“Who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?” Tennessee Williams and Julia Margaret Cameron’s Theatrical Portraits of Women

Jennifer M. Klug
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Klug, Jennifer M., ""Who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?" Tennessee Williams and Julia Margaret Cameron’s Theatrical Portraits of Women" (2018). Masters Theses. 904.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/904

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters' Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
“Who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?”
Tennessee Williams and Julia Margaret Cameron’s Theatrical Portraits of Women

Jennifer M. Klug

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

Department of English

August 2018
Abstract

In the production notes preceding *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams said:

“Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance.” In spite of Williams’s emphasis on the limitations of literal representation, some of his most famous female characters were created in a tradition similar to that of portraits of women by the Victorian-era photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. Both Cameron and Williams made portraits of women that encouraged an understanding of and allowance for multiple truths. This thesis explores the parallels between Williams’s theatrical “portraits” and Cameron’s “theatrical” portraits, and demonstrates that both artists empowered women characters with the ability to perform truth that is much larger than (and frequently contradicts) that which is “merely present in appearance.” This discussion examines the visual techniques that Cameron used in her portrait photographs in order to illuminate the ways Williams built similar performances in his scripts, and then tracks women characters from four of Williams’s plays—“Portrait of a Madonna,” *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*—tracing a progression of their power through their dialogue, Williams’s stage directions, and his writings about the characters and plays.
# Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 5  
Chapter One: “Portrait of a Madonna” .................................................................................................. 16  
Chapter Two: *A Streetcar Named Desire* ................................................................................................ 36  
Chapter Three: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* ............................................................................................... 75  
Chapter Four: *Sweet Bird of Youth* .................................................................................................... 98  
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 123  
Appendix .................................................................................................................................................. 130  
Works Cited ............................................................................................................................................... 140
Introduction

Julia Margaret Cameron. *Beatrice*. 1866.

In the production notes preceding *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams said:

“Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present
in appearance” (395). In spite of Williams’s emphasis on the limitations of literal representation—the “photographic”—he worked within a tradition of portraits of women such as those by photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. Cameron and Williams had no connection to each other; they are separated by a century and worked in different media, and there is no indication that Williams was aware of Cameron’s work. Nevertheless, both artists created portraits of women that encouraged an understanding of and allowance for multiple truths. Exploring the parallels between Williams’s theatrical “portraits” and Cameron’s “theatrical” portraits demonstrates that both artists empowered women characters with the ability to perform truth that is much larger than (and frequently contradicts) that which is “merely present in appearance.” Cameron’s visual techniques revealed in her photographs illuminate the ways Williams built similar performances in his scripts. The source of Williams’s women characters’ power is their ability to perform and embody more than one truth; the progression of this power is recognized through four characters: Lucretia in the one-act play “Portrait of a Madonna,” Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire, Maggie in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Princess in Sweet Bird of Youth. Their dialogue and stage directions, along with Williams’s writings about the characters and plays, demonstrates a chronological path of increasing and then decreasing power for these women.

To set the stage for the discussion of Cameron’s and Williams’s work, some background from theorist Roland Barthes will be helpful, particularly The Pleasure of the Text and Camera
In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes establishes that in an “open” text, the reader is invited to come in and make meaning, but for there to be that level of interaction, Barthes says that “[t]he text you write must prove to me that it desires me” (6). When there is a two-way desire on the part of the reader (or viewer) and the author (or photographer), then the reader can enter into an opening in the text and create meaning. Barthes compares texts to bodies and says the openings are “*where the garment gapes* . . . the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing . . .” He says it is “this flash itself which seduces” (9-10), and the result of that seduction is what he refers to as “bliss,” which is different from mere “pleasure”: “Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts . . . , unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions . . .” (14). Pleasure, then, can happen in an easy, comfortable way. It can cause a reader to be contented or even euphoric, but it does not challenge her current ways of understanding; it is comfortable. Bliss, however, is an uncomfortable way of reading in that it challenges one’s assumptions. Bliss occurs when a reader is pushed to reconsider things she may prefer to leave undisturbed: her “historical, cultural, psychological” assumptions.

In *Signs and Images*, Barthes names photographs as Text: “But the Photograph is neither a painting nor . . . a photograph; it is as Text, that is to say, it is a complex—extremely complex—meditation on meaning” (105) (original ellipses). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes uses the

---

1 It is worth repeating Geoff Dyer’s warning in the foreword to *Camera Lucida* here: “To copy out and formalize Barthes’s argument is not simply to diminish it, but to rob it of its many subtleties as to misrepresent it entirely (all in the name of representing it more clearly and rigorously)” (xiv). It is, in fact, nearly absurd to try to summarize Barthes. To take out pieces of his criticism certainly does “diminish” it, since Barthes says things so gorgeously (even in translation). Here, Barthes’s theories are used only to establish a precedence for reading photographs as texts, and to make the connection between an open text, the experience of “bliss,” the power of a portrait (photographic or literary) to wound us, and to make us consider the ways we interpret all texts. To do justice to Barthes in a brief summary is not possible, and this paper certainly does not pretend to try to do so.
Latin terms “studium” and “punctum” instead of “pleasure” and “bliss,” but there is a relationship between the two sets of terms. In his consideration of why some photos move him and some do not, Barthes says that some images “provoked tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself (16); “tiny jubilations” certainly sound like something that could be caused by bliss. Barthes defines the *studium* of a photograph as its field, “which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture; this field can be more or less stylized, more or less successful, depending on the photographer’s skill or luck, but it always refers to a classical body of information . . .” (25-26). Like the pleasure in a written text, a *studium* may be interesting (or it may not be), but it does not challenge the viewer.

Barthes goes on to say that many photos are “inert,” and even among those that are not, “most provide only a general and, so to speak, polite interest: they have no *punctum* in them: they please or displease me without pricking me: they are invested with no more than *studium*” (27). In other words, most photographs do not move a viewer to the degree of bliss; most photographs are too “polite” to push that hard. Most photographs are what Williams calls “photographic.” They record what is already there in front of the camera. Barthes says these *studium*-only photographs are endowed with “functions,” which are “to inform, to represent, to

---

2 It is significant that when he is talking about reading a photograph, the opening, or the site of the “erotic,” is in himself, not in the text. For Barthes, the meaning that is made in viewing a photograph comes from within; it is not present without him. This is a matter for another paper, but it is noted here as a significant difference Barthes seems to assign between photography and written texts.

3 Unlike Williams, Barthes does assign some value to the “photographic” cataloging of information. Speaking of the level of detail in a photographic image, Barthes says this: “Photography can tell me much better than painted portraits. It allows me to accede to an infra-knowledge; it supplies me with a collection of partial objects and can flatter a certain fetishism of mine: for this “me” which likes knowledge, which nourishes a kind of amorous preference for it” (30). Captured details are not only valuable, they “[nourish] an amorous preference.” Provoking his amorous appreciation is not necessarily an indication of bliss, or of the presence of a *punctum*, however.
surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire⁴,” and as a viewer, “I recognized them with more or less pleasure: I invest them with my *studium* (which is never my delight or my pain)” (28) — or his bliss. In order to cause bliss, a “second element” is required to “break (or punctuate) the *studium*.” He refers to the *studium* as an “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26). Barthes says that *punctum* is also a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). In an extended discussion about the difference between pornography and an erotic photograph, Barthes revisits the idea of the *punctum*. He says that an erotic photograph, like other photographs that make the viewer feel something, “. . . takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see” (59). An emphasis on that which is “beyond” what we are “[permitted] to see” is at the heart of the portraits we will examine here. A representation of a woman’s truth which can persuade an audience to accept more than (or other than) that which is visually present, or present on the surface, is powerful. Cameron and Williams both give us women who are simultaneously themselves and also more, and they do so in a way that Barthes’s discussion of photography theorized was possible.

Ironically, it was by calling attention to what *was* visible that Cameron signaled her audience to be aware of what was not visible. Through theatrical techniques such as elaborate costumes, dramatic lighting, and textures that marked the surface of her prints, Cameron called attention to the constructed nature of her images, and did so at a time when photography was still in its early days. A debate raged over whether or not it was a technological process, an art, or

---

⁴ In this context, “provoke desire” refers to the sort of photography used in advertising; it does not refer to the sort of desire for a two-way meaning-making intercourse that Barthes refers to elsewhere.
both. Cameron used the wet collodian process to create her images, a technology invented by Frederick Scott Archer in 1851. This process allowed for the creation of glass negatives, which could be used to create several prints—or “performances”—from one negative. Consider the image at the beginning of this section, titled Beatrice, from 1866. Cameron’s image is working on multiple levels, as so many of her portraits of women do. The title of the image refers to the lead character in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s drama The Cenci. Immediately upon viewing the image and the title, there are two levels of meaning, or two identities which are simultaneously present. Most viewers would not know the model’s name (May Princep)\textsuperscript{5} or her biographical relation to Cameron (she was Cameron’s niece), but a contemporary audience would probably have been familiar with Shelley’s work and would understand that the model was playing a role. She is presented not as the biographical May Princep, but as the tragic character Beatrice. Nevertheless, the nature of a photograph insists that a viewer is simultaneously aware of the biographical reality of the model. For Barthes, this is the what sets photography apart from all other forms of art:

\textellipsis in Photography I can never deny that \textit{the thing has been there}. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the \textit{noeme} of Photography. What I intentionalize in a photograph \textellipsis is neither Art not Communication, it is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography. The name of Photography’s \textit{noeme} will therefore be: “That-has-been,” or again: the Intractable. (76-77)

\textsuperscript{5} A note on names: due to the facts that Cameron’s maid and model Mary Hillier frequently posed as Mary the Virgin, and that two of our later sitters share with Cameron the first name Julia, I will use first and last names to identify sitters throughout this discussion.
Victoria C. Olsen refers to this battle between literal and narrative in *From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron and Victorian Photography*, when she discusses to the “. . . tension between the inescapable reality of Cameron’s models, props, and locations and the fictional narratives that they are supposed to embody . . .” (23). It may not be possible to view a portrait without an awareness of the subject as a person who existed in a moment of time; her existence is the “intractable.” There is always an awareness of “that-has-been,” or in this case, she-has-been. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag addresses the reality of the subject as well as the insistent presence of the photographer. She says photographs are “. . . a record of the real—incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be—since a machine was doing the recording. And they [bear] witness to the real—since a person had been there to take them” (26). May Princep was a real woman, and we do not lose track of her “real” self even while we view her portrait/performance as a character from another narrative. The tension between who she was and who she poses as is part of the nature of the art of photography, but it is also part of what the photograph asks us to consider. At the same time, Cameron as Artist is also present since a photograph always captures the photographer’s point of view. Consideration of this portrait becomes complex: We see a real woman who is performing as fictional female character. We are aware that this is a moment that took place in the past, and from the point of view of someone specific—in this case, Cameron. Our reading shifts between these multiple levels of conversation: Meaning vacillates, to use a term from Barthes.

