/or alcohol to make things easier to bear. Yet, these techniques for dealing with reality are never entirely adequate; in fact, for nearly all of the Outsiders, in employing these methods their problems are exacerbated.

The only thing that seems to offer any real hope for Williams' Outsiders is the establishment of genuine human connections - Lady and Val, Blanche and Mitch - but in Williams' world, these links are difficult to sustain. In the end, the only way they can retain their human dignity is to search, like Carol does, for 'others' of their kind.

It is incorrect to say that Williams' Outsiders are necessarily against the values of the Inside - interestingly, out of the plays I have looked at, only Carol and Val are deliberately subversive. Blanche, Lucretia, Chance and the Princess all want to be a part of society. It is, to some degree, their failure at doing so that makes them Outsiders. Conversely, the Outsiders are never able to achieve the true nastiness that is required to become a stable presence on the Inside. The Princess cannot stand the monster she has become, Chance cannot become the monster that he has to be, and Sebastian becomes the monster that most frightens him. Even at their worst, Williams' Outsiders still elicit sympathy.

Each Outsider is confronted with a world that is cruel, confusing and corrupt. What is unfortunate is that Williams' Outsiders are unable to rise above their circumstances; they are, by their very nature, doomed to destruction. Even when the
Outsider does in some sense survive (Carol, Princess), there seems to be little room for hope. Perhaps it is in the following epitaph written for Williams by Marlon Brando that we can come closer to understanding why this is the case. Speaking about Williams he wrote:

By the time death came, he had been so close to it so many times, psychologically, emotionally, and physically...If we had a culture that gave full support and assistance to a man of his delicacy, perhaps he would have survived. There is no real solace or cultural support for artists who find it difficult to find root in this culture. (Williams, 1991, Epitaph)

The same thing could be said about Williams' Outsiders. All of them endure lives that linger closely to death and destruction. Many of course find the ultimate destruction in death: Sebastian, Lady, Val and Papa Romano. But even for those that do not find death, life is at any rate very close to it, or they find a near enough version of it: Flora, Lucretia, Blanche, Catharine, Chance, and the Princess.

When Brando remarks that there is no cultural support for artists he may as well be referring to all of Williams' Outsider protagonists – not just the artists but also the Southern women, the weak, the mad, the sexually different, the strange, and the failures. If his characters inhabited a different society – one more free and open to the complexities of the human spirit – there perhaps could have been some chance for happiness and survival.
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