---

6 For Barthes and for others such as Susan Sontag, the nature of “this-has-been” makes portrait photography always about death, at least partially. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes says, “. . . the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past (“this-has-been”), the photograph suggests that it is already dead.” In *On Photography*, Sontag says, “Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos . . . All photographs are *memento mori* . . . Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (15).
Cameron used various theatrical techniques in order to keep the viewer aware of the performative and constructed nature of the image. Much of the criticism and scholarship about Cameron’s work is preoccupied with her characteristic “soft focus.” Olsen says, “Critics and photographers either admired Cameron’s obvious efforts to draw on Renaissance portraiture or they reviled her technical abilities. Many felt that her work was not soft-focus but out of focus, due to her supposed ineptitude with a camera” (4). This image Beatrice is an example of how focus in Cameron’s images directs the viewer. One half of the sitter’s face is in relatively sharp focus, but the sharpest focus is on the wave and texture of her hair. This may be partly because it is a beautiful and visually-appealing detail, but it may also have something to do with how a Victorian audience would interpret unbound hair: as an indication of youth, or perhaps wildness, or sexuality. In her analysis of Cameron’s work, Sylvia Wolf acknowledges that at least initially, Cameron’s variable focus may have been due to some technical issues that were beyond her control:

During the first two years of her career, she made 9-by-11-inch plates and utilized a lens with a short focal length. This yielded an image in which only one shallow plane would be in sharp focus and the rest of the image would fall off into progressive blurriness. For example, a sitter’s eye might be in focus, but her nose, hair, or garment would not. (33) Cameras of that time also required long exposure times, and Cameron’s technique of limiting the light to make it come from one direction rather than flooding the scene with all available lights also meant that her exposures were much longer. Wolf again: “Cameron’s exposures could take up to seven minutes. A model’s breathing or slight body movement were, therefore, recorded as motion on film, further adding to the diffusion of the image” (33). Regardless of how Cameron landed on her technique, it became characteristic of her vision. As Wolf says, “[h]ad she been
dissatisfied with the result, she could have changed cameras or photographed her subjects differently” (33); however, the soft focus allowed Cameron to inscribe her image with a visual reminder of the constructedness. Her portraits are not presented the way our eye sees. The selective focus allows Cameron to direct the viewer’s eye where she wants emphasis, and also reminds us that we are not looking at “real life.” This is a constructed performance. The shallow focus along with the spots, scratches, marks, chemical stains, and other “imperfections” of the print make a viewer unable to look “through” the performance to see only May Prinsep. Cameron’s work moves beyond photography’s ability to give us “that-has-been.” Wolf tells us that Cameron’s contemporaries “condemned her for exhibiting photographs with spots and smears on them: one successful contemporary coolly pointed out that ‘it is not the mission of photography to produce smudges.’ Her colleagues argued that photography was a mechanical process in which technical perfection should supersede any artistic intentions” (Olsen 5). But Cameron was after more than a mechanical reproduction of what was in front of the lens; she was not any more interested in mere verisimilitude (photographic) than Williams was.

In much the same way that Cameron’s photographs call out to a viewer to remain aware of their constructed nature, Williams used innovative and non-traditional theatrical techniques to remind a theater audience that what they were watching was more than “real life.” In his introduction to The Norton Anthology of Drama, Peter Simon called this development “an expressive or ‘subjective’ stage realism that presented the theatrical categories of present and past, here and there, exterior and interior with poetic fluidity” (74). In other words, these techniques allowed movement between multiple realities. Williams’s characters embody truths that are larger than and sometimes directly contradict their “historical” stories. Lucretia in “Portrait of a Madonna” is a single spinster who imagines—and presents—herself as a raped and
pregnant woman: She is performing an alternate reality. Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* has a history of being both married and sexually active outside of marriage, but she performs as a pure woman who has followed the expectations of her time and class. Maggie (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) and Princess (*Sweet Bird of Youth*) also perform as other than they are, with different levels of success. In order to lead an audience to understand and accept both a “real truth” and a “performed truth,” Williams needed a new kind of theater that would allow an audience to see more than that which was present on the surface. What Cameron accomplished with selective focus and visual noise on her prints and negatives, Williams accomplished with other theatrical techniques. He employed the use of creative lighting (such as lantern slides and wild colors), music and other sound techniques, stage devices such as scrims which allowed an audience to see through walls and other divisions, and included performative language in all the “extras” in his scripts (stage directions, scene descriptions, introductions, forewords, afterwords, and interjections). All these tools were employed to suggest a division between what is literal and what is subjective—one in which the “real” is not always privileged.

In a published letter from 1948 to critic Eric Bentley, Williams defended the use of these techniques, which he worried critics had not yet caught up with: “. . . I have read criticism in which the use of transparencies and music and subtle lighting effects, which are often as meaningful as pages of dialogue, were dismissed as ‘cheap tricks and devices’. Actually all of these plastic things are as valid instruments of expression in the theatre as words . . .” (Letters 203). In his autobiography, director Elia Kazan, who worked with Williams on some of his most successful theatrical productions (and movies), quotes a letter Williams sent him about directing *Streetcar*: “Finding a director aside from yourself who can bring this play to life exactly as if it were happening in real life is going to be a problem. But that is the kind of direction it has to
have. I don’t necessarily mean ‘realism’; sometimes a living quality is caught better by
expressionism than what is supposed to be realistic treatment” (330). Williams, like Cameron,
knew that realistic representation is not always the most effective way to get at the truth of a
narrative or a character. Theatrical techniques could be “as meaningful as pages of dialogue.”

Kazan was speaking of actors in the following quote, but it applies just as well to other
kinds of artists, such as photographers and playwrights, and it speaks to the “bliss” that Barthes
says can sometimes be provoked by a text. This comes after Kazan has named some of the
greatest actor performances he knows of, and what set them apart from everything else:

. . . because the actors—whether by technique or by accident—gave you pieces of their
lives, which is certainly the ultimate generosity of the artist, and they did it unabashed.
You were the witness to a final intimacy. These artists spoke to your secret self, the one
you hide. They offered you more than cleverness or technique: they gave you the genuine
thing, the thing that hurt you as it thrilled you. (146)

Cameron and Williams both accomplished this in different ways: they give us “the genuine
thing,” in all its multiplicity, which causes bliss as it hurts and thrills. Learning to read and allow
for performed truth is hard. It is easier by far to read the surface only, to accept as true and
singular the biographical or historical facts of a person, rather than to consider and value other
possible interpretations. To make room for each other’s performances, to accept the possibility of
truths other than the obvious ones—this is unsettling. Nevertheless, it is just this kind of bliss
that Cameron and Williams ask us to work toward.
Chapter One

“Portrait of a Madonna”

Julia Margaret Cameron. *Madonna with Two Children*. 1864.

Julia Margaret Cameron’s photograph *Madonna with Two Children* is an image from early in her career. Taken in 1864, it is one of her first successes, and while in some ways it already displays many of the hallmarks of Cameron’s work, in this image we can see her artistic vision still taking shape.
This is one of many images where Cameron posed her maid Mary Hillier as the Madonna. One of the aspects of the image that is immediately evident (after the model’s almost-direct gaze) is the extent of Cameron’s interaction with the print. The halo above Mary’s head has been scratched into the image, with no attempt to disguise the fact. This sort of direct manipulation of a print or negative is not something that Cameron would rely upon as she matured as an artist; she would find other, more subtle ways of creating the same effect, but like Tennessee Williams’s intentionally non-realistic theatrical techniques, this is a cue to the viewer—*remember, this is a construct*. This image does not present itself to be read as a visual recreation of the literary or historical Virgin Mary, or a recreation of a painting or sculpture of Mary, although it does refer to those traditions in the way she is represented. This artwork is meant to be viewed as a model posing—and being posed—as the Madonna. The etched halo is a visual prompt to remember the presence of an artist-creator, in order to encourage consideration of role-playing and artistic creation, and the multi-voiced nature of that pursuit. The text of the photograph invites us to consider the multiple interactions. A woman who is not the Mother of Jesus is posing as the Mother of Jesus, for our viewing. The carved halo reminds us that she is not Mary, while it also calls our attention to the hand of the artist, which is another layer of the conversation—that which occurs between the artist and the viewer. The model does not *quite* seem to be looking at the viewer; she appears to be looking at the photographer, which is another layer of interaction. There are at least three channels of conversation, then: model/viewer, artist/viewer, artist/model. We will not consider the other figures in the image for now, apart from mentioning that their presence adds more layers of interactions (the children between each other, the children to Mary (the Virgin and Hillier), the children to the viewer, the children to the artist). As Joanne Lukitsh said in her book *Julia Margaret Cameron*, “The portrait is a
performance—Cameron as mother and writer—revealing her understanding even then of the possibilities of invention in front of the camera” (3). This is a “performance” and an “invention.” This image is not “photographic” (Williams’s dismissive word) photography. The goal of this photograph is not verisimilitude, although that was a common theme during the time, and an impediment to reading photography as art even now. Photographs are literal images of things that exist in the world, so one of the easiest ways to judge them is by how “accurate” they are, or how faithfully they capture the literal reality in front of the lens. In a reaction to losing a photography contest in 1865, Cameron was delightfully sarcastic about this limiting view of photography:

    The picture that did receive the prize, called ‘Brenda,’ clearly proved to me that the detail of table-cover, chair and crinoline skirt were essential to judges of the art, which was then in its infancy. Since that miserable specimen, the author of ‘Brenda’ has so greatly improved that I am content to compete with him and content that those who value fidelity and manipulation should find me still behind him. (Hamilton 13)

Mere fidelity is not what Cameron valued. She was not trying to capture, or trap, or reproduce the reality of what was in front of the camera. She was using the camera and her models (actors) to invent. Cameron is telling a story, creating a narrative, staging a performance. The “imperfections” of the image (evident erosion of the negative in the corners, apparent chemical stains across the bottom, variable focus) insist that we remain aware that we are looking at a staging. The way the image lifts away in the corners creates dimension and opening, and reads as an invitation to go inside or behind the surface to make meaning—or more, suggests that there is meaning to be made behind the surface of the image.
Cameron’s Madonnas with Two Children is the kind of image Roland Barthes would call subversive. In Camera Lucida, Barthes claims “Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks” (38). Barthes never quite goes in the direction a reader expects, and the unexpected curve here is that the photograph does not inspire pensiveness on the part of a viewer—photography itself is pensive. For a photograph to be pensive, it must be aware of itself. It is an active text, a two-way conversation between the creator and the viewer or reader. In Barthesian terms, being “pensive” means moving beyond the unary. Barthes defines a “unary photograph” as one which consists of a studium which is not pierced by a punctum, and says these types of photos are “the most widespread in the world.” He continues:

In generative grammar, a transformation is unary if, through it, a single series is generated by the base: such are the passive, negative, interrogative, and emphatic transformations. The Photograph is unary when it emphatically transforms “reality” without doubling it, without making it vacillate (emphasis is a power of cohesion): no duality, no indirection, no disturbance. (40-41)

Cameron’s photographs, then, like the Williams plays we will discuss, are subversive in that they are not unary. These works do not function as bases that generate a single anything. Cameron’s photographs, like Williams’s plays, are “pensive” in the sense that they contain multitudes, and those multitudes are allowed to exist simultaneously even if they contradict one other. They “vacillate” between narratives, between realities, between truths, between conversations. There is no single “emphasis” that creates “cohesion.” Mary Hillier is Mary Hillier and the Madonna, the same way Lucretia in “Portrait of a Madonna” is herself and, to some degree at least, the narrative she creates. These women are their literal selves at the same time they are the role they
play, and both identities are emphatic, present, insistent. The image demands that we remain aware of both. The scratched-in halo is an insistent reminder to the viewer she is a performance, not a factual record.

Lukitsh asserts that the emphasis on performed representation in Cameron’s Madonna photos is evidence of Cameron’s subversiveness. She says that initially, the images appear to “conform with the expectations of the Victorian woman,” in the sense that they seem to “properly contain woman’s sexuality within a space of holy motherhood.” Further analysis, however, uncovers a Barthesian vacillation: “The images, which are often literally blurred, move metaphorically between categories, smearing the lines between sexual and not-sexual, male and female, earthly and heavenly. They move like an apparition, leaving the viewer perplexed about what has been seen” (47). That sense of movement, or of leaving a viewer “perplexed,” extends the viewer’s engagement and allows these images to function as a performance, inviting us to consider the unsteady nature of these roles.

Like Cameron’s portrait of a Madonna, Williams’s “Portrait of a Madonna” came early in his career but already contained themes that would continue to be important to him. The one-act tells the story of a woman who has been living alone in an apartment for many years. She has come to believe that Richard, her former beau, has been breaking into her apartment and raping her. She has called the building manager for help, and he has sent up the Porter and the Elevator Boy to talk to her while a doctor is called. After she tells her story to the sympathetic Porter and sarcastic Elevator Boy, a doctor arrives with a nurse to take her to an asylum.

Williams’s writing about “Portrait of a Madonna” is limited. There is no introduction to the play, no essay between revised versions, very little mention in published letters to or from Williams. From his Notebooks, all we have is from Monday, March 11, 1940: “Wrote a one-act
‘Portrait of a Madonna’ which may be kinda good” (101). Unlike the heroines of other plays discussed here, Miss Lucretia Collins did not garner much attention or additional written analysis from Williams. When he does mention the play in his Memoirs, it is only in the context of seeing Jessica Tandy perform the role of Lucretia, which led him to consider her for A Streetcar Named Desire.7

In the autobiography Elia Kazan: A Life, the famous actor, director and Williams-collaborator also has little to say about “Portrait of a Madonna.” He calls Madonna “Tennessee’s sketch for Streetcar,” and says that Lucretia was “a first drawing of Blanche” (340). Whether or not Lucretia was his first drawing is hard to say; it seems like Williams wrote a lot of versions of Blanche before he wrote the Blanche we know. It is true, however, that Lucretia was Blanche-like. The two heroines share many traits and a similar fate, although Lucretia is more confused and has less power than Blanche. Lucretia reacts and tries to make sense out of her world, but she has no power to impose an alternate truth on anyone else, while Blanche bends the facts and perception to get at a truth. For the first half of Madonna, at least, the reader is not sure that Lucretia Collins understands the difference between literal facts and the story she creates for herself.

Although we do not have a wealth of stage directions or a poetic introduction in the voice of the creator, Williams is definitely giving us commentary (or at least foreshadowing) with his naming. The title of the play contains the word “Madonna,” and “Lucretia” is a nod to the classical story of a rape victim.8 Like Cameron’s maid/virgin/mother/saint, Lucretia is multiple.

---

7 In an interview in the collection A Look at Tennessee Williams by Mike Steen, Jessica Tandy expresses her opinion of “Portrait of a Madonna” and it’s more than Williams’s assessment of maybe “kinda good.” “Madonna is really a superb play. It’s got everything in it. It’s a perfect little jewel of a play” (178).

8 In Roman tradition, Lucretia (or Lucrece) was a noblewoman whose rape and subsequent suicide triggered the rebellion that overthrew the Roman monarchy and led to the creation of the Republic. The Lucretia legend is featured in the work of Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare and others.
The contradiction between of her story (victim of rape) and the way she is perceived (spinster/virgin) is established in the names of the one-act and the lead character.

Williams’s setting notes are utilitarian: “The living room of a moderate-priced city apartment. The furnishings are old-fashioned and everything is in a state of neglect and disorder. There is a door in the back wall to a bedroom, and on the right to the outside hall” (346). These directions are practical and brief, especially contrasted with the elaborate, poetic direction in other works, such as A Streetcar Named Desire and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. The words “neglect and disorder” serve to set a tone, but there is nothing in this language to indicate that the directions are meant to function on any level other than the evident purpose of communicating information for the cast and crew who would stage a production. Later in his career, Williams will use stage directions as an increasingly-direct way of speaking directly to a reader, but in this early work, his directions are shorter and more traditional.

His description of the character of Lucretia Collins is similarly brief compared to descriptions in some of his later works. His notes on Lucretia do establish an understanding of her, but these notes could be for the actor or the director, and are quite literal: “Her hair is arranged in curls that would become a young girl and she wears a frilly negligee which might have come from an old hope chest of a period considerably earlier” (346). We understand that her hair is inappropriately youthful for her age, and that her clothes are “frilly” and dated. Those facts are important for establishing her character, but any production of the play could reasonably communicate these traits without the audience having access to Williams’s words.

When the play opens, Lucretia Collins calls the manager of her building. She appears to be having a conversation with a man in her bedroom, although the script has already identified her as a “spinster.” We learn through her phone conversation that she sees herself as a “good
woman” as defined by church expectations, but she also seems to be describing a sexual interaction with an unwelcome male visitor:

I’ve refrained from making any complaint because of my connections with the church. I used to be assistant to the Sunday School superintendent and I once had the primary class. I helped them put on the Christmas pageant. I made the dress for the Virgin and Mother, made robes for the Wise Men. Yes, and now this has happened, I’m not responsible for it, but night after night after night this man has been coming into my apartment and—indulging his senses! Do you understand? Not once but repeatedly, Mr. Abrams! I don’t know whether he comes in the door or the window or up the fire-escape or whether there’s some secret entrance they know about at the church, but he’s here now, in my bedroom, and I can’t force him to leave, I’ll have to have some assistance! (346-47)

The man that Lucretia describes as “indulging his senses” is Richard, the man she loved and expected to marry. With Lucretia’s first speech, the audience (reader) already knows there is a conflict between reality and Lucretia’s narrative. It seems unlikely that a man has somehow managed through mysterious means to gain entry to her bedroom and take advantage of her, but to hear her tell it, this ravishing been going on “repeatedly” in spite of the fact that she used to teach Sunday school. She identifies herself as both extremes—a good, church-going woman, and a sexually-active, unmarried woman. She even implies there may be a Church-based conspiracy to give Richard access to her. She seems to believe the narrative she creates, at least for now—a marked difference from latter heroines such as Blanche and Maggie. Lucretia is not acting strategically. She is not creating or manipulating her narrative in order to gain power or to deceive anyone. The thing that makes her a figure more to be pitied than other complex women
characters is that the only person she is actually able to deceive is herself, and even those results are mixed. While we might admire her ability to stick with such an implausible story, she is not located in a position of power. Throughout the play she comes across as hysterical and delusional. We sympathize with her, and we may be “on her side,” but she fails to wield any real power the way other characters in Williams’s works do.

After his discussion with Miss Collins, Mr. Abrams sends up the Porter and an Elevator Boy, with the instructions to “Stay here an’ keep a watch on ‘er till they git here” (347). In the initial dialogue between the Porter and the Elevator Boy, Williams sets up two ways of viewing our heroine. The Porter is sympathetic and gentle in his approach. The Elevator Boy is snarky and sarcastic. The play establishes sympathy for Lucretia Collins by aligning the negative interpretation of this admittedly strange heroine with a character who alienates the audience/reader through sarcasm. When the Porter and Elevator Boy are called to Miss Collins’s apartment, the Elevator Boy reveals where his interest lies: “Holy Jeez. I wonner if she’s got money stashed around here” (349). The Porter explains that Miss Collins has been living there for 25 or 30 years, and only goes out for church services or meetings. The Elevator Boy says, “I didn’t know that she’d been nuts that long.” The Porter responds with ambiguity that is representative of Williams’s theatrical world view: “Who’s nuts an’ who ain’t? If you ask me the world is populated with people that’s just as peculiar as she is.” There is an echo here of Cameron’s words to her mentor Sir John Herschel, in a letter from December of 1864, quoted by Colin Ford: “What is focus—& who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?” (Ford

---

9 Much has been written comparing Lucretia both to Blanche DuBois and to Alma Winemiller from The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, but Roger Boxill compares the Elevator Boy (Frank) to another character from Streetcar: “Frank, the ‘smarty pants’ of an elevator boy, opposes Lucretia’s wishful delusion with harsh reality. . . . In his lack of comprehension, his normal sexual vigour, his vulgarity and his mocking sense of humour, Frank is to Lucretia the beginning of what Stanley is to Blanche” (41).
Focus/sanity is variable; it vacillates. As we will see in this and other works, the person who holds the power determines which focus is permitted.

Their dialogue continues when the Porter points out that other people who have done far more damage have not been imprisoned: “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. They kill millions of people and go scot free!” To the Porter, Lucretia is to be pitied; he does not deny that she’s “peculiar,” but to him, the critical point is that her “illusions” are not hurting anyone. To the Elevator Boy, though, what matters is that she is “disgusting” for imagining sex: “An ole woman like her is disgusting, though, imaginin’ somebody’s raped her” (349). To this character, an older woman’s sexuality is so repugnant that she should be locked up; she deserves it even more, maybe, than the Nazis. In future plays, Williams’s way of handling this battle between truth and untruth, sanity and madness, chastity and sexuality will be more nuanced, but in this early work, the themes are already here. One of the concepts we will see again is that a woman’s sexuality is threatening.

When Lucretia joins the two men in the room, the stage directions describe her in this way: “Her appearance is that of a ravaged woman. She leans exhaustedly in the doorway, hands clasped over her flat, virginal bosom” (349-50). However, this virginal spinster presents herself as a “ravaged woman.” Lucretia is playing a role, and the audience is meant to be as aware of that as they are of the fact that the role of Miss Collins is being played by an actor. Part of the message is this is a play in which an actor acts a character who acts a role. The text of the performance is partly about acting or role playing, in the same way that when we see Julia Margaret Cameron’s model Mary Hillier playing the Madonna, we are meant to understand that we are not looking at the real Virgin Mary; we are looking at a photograph (construct) of a
woman who is playing the role of the Virgin Mary. (It is interesting to compare Miss Collins’s performance to that of Mary Hillier’s Virgin in other portraits such as *Blessing and Blessed* (Appendix A) and *Goodness* (Appendix B). Hillier is “playing” the Virgin but she is distinctly not-virginal, at least when it comes to bosom-representation. In this two-way conversation about what someone *is* versus how she presents herself, even bust-lines have the opportunity to simultaneously play a role and subvert it.)

In the conversation between Miss Collins, the Porter and the Elevator Boy that follows, it becomes even more clear that the character we are meant to sympathize with is Miss Collins. The Porter treats her with respect; the stage directions use “kindly” and “gently” (350) to describe the way he talks to her. The Elevator Boy, however, continues to be sarcastic and insensitive even when he is speaking directly to her rather than just about her. When they ask her if “the man” is still there, she says no. The Elevator Boy asks if he went out the window. “I seen a guy who could do that once. He crawled straight up the side of a building. They called him The Human Fly! Gosh, that’s a wonderful publicity angle, Miss Collins—‘Beautiful Young Society Lady Raped by The Human Fly!’” (351). It is not funny, and we are not meant to be amused. Compared to the kind and gentle Porter, the Elevator Boy is cruel and immature. He is not wrong that Lucretia’s suggestion that a man came in through mysterious means, raped her and escaped out the window of a top floor is unbelievable, but to mock her is cruel, which makes an audience unlikely to sympathize with him. This pits the audience against what is literally true. We side with the Porter and Miss Collins, emotionally backing a narrative that we know could not have occurred. In this battle between what Lucretia presents as true and what must actually be true, the script invites us to land on the side of the “untrue truth.” This is typical of Williams, and he will do the same thing in future plays. His women characters, such as Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar*
*Named Desire* and Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, create narratives that are not literally, factually true and are simultaneously more valid, more *true*, than reality.

There is a photograph on the mantle which triggers Lucretia’s memory and recounting of the facts of her past with her lost love, Richard. “That’s the picture, the one in the silver frame up there on the mantel,” she says. She tells of Richard disappearing with a woman who behaved like “a common little strumpet” and came back with a skirt “—covered with—grass stains! Did you ever hear of something as outrageous!” (351). When she looks at the photograph here, it seems to trigger her memory and she “reads” the past in a literal way. In this instance, the photograph is an artifact—a tie to a factually accurate narrative from the past. This is one of the few times in the play when Lucretia seems lucid, as if her ability to read the photograph grounds her more firmly in historical truth rather than a recreation of what she thinks could have happened, or perhaps should have happened. Given Williams’s tendency to dismiss the photographic as a mere recording of reality, it is interesting that here that function of a photograph grounds Lucretia, however temporarily.

The following conversation with the Elevator Boy reveals how Miss Collins keeps her version of reality safe from the historical/photographic version. The Elevator Boy asks her which person in the photograph is Richard, and then quips, “Quite a Romeo—1910 model, huh?” Lucretia does not respond to his words, but seems to reimagine the interaction as if the boy had complimented her dress, which would work better in her present, alternative narrative, in which she still has a relationship of sorts with Richard. She says “vaguely,” “Do you? It’s nothing, really, but I like the lace on the collar. I said to Mother, ‘’Even if I don’t wear it, Mother, it will be *so* nice for my hope chest!’” (352). This boy’s mockery of Richard does not fit with the story Lucretia is building, so she does not allow it to exist for her. Instead, she reimagines the Elevator
Boy’s dialogue for him, and assigns him a line that would give her an opportunity to keep the
discussion within the context of a relationship or marriage with Richard. His unpleasantness, and
the fact that he clearly does not believe her, does not penetrate her narrative at all. As they
continue, the Porter intervenes:

Porter: (grasping his arm) Cut that out or git back in your cage! Understand?

Elevator Boy: (snickering) Take it easy. She don’t hear a thing.

Porter: Well, you keep a decent tongue or get to hell out. Miss Collins here is a lady. You
understand that?

Elevator Boy: Okay. She’s Shoiley Temple.

Porter: She’s a lady. (352)

To the Porter, protecting Miss Collins and being careful with her is much more important than
the truth of her narrative, and when the Elevator Boy ridicules her, the Porter responds by
likening him to an animal, with the elevator as his cage. This predicts the way Blanche DuBois
will call Stanley an animal in A Streetcar Named Desire. Someone who refuses to allow for
performance or multiplicity—someone who only accepts literal truth—is called less-than-human,
as if our humanity depends upon our willingness to allow each others’ larger but perhaps not
literal truths. We understand that he knows that Lucretia’s story is not real, but the Porter is
protective of her because he views her as a lady, and he is kind (human); the Elevator Boy treats
her as a joke because of the distance between the truth and her understanding of her world, and
because he is unkind (animal). His sarcastic likening of her to Shirley Temple highlights what he
sees as the joke, or the most disturbing thing about the narrative she creates: that Lucretia is
trying to play a role of someone young and innocent, which becomes “disgusting” when
performed by an older woman who is also laying claim to sexuality.
In the next interaction, Miss Collins recounts being confronted with the reality of the relationship between Richard and the woman he married. We know from her earlier comments what her feelings are on his choice of bride (“When men take advantage of common white-trash women who smoke in public there is probably some excuse for it, but when it occurs to a lady who is single always com-pletely above reproach in her moral behavior, there’s really nothing to do but call for police protection!” (353)). When she recounts having to walk past their house, the way she describes the light and the act of being seen reveals her horror of the truth:

MISS COLLINS: (dreamily) I used to think I’d never get to the end of that last block. And that’s the block where all the trees went down in the big tornado. The walk is simply glit-tering with sunlight. (pressing her eyelids) Impossible to shade your face and I do perspire so freely! (She touches her forehead daintily with the rag.) Not a branch, not a leaf to give you a little protection! You simply have to en-dure it. Turn your hideous red face away from all the front-porches and walk as fast as you decently can till you get by them! Oh, dear, dear Savior, sometimes you’re not so lucky and you meet people and have to smile! You can’t avoid them unless you cut across and that’s so ob-vious, you know . . . People would say you’re peculiar. . . . His house is right in the middle of that awful leafless block, their house, his and hers, and they have an automobile and always get home early and sit on the porch and watch me walking by—Oh, Father in Heaven—with a malicious delight! (She averts her eyes in remembered torture). She has such penetrating eyes, they look straight through me. She sees that terrible choking thing in my throat and the pain I have in here—(touching her chest)—and she points it out and laughs and whispers to him, “There she goes with her shiny big red nose, the poor old maid—that loves you!” (She chokes and hides her face in the rag.) (354-55)
There’s no Cameron--esque soft focus here; the light is uncontrolled and “glit-tering.” Miss Collins’s horror is based on her inability to control the way she is revealed to her church-going acquaintances, the man she loves, and worst of all, the woman he chose. Her pain is not caused merely by being rejected; it is due to her inability to control the way others view her. She has no shelter or privacy. Richard’s wife can see Miss Collins under the harsh light—she can see that she is sweating and that she is red, both potential indicators of sexuality. In Streetcar, Blanche will use the color red as an indicator of her sexuality, and she has a nearly-phobic concern about sweating. Blanche, though, wears red when she chooses to wear it; she does not turn red against her will, and when she sweats, she cools herself or bathes. Lucretia has no way to hide her redness or her perspiration; they are on full display for her rival. Even worse, Richard’s woman can see into Lucretia, all the way to “that terrible choking thing in my throat” and the pain in her chest. Lucretia has no control over being seen, and her humiliation is complete. The resulting pain is enough to drive her to madness.

The Porter tries to soothe her, and encourages her to forget it. “Never, never forget it! Never, never!” she replies (355). And her next speech includes more references to the light: “into that mercilless sunlight. Oh! It beat down on me, scorching me! Whips! . . . My face turned so horribly red, it got so red and wet, I knew how ugly it was in all that merciless glare . . .” When Richard tried to speak to her, she fled:

And he—he stepped up straight in front of me, smiling, blocking the walk with his terrible big white body! “Lucretia,” he said, “Lucretia Collins!” I—I tried to speak but I couldn’t, the breath went out of my body! I covered my face and—ran! . . . Ran! . . . Ran! (beating the arm of the sofa) Till I reached the end of the block—and the elm trees—started again. . . . Oh, Merciful Christ in Heaven, how kind they were! (357)
She has no ability to prevent herself from being seen and confronted. All she hopes for is the “kind” trees to hide her. Williams’s use of color is interesting here, too. Richard is “terrible” in his whiteness, which indicates his lack of sexual desire while it also highlights the fact that he is in complete control of himself, unlike Lucretia. He smiles while he blocks her escape, and most painfully, remains completely “white” in the face of her distress.

Lucretia is so involved in building her own narrative that she fails to hide herself from the gaze of the Elevator Boy. She continues to spin her tale and confesses that she is carrying Richard’s child, and the Elevator Boy responds predictably with laughter and disgust. “Did you say—a baby, Miss Collins?” and “Jeez! (He claps his hand over his mouth and turns away quickly.) (356).

When it comes to her imaginary child, Lucretia expresses her true feelings about the Church. Up until now, she established her pure reputation and her character by insisting that she is a church-going woman. When it comes to her child, however, she wants the opposite. She says she will make sure it has 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!” (356). Lucretia had been led to believe that she was safe in the “shadow of the cross,” but then she was betrayed and forced into “terrible sunlight.” We understand that she knows she may be hiding in the shadow of her imagination or play acting now, but it is only because she was not equipped to handle the sunlight of a hurtful reality. Until this moment, Lucretia was to be pitied. She was sweet and harmless and even a little amusing with her florid but impossible descriptions of a sexual relationship with a crush from her past. Now there is a shift in the interaction or conversation between the character and the reader/viewer. Reality doubles, and we see she is aware of her
madness. Both things are true: she is telling an implausible story that she believes, and she also understands that she has gone mad. The Virgin wants a child, and she wants to raise it to live in the sunlight of reality. When the Elevator Boy laughs at her this time, it is not just disrespectful or annoying. It is intentionally cruel, and in the world of a Tennessee Williams play, cruelty is unforgivable.

When the elevator buzzes from outside her apartment, the Porter sends the Elevator Boy out to get it, and tells Miss Collins, “[I]t’d be better—to go off some place else.” She says, “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” (357). In a way that he’ll use again in Streetcar, Williams pits the nurse and doctor against his heroine, although the doctor here is more cruel. The scientists stand for literal truth, and have no patience for any kind of vacillating narrative. Williams describes the doctor as a “weary, professional type,” and the nurse as “hard and efficient,” while Mrs. Abrams (the building manager) is “sincerely troubled by the situation” (357).

The doctor is brusque. The stage directions use words such as “briskly,” “mechanically,” “carelessly,” and “impatiently” to describe his behavior. He looks at his watch at one point. The nurse hustles around, gathering Lucretia’s things. Then Lucretia realizes what’s happening. “(With slow and sad comprehension) Oh. . . . I’m going away. . . .” Mr. Abrams says, “She was always a lady, Doctor, such a perfect lady” (358). But the doctor and the nurse do not care; they hustle her out the door. Like the Elevator Boy, they have no time or sympathy for Lucretia. They can allow for only one truth. Lucretia’s narrative does not conform, so she must be mad. Since she is mad, she must be locked up.

In his article “‘Fifty Percent Illusion’: The Mask of the Southern Belle in Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie, and ‘Portrait of a Madonna,’”
George Hovis suggests that Lucretia’s “madness” is that she violates a male expectation of her sexuality. She has played by society’s rules to be pure outside of marriage; in the role of a Southern belle “she was made the emblem of moral virtue” (12), but now that she is older and alone, she fantasizes that she has a sexual life, one which she is only free to imagine as rape in order to keep herself from being blamed. She is a “perfect lady,” and she is unmarried, and she is no longer young. Nothing about this context allows for the fact that she may still have sexual desire, so even when she fabricates her sex life, it must be imagined as rape to remove her agency. As Hovis says, “[o]n a deep libidinal level she is autonomous, but on a rational level Lucretia is dominated by her culture” (14). That culture refuses to allow her even to imagine sexuality. Because of her age, acknowledging that she could still experience desire is too disgusting to characters such as the Elevator Boy. Mary Hillier is permitted to be Mary Hillier and the Madonna is Cameron’s portrait; Lucretia is permitted no such duality. She cannot be virgin and mother any more than she can be “old” but still sexual. The vacillation is not permitted, and she is designated mad.

The sympathetic characters of the Porter and Mr. Abrams allow Lucretia the time and space to tell her own story, and allow her to behave as if she believes herself. They are able to hear the larger truths of her imaginary story—the pain of being rejected, and the awareness that she was raised to exist in shadows (soft-focus) rather than given the skills to be able to thrive in the sometimes-harsh direct light, and the uncomfortable truth that she is an older, single woman who is still a sexual being. The sympathetic characters respect Lucretia’s right to be pensive, to narrate, to perform. For Lucretia, creating a second imaginary narrative is the only hope she has of being more than a lonely, aging spinster. By playing a role, like a maid performing as the Madonna, Lucretia can be both herself and simultaneously more. When the audience sees at the
end that Lucretia is aware of her double narrative, we are prompted again to be aware of the nature and power of performance.

To the rest of the world, represented by the Elevator Boy, the nurse, and the doctor, there is true and not-true; that which is not-true must be denied and punished. They have, in Cameron’s terms, decided what the proper focus is, and the portrait Lucretia creates by her performance is not it. They believe only in what Tennessee Williams calls “photographic” and that hard, inflexible, merciless light. There is no room in that world for ambiguity or multiplicity, and so it must be denied. In an article from 1948 about Williams’s works up until that time, author John Gassner reacts to the tone of “Portrait of a Madonna” and imagines the tenderness that Williams shows towards Lucretia: “Williams is particularly affecting in his treatment of battered characters who try to retain shreds of their former respectability in a gusty world. Self-delusion, he realizes, is the last refuge of the hopelessly defeated. . . . Williams would like to grant these unfortunates the shelter of illusions, and it pains him to know the world is less tender” (390). This willingness to be gentle or tender towards each other is a theme that will tie together this one act play with his later full-length plays *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. One of Williams’s most pervasive themes is an empathy with or even a love for these characters who “try to retain shreds” of their former lives but are forced by a “gusty world” to create alternative realities as a means of being accepted or safe.

In terms of Williams’s arc of his women’s power to control truth through their narratives, Lucretia is at the bottom of the curve. She builds an alternate reality, but she convinces no one of the possibility of truth in that narrative, probably not even herself. She can garner sympathy and inspire gentleness, but she has no power to influence any other character’s understanding of reality. One can see why Kazan called her a “first sketch” of Blanche: Lucretia tried to hide her
sexual truth (purity) in order to make a reality that was more acceptable, at least for her: that of a woman who was desired by a man and was sexually active. Blanche will hide a sexual truth (sexually active) in order to present an alternative (purity) that would be more acceptable to her audience. Blanche’s fate was ultimately the same as Lucretia’s, but she made a good run for it first.
Julia Margaret Cameron’s image *Mary Mother* was created in 1867, three years after *Madonna with Two Children*, with Mary Hillier once again posing as The Virgin Mary. Although her subject matter and model are the same, this is the work of a more assured photographer. There is no hand-etched halo to direct us to view the subject as holy; the prompts
here include the traditional robes of the Virgin, and the direct, focused light that illuminates her forehead—a light that can be read as a halo, or as touch of some sort of holy favor and a gaze and expression that are consistent with traditional representation of the Virgin. Cameron no longer has to literally “write” what she wants us to understand by etching it on the print; her ability as an artist has grown so that she can “show,” instead. The meaning is embedded in the text of the photograph in ways that are more subtle but no less powerful.

*Mary Mother* displays Cameron’s characteristic selective focus, a technique that was controversial at the time. The image directs your gaze to linger on the light on her forehead, her profile, her right eye. In order to command such control of the viewer’s gaze, Cameron used techniques that were the opposite of how commercial portrait photographers of the time worked, which was to let in as much light as possible from all directions to reduce the amount of time subjects would have to remain still. So much light, according to Colin Ford, “flattened the sitters’ features and in effect ‘smoothed out’ their characters” (46). One can imagine that a paying customer who wanted a likeness of herself would be reluctant to be still for the amount of time it would take to capture an image like *Mary Mother*, but one can also imagine that the paying customer would not have been interested in an image like the one above.  

*Mary Mother* is a performance, not a likeness. Flat light is “photographic”; it merely records what is in front of the lens.

The drapes of the costume are in soft focus, and the way the light caresses them gives them the appearance of marble, like the folds of a robe recreated in a statue. This is a traditional way of presenting Mary; it is how we are used to looking at her. The fabric draping over her head

---

10 Because of the limitations of the equipment Cameron used and the nature of the early processes of photography, along with the ways she limited the light, her portraits could take several minutes. As Sylvia Wolf said, “Cameron’s exposures could take up to seven minutes. A model’s breathing or slight body movement were, therefore, recorded as motion on film, further adding to the diffusion of the image” (33).
and falling around her in graceful folds is as much a part of our visual language of Mary as a halo, but the fact that it looks like marble rather than actual soft, tactile fabric is a visual cue to be aware of the presence of a tradition and a vocabulary. Her robes are a costume, or part of her role. Like Blanche DuBois signaling her role as “southern belle” with her out-of-place white, frilly clothing in the French Quarter, Mary Hillier’s robes signify that she is playing a role with a definition even more rigid than the traditional southern woman. The photograph does not invite us to consider Mary (the Virgin or Hillier) so much as it calls upon us to consider the representation of Marys. The textual conversation of this portrait performance encourages a viewer to think about the ways we present and interpret “mary-ness,” not Mary.

In order to create a performance or to foster a conversation, Cameron controlled the light by limiting it, directing the viewer to consider the constructedness of her presentation. Another way the image invites this consideration is by the pose of the sitter, specifically her averted gaze. In his essay “The Timeless World of a Play,” Tennessee Williams addressed the way we look differently when our gaze is not returned. We are able to observe more freely, he says:

Because we do not participate, except as spectators, we can view them [plays] clearly, within the limits of our emotional equipment. These people on the stage do not return our looks. We do not have to answer their questions nor make any sign of being in company with them, nor do we have to compete with their virtues nor resist their offenses. All at once, for this reason, we are able to see them! (61)

In a sense, Mary Hillier’s averted gaze relieves us of the responsibility of interacting with her, and we are permitted the luxury of time. That time leads to the ability to truly “see,” with the implication that truth is there to be seen, and we will recognize it because our human truths are shared, mutual, and able to be both inscribed (performed) and read.
Another level to that conversation is that we know that Mary Hillier knew that she was posing and would be observed. Barthes addresses this state in *Camera Lucida*: “I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from my effigy” (11-12). The circle is squared; we know that even while we are invited to consider the Madonna through the presentation of her as an iteration of icon, this portrait is also of a flesh and blood woman who is inviting us to see her as Virgin Mary, and simultaneously herself. As much as our attention is drawn to the constructed nature of the icon and the corresponding narrative, it is still impossible to miss the fleshly reality of the real woman, a phenomenon Varun Begley refers to as “an intercourse of corporeality and dramatic text” (350). The tension between the two spotlights the nature of performance. Mary Hillier is posing, she knows she is posing, she knows we know she is posing, we know she knows we know she is posing; this “square” in the image text is an example of what Barthes calls “pensive.” This text is a conversation about the nature of performance, about playing a role. As we consider what is real and what is true, we wonder if in some ways the activity of posing (performing) can get at a truth that is more broadly true than the literal, limited woman (model, actor). Madonna as performed by Hillier as presented by Cameron—all of this is woven together to invite a reader to consider if the roles we perform are more important than our literal selves. To say it another way, are our performances more “true” than the mere facts of our lives?

The fact that the art is a photograph rather than a live performance or a painting or any other kind of art adds to this tension between the literal fact and the presented performance. In her book *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*, Carol Mavor claims that because a photograph never allows us to escape the presence of the model, the
conversation is changed: “Because she is photographed . . . this altered Mother appears more real than mythical. Because Cameron imaged her Madonna through an everyday ‘real’ woman, Cameron’s Mary embodies death and sexuality (something that the biblical Mary is robbed of)” (47). Another level of the conversation, then, and one that is particularly applicable to a conversation about Williams’s Blanche: How do we understand a performance of purity by a real woman with a real sexuality? Hillier is sexy—or, at least, we can be permitted to think of her in that way. We are not invited to think of the Madonna that way, so the combination gives us the unattainable: purity and sexuality. Cameron shows us that one can represent pure, or pose as pure, or perform pure, at the same time one functions as a sexual being. Both levels are simultaneously present. The purity is performance, as Blanche DuBois’s purity is performance. In Barthes’s terms, this image vacillates and is more than unary. The subject is pure and earthly. Virgin and Mother. Madonna and sexy. All of it at the same time.

Inherent in the act of posing and being posed is the notion of intention. Posing and performing are both active and intentional. Mary’s gaze is averted to invite us to look at our leisure, without the responsibility of responding to her. She poses, though, on her own terms (and Cameron’s), with the most flattering, gorgeous light imaginable. We can look at her as long as we wish as soon as she has set the scene (still more echoes of Blanche). Cameron’s photographs of women clearly tell us about her art, as Wolf points out in her assessment of Cameron’s photographed women: “A photograph like this one, while addressing a religious subject, reveals Cameron’s love of photography. It displays a pure delectation in the effects of light on skin, hair, and drapery, and it shows how a portrait can transcend the specifics of the real world and get at something below the surface” (63). While Wolf’s focus is on a different image, The Angel at the Tomb (Appendix C), her critique applies equally well to Mother Mary: All of Cameron’s best
portraits display that “love” and “delectation.” She uses light to create a level of dimension and touchability that reveal her delight in the physicality of her model at the same time she uses the same light to create a sculptural coldness to the fabric that drapes around her. As much as this image is a discussion on the nature of performing the Virgin, it is also a celebration of the physical beauty of her real-life model. Even if the technology of the time had allowed for it, one senses that the “snap shot” would never have interested Cameron. Her control and direction of light and focus are techniques that take time. This sort of theatrical narrative is the result of a purposeful construction, not a happy accident or a captured, spontaneous moment. When a portrait transcends the real world and gets at something larger, it is not through an accident or a trick of the light. It is through an intentional, extended, concentrated performance, one in which both model and photographer are active.

The theatricality of *Mary Mother* is more sophisticated than that of *Madonna with Two Children*, but that is certainly not to say that Cameron’s presence is not felt in this image, as in all her images. There are dots and scratches and smears on the image that recall the viewer to the process of the creation of the image. What registers as white dots to us are evidence of dust or other particles between the negative and the paper on which it was printed. There are visible smears, in the upper right corner, upper left quadrant, even across Mary’s face, all evidence of Cameron’s touch and of the existence of a physical print that has moved through time, rather than an easy electronic reproduction. As viewers, we are aware of Cameron’s presence; not only did she pose and dress her maid, she also operated the camera, touched the negative, exposed the print. Evidence of her touch is all over the entire process, both figuratively and literally. This is more than historically interesting; it becomes part of the conversation. Like with *Madonna with Two Children*, Cameron’s agency is part of the consideration and the conversation. The parallel
to Williams is that in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a work similar in many ways to “Portrait of a Madonna” but more assured, more complex and more developed, Williams’s voice is more present in setting the scene and giving stage directions throughout. As Cameron gained confidence and power, her message became more direct and her presence more present in her portraits. The same is true for Williams.

In his notes for *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams wrote directly about the tension between surface reality and what lies beneath it: “When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are” (393). He could just as well have been expressing the thoughts of arguably his most famous character, Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. There are unconventional, theatrical, techniques that can create a more “penetrating and vivid” expression of reality, “of things as they are,” even (or especially) when those truths run counter to the facts. “Unconventional techniques” can help us move beyond reality or interpretation to get us closer to real truths. Like Williams, Blanche uses all the theatrical techniques at her disposal in order to perform her role in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Her future depends on being able to transcend her reality to inhabit a more acceptable truth.

What Blanche creates for her audience (the other characters) is what Williams builds for the larger audience: He uses techniques such as unconventional staging, symbolic use of color in costumes, and music to reflect both atmosphere and characters’ inner lives—an approach that was counter to the naturalistic trends of his time. As Henry I. Schvey says in “‘Lightning in a Cloud’: Tennessee Williams’ Theatrical Expressionism,” “[w]hat Williams argues for . . . is nothing less than a new way of thinking about the theater which goes beyond conventional
realism to pursue inner truth” (69). Like Cameron, Williams intentionally indicates that there are multiple, concurrent layers to a performance. The conversation is layered; there is the action of the play, which moves the plot forward, there are the internal truths of the characters, and there is the tension between the “truth” and the “performance.” Much like the difference between *Madonna with Two Children* and *Mary Mother*, Williams’s power to express himself has grown stronger between his creation of Lucretia of “Portrait of a Madonna” and Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*; Blanche is a more developed, more powerful version of Lucretia.

In her book on the collaborative relationship between Williams and Elia Kazan, Brenda Murphy claims the power of Williams’s work is in the space between “the objective and the subjective, social reality and memory, past and present,” which Williams accessed by “exposing the hidden secret selves of its characters at the same time as it maintained the illusion of objective reality regarding the events happening in the present of the stage action” (Collaboration 9). The plot of the play presents itself as an objective reality, in which the audience/reader is asked to suspend her disbelief and to accept the plot events as real and literal. Williams would consider this “photographic.” This layer is what we see on the surface; *Streetcar* puts greater significance on a second, more significant level, which is the existence and struggles of the “hidden secret selves” of the characters, especially Blanche.

In his essay “If the Writing is Honest,” Williams explores the personal nature of truth: “If the writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it. It isn’t so much his mirror as it is the distillation, the essence, of what is strongest and purest in his nature . . . This makes it deeper than the surface likeness of a mirror and that much more truthful” (90). What matters to Williams, then, is much more than what would be reflected in a mirror. Just as verisimilitude was not interesting to Cameron in her photography, it does not interest Williams, either. What is
under the surface or inside a character may be more pure and *more true*, but as Barthes said of photographs, there will also be the movement between the two—the vacillation. Part of the conversation that these works invite is a discussion between the two levels—the merely factual, and the truth about a person or a character. The core, inner truth can be observed or expressed through performance, but only using, as Williams says, “unconventional techniques.”

In that same essay, Williams uses the mirror metaphor again to express the limitation of the literal, this time in his praise of fellow playwright William Inge. Williams says Inge uses his “manners” to “clothe a reality which is far from surface. It is done, as they say, with mirrors, but the mirrors may all of a sudden turn into X ray photos, and it is done so quietly and deftly that you hardly know the moment when the mirrors stop being mirrors and the more penetrating exposures begin to appear on the stage before you” (90-91). Again, he stresses that the mirror image is not what matters. All a mirror does is reflect surface appearance, but the surface is not where the important (if sometimes contradictory) truth resides. Williams thought that Inge’s particular genius was to make the mirror/surface become an X-ray that penetrates a character.

When it was time for *A Streetcar Named Desire* to be produced for the stage, Williams wanted director Elia Kazan. Williams felt that he needed to convince Kazan to believe in a script that was different from anything the director had previously worked on, although in Kazan’s memoirs, he shares what Lee Strasberg from the Group Theater taught him, and revealed he was already sympathetic to Williams’s notion of truth: “Lee . . . introduced me to the

---

1 It is part of the legend of Kazan and Williams’s relationship that Kazan was prepared to reject *Streetcar* until his wife Molly intervened. In his memoirs Kazan said: “But Molly, who’d once caused the Group Theater to give a prize to Tennessee for three one-act plays, read his new play immediately. It was titled *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Tennessee was impatient to know my reaction and called the next morning. Molly knew a masterpiece when she had it in her hands and told Williams on the phone how much she thought of his play. He was still worried what my reaction would be. ‘Gadg likes a thesis, I know,’ he told my wife, ‘and I haven’t made up my mind what the thesis of this play is’” (327). As his letter to Kazan shows, Williams settled on a thesis of fidelity.
idea of what he called the ‘subtext,’ which describes what happens underneath and sometimes contrary to what is spoken. ‘The subtext is the play,’ he said” (66). Kazan also reveals this understanding when he writes an imaginary conversation he could have had with his analyst, about the contractions within his own nature: “I know something you don’t know . . . which is that the only good basis for a film or a play is a central character who’s split, where there is a conflict within him and within the author about him. ‘Ambivalence’ is the essential word” (9). The subtext is the ambivalence inherent in the play, the character, the performance, the portrait.

In Barthes’s terms, the subtext is the opening that allows or invites the audience in to make meaning, to participate in the conversation. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes says “Is not the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes? . . . [I]t is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance” (9-10). In Williams’s plays, as in Cameron’s photographs, the ambivalence, the pensiveness, the larger truths are visible when the biographical truth slips, and the performance comes forward—appearance-of-truth as disappearance-of-reality.

Williams left us some of his most articulate explanations of *Streetcar* and his emphasis on truth, or “fidelity” in a letter persuading Kazan to take on *Streetcar*:

I think it’s quality is its authenticity or its fidelity to life. There are no “good” or “bad” people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. . . . Nobody sees anybody truly but all through the flaws of their own egos. That is the way we all see each other in life. Vanity, fear, desire, competition—all such distortions within our own egos—condition our vision of those in
relation to us. Add to those distortions in our own egos, the corresponding distortions in
the egos of others, and you see how cloudy the glass must become through which we
look at each other. That’s how it is in all living relationships except when there is that
rare case of two people who love intensely enough to burn through all those layers of
opacity and see each other’s naked hearts. Such cases seem purely theoretical to me.
(Kazan 330)

In Williams’s view, where we fail is in our inability to understand each other, or our inability to
leave room for each other’s performances. When we only look through the “flaws of [our] own
egos,” our vision is clouded and we cannot truly see. Williams claims to think that overcoming
such limited vision is a purely theoretical possibility, but he concentrated much of his career on
providing us with opportunities to consider it. Blanche and Stanley embody the ways we perform
our truths, the ways we are unable to see someone else’s performance of truth that contradicts
our own understanding, and the ultimately devastating results. We must leave openings for
others to make meaning from our texts, and we must be willing to enter into the openings that
others leave for us. As John Timpane says in his article “Gaze and Resistance in the Plays of
Tennessee Williams”: “If the audience wants exhaustible characters, characters who can be
reduced to a known, stable significance, they will not get them from Williams” (751).

Unlike “Madonna,” the stage directions for Streetcar are very elaborate, and as poetic as
any of the dialogue in the play. The beautiful language in Williams’s directions function both as
abstract, descriptive instructions to a director or set designer, but in the version of the script

---

12 See Timpane’s article for an interesting discussion on the concept of desire for the characters in Williams’s work,
particularly Streetcar: “From the Williams gaze, humanity is a single class with an infinite number of resistant
versions, any of them potential objects of desire.” Also, “In the Williams gaze, all characters, women included, are
seen with desire, but not with a desire to control. They are seen with desire because they cannot be controlled.” This
article would pair nicely with “Roland Barthes, Tennessee Williams, and ‘A Streetcar Named Pleasure/Desire” by
Philip C. Kolin, a discussion of the Barthesian erotics of the text as applied to Williams.
intended for a reading audience, they serve to create a virtual stage performance. Through his words, he can create an image of the light he would have intended a sitting theater audience to see. By speaking directly to a reader, Williams expresses what Barthes would term desire on the part of the text (“The text you write must prove to me that it desires me” (Pleasure 6)). The theatrical techniques are how Williams expresses his desire textually, how he seduces the viewer. Not as a means of “escaping” his “responsibility,” but rather an invitation to the viewer/reader/audience to enter the text and make meaning, for her to see “things as they are” (truth). In speaking to a reader with his stage directions, Williams as author makes his presence felt at the same time he acknowledges the reader. Like Blanche herself, Williams as author tries to seduce his audience into seeing as he wants them to see through the use of and control of light.

Before Scene One begins, Williams describes the light he wants us to imagine:

It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. (469)

The poetry of the way he describes the light creates an ache and sets a mood in a reader who is not seeing what a stage manager or set designer may have made of this instruction. There may be no such thing as a stage light that will allow a reader to smell coffee and bananas, but one can certainly build that atmosphere in one’s mind. Williams is creating a mental performance for the reader, similar to that which an audience member would see from frequent-collaborator Jo

---

13 Barthes speaks about this concept in theatrical terms in The Pleasure of the Text: “The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc.; and, lost in the midst of a text (not behind it, like a deus ex machina) there is always the other, the author” (27).
Mielziner’s stage design. The expectation is set: This experience is going to be gorgeous, but it will hurt, because the soft light obscures the very real and just-visible decay. It is “first dark” of an “evening early in May.” The light is performing a spring evening but underneath that, the rotting has already begun. This light is performing Blanche.

Blanche’s costume is part of her performance, and the script lets us know that the way she is dressed is “incongruous” to the setting of this part of New Orleans. She stands out in opposition to the scene and the other characters. She is dressed “daintily,” she is wearing a “white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district.” So far, these are details that will be reflected on stage in the costume of the actor. Then again, Williams addresses a reader directly with notes on Blanche’s character: “Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth” (471). A moth is drawn to the light, but we already know that in this world, decay is what is hiding under a soft light. The tender blue of the light suggests the Madonna, and the white of Blanche’s clothes imply purity and virginity, but the expectation has already been set that a stronger light would reveal decomposition under the deceptive surface. Blanche’s costume is incongruous with her setting, and perhaps her character. The clothes and accessories she wears perform Blanche.

When Williams compares her to a moth, another ominous note sounds for the reader, since we know a moth would be drawn to and destroyed by the light/flame. “Moth” is meant for the reading audience to build a performance of this story, and to understand the contrast between the power and decay of New Orleans and the delicacy and fragility of Blanche. The victor is foreshadowed, and it is not going to be the moth.
When we arrive at Scene Three, titled “The Poker Night,” Williams sets the lighting scene for the reader again, this time for the opposing side: “The kitchen now suggests that sort of lurid nocturnal brilliance, the raw colors of childhood’s spectrum. Over the yellow linoleum of the kitchen table hangs an electric bulb with a vivid green glass shade” (492). This light is performing Stanley. It is “lurid,” “raw,” “electric,” and “vivid.” When Stanley’s bulb is shaded, it is shaded with green, which exaggerates or distorts the already bright and clashing colors. This light amplifies rather than attenuates. Stanley does not use light to soften; he uses it to add to the already chaotic visual noise. The poker-players’ costumes add even more visual cacophony: “The poker players—Stanley, Steve, Mitch and Pablo—wear colored shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green, and they are men at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors. There are vivid slices of watermelon on the table, whiskey bottles and glasses” (492). Schvey points out that the title of this scene “refers to a specific painting by van Gogh, Night Café,” which Williams carefully recreated:

. . . the playwright has taken considerable pains to “paint” this scene, down to the most precise details of color and shape. The “absorbed silence” in the stage directions is a particular clue that Williams wanted his audience to register the image visually for a beat as a tableau vivant, even before a word was spoken. However, Williams’ choice to quote the van Gogh painting would be little more than an interesting curiosity were it not that, like van Gogh, the dramatist is concerned not merely with external but also with the internal depiction of emotion. (72)

The intentional creation of a tableau vivant (photographic reproduction of a painting) is an interesting choice for a creator who dismisses the photographic. But of course, this technique is
not photographic, since it is used not only reveal what was there, but to use the visual
impressions to create a way of seeing the “internal depiction of emotion.”

The men’s costumes perform the visual opposite of Blanche’s, and the battle lines are
drawn. “Blanche” means white, and Blanche wears white—a symbol of purity.14 Stanley uses the
opposite (bright color) to represent the opposite (sexuality). (In Scene Eight, he dreams about
when Blanche will be gone, and he and Stella can “get the colored lights going with nobody’s
sister behind the curtains to hear us!” (538).)

When Blanche is initially reunited with Stella, her first words after their embrace are to
prohibit Stella from looking at her in the light: “Now, then, let me look at you. But don’t you
look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I’ve bathed and rested! And turn that over-
light off! Turn that off! I won’t be looked at in this merciless glare!” (473). Blanche insists on
being shielded from a strong direct light, in a way that echoes the photography of Julia Margaret
Cameron’s work. In her essay “Milkmaid Madonnas: An Appreciation of Cameron’s Portraits of
Women,” Phyllis Rose analyzes Cameron’s use of light and focus to obscure or blur details: “She
refused to be influenced by mere circumstance, such as whether a female model happened to be a
great lady or a servant, English or Italian, bubbly or depressed. Her eye was fastened firmly on
the Ideal, and her out-of-focus technique exactly rendered her attitude to the details of daily life.
She didn’t like to see things sharply” (15). An “out-of-focus technique” is what is required to
“exactly render,” because what’s rendered in soft-focus is something larger and more true than

---

14 Nancy M. Tischler calls Blanche’s clothing choices “a visual indication of [her] rejection of her own history”
(“Sanitizing” 48). But she doesn’t always wear white. As part of his dedication to creating characters who are
balanced and “true,” not all good or all bad, Blanche sometimes steps into Stanley’s world of sexual color. In Scene
Three, (“She takes off the blouse and stands in her pink silk brassiere and white skirt in the light through the
portieres”) (496). The introduction of pink with her white leads her a step closer to red, the color of sexuality, and
stands in the light where she can be seen by the men—an intentional performance. After she meets Mitch, she goes
all in and “(slips on the dark red satin wrapper)” (497), marking herself as a sexual target for a potential suitor.
anything surface details in sharp focus could tell us. Cameron knew the real circumstances of
Mary Hillier, of course. Mary Hillier was Cameron’s maid. She was a working woman, a lower-
class woman, a woman who in her normal work day would certainly wear something other than
the robes of the Madonna. Those were Hillier’s circumstances and they were true, but they did
not prevent Cameron from using Hillier to represent an Ideal that was far removed from real life.
In a similar way, Blanche knows what her circumstances are, and to a large degree, they revolve
around death. She tells Stella how their home Belle Reve (which means “beautiful dream”) was
lost:

All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that
dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn’t be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like
rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty
compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths—not always. Sometimes their
breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you,
“Don’t let me go!” Even the old, sometimes, say, “don’t let me go.” As if you were able
to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes
they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, “Hold
me!” you’d never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn’t
dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw! (479)

Sharp focus or bright light on Blanche would reveal a woman who had been overcome by death,
faced with a gruesome, gory reality that she would not have been raised to have to handle. The
light was bright enough then that she “Saw! Saw!” the ugly reality when it was not hidden away
in a gorgeous box or made presentable for a pretty funeral.
The Ideal that Blanche wants to perform, the truth she wants to create, is that of a woman who is young and pure enough to interest a man who will marry her and keep her safe (financially secure). A bright light or a realistic focus could reveal a woman who “answer[ed] the calls” of young soldiers who camped out on the lawn of Belle Reve (57), but she wants to present herself differently to Mitch. To accomplish that, she needs to focus on an Ideal of purity and youth—an impression she can only render by blurring the focus and softening the light.

Blanche enlists Stanley’s friend Mitch to put a shade over the light for her, which suggests that in some ways he will be complicit; he facilitates what Stanley will consider Blanche’s deception. She says, “I bought this adorable little colored paper lantern at a Chinese shop on Bourbon. Put it over the light bulb! Will you, please?” Mitch agrees, and Blanche says, “I can’t stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action” (499). Direct light is “rude” and “vulgar,” because it reveals her age and how worn she is. When she obscures those things, it is a kindness or a matter of manners, not a deception of any importance. At least initially, Mitch is more than happy to comply; he is willing to see her as she wishes to be seen.

Later, in Scene Nine, when Mitch refuses to let Blanche control her own lighting, it is an indication that he will no longer allow her to own and perform her version of herself. Mitch has heard about Blanche’s past from Stanley. (“Why?” Stella asks Stanley. “You’re goddamn right I told him! I’d have that on my conscience the rest of my life if I knew all that stuff and let my best friend get caught!” (534). Stanley’s behavior to Mitch in the rest of the play does not seem like that of a “best friend,” but that is the narrative he presents to Stella.) Mitch and Blanche are alone at Stanley and Stella’s when Mitch says, “It’s dark in here.” Blanche responds, “I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me.” Mitch says he has never seen her in the light.

BLANCHE: Whose fault is that?
MITCH: You never want to go out in the afternoon.

BLANCHE: Why, Mitch, you’re at the plant in the afternoon!

MITCH: Not Sunday afternoon. I’ve asked you to go out with me sometimes on Sundays but you always make an excuse. You never want to go out until after six and then it’s always some place that’s not lighted much.

BLANCHE: There is some obscure meaning in this but I fail to catch it.

MITCH: What it means is I’ve never had a good look at you, Blanche.

BLANCHE: What are you leading up to?

MITCH: Let’s turn the light on here. (544)

When Mitch says he’s “never had a good look” at her, the audience knows he has rejected her performance. As soon as he feels he has to see her in bright light to really get a look at her, it is clear that he will not accept the way she presents herself to him. He will not read her the way she wants to be read. He rips the shade off the bulb and exposes her.

BLANCHE: What did you do that for?

MITCH: So I can get a look at you good and plain!

BLANCHE: Of course you don’t really mean to be insulting!

MITCH: No, just realistic.

BLANCHE: I don’t want realism.

MITCH: Naw, I guess not.

BLANCHE: 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 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!” (544-45).
In Blanche’s case, what “ought to be truth” is that she should be young, cared for, flirted with, and desired. She ought to be allowed to perform purity, although her past has led her to do things that would be considered counter to that. It ought not to have happened, so she believes she should be permitted to act is if it had not. She gives Mitch (and everyone else) a performance of herself as she should be, or wants to be. She believes that performing as if things are the way they ought to be is a way of creating that reality. When Mitch turns the light on, however, she gives him the truth he thinks matters and tells him her history. After her husband died, she sought out “intimacies with strangers,” including a seventeen-year-old boy, which caused her to lose her job. She confesses to Mitch that she was looking for “[p]aradise” in the form of “a little peace.” Mitch can’t hear beyond her confessions, though:

MITCH: You lied to me, Blanche.

BLANCHE: Don’t say I lied to you.

MITCH: Lies, lies, inside and out, all lies.

BLANCHE: Never inside, I didn’t lie in my heart . . . (546)

As Williams wrote in his letter to Kazan, the brilliance of Streetcar lies in “its authenticity or its fidelity to life.” Blanche is authentic according to her own rules because she does not think she misrepresented anything significant: “Never inside, I didn’t lie in my heart.” Her truth is in her heart, and what is in her heart is what she performs. Like she did with Stanley, when pressed, she does admit to Mitch the biographical facts of her life even when those facts are ugly. She lost her family home. She seduced an underage boy, and she has been sexually promiscuous with strangers in a time when women were expected to be more chaste (although how much that expectation has changed is a matter for debate). Streetcar is not a story of Blanche against Stanley where there is an easy, obvious victor. We may root for Blanche, but she is problematic.
Earlier in the play, Stanley rejected Blanche’s performance through a violent reaction to her theatrical techniques in the form of her costuming. An argument between Stanley and Stella over Blanche’s clothes and accessories in Scene Two establishes that Stella allows and accepts Blanche’s need to perform, even though she knows it to be a truth that is other-than-literal. Stanley, though, can only see Blanche’s costumes as literally expensive or literally deceptive. In his world, there is no such thing as shades of gray, and Blanche should certainly not be wearing white. “Open your eyes to this stuff!” he tells Stella. “You think she got them out of a teacher’s pay? . . . Look at these feathers and furs that she come here to preen herself in. What’s this here? A solid-gold dress, I believe. And this one! What is these here? Fox-pieces! . . . Genuine fox fur-pieces, a half a mile long!” Stella tells him they’re inexpensive, old pieces. He tells her he’ll have a friend appraise them. “I’m willing to bet you there’s thousands of dollars invested in this stuff here.” Stella tells him not to be “such an idiot.” He moves on to Blanche’s jewelry. “What have we here? The treasure chest of a pirate!” He pulls out what he believes are real pearls and real diamonds. “Here’s your plantation, or what was left of it, here!” he says. Stella snaps, “You have no idea how stupid and horrid you’re being” (485–6). Stanley thinks things must be what they look like, and they must look like what they are. Part of the cause of Stanley’s rage against Blanche is that she does not play by those rules. For Stanley, Blanche is obligated to look like what he thinks she is. He will not allow Blanche to perform something other than the literal truth, because for him, there can be nothing other than the literal truth.

After Mitch rejects her, Blanche becomes more desperate and, in her need to perform, she pulls out all her most inappropriately youthful and pure clothes and accessories. The stage directions leading into Scene Ten tell us that Blanche’s environment is in chaos as she’s half-packed, and she has “decked herself out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening
gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers with brilliants set in their heels.” She isn’t wearing these things; she has “decked herself out.” She has intentionally costumed herself for a role that is quickly becoming un-performable. Now her clothes are “soiled” and “crumpled” and “scuffed” (548). Blanche DuBois is no longer “incongruous” with her setting. She fits in very well with the “atmosphere of decay” that runs along with the beauty of New Orleans.

Blanche is gazing into the mirror as this scene begins, literally performing for an imaginary audience of “special admirers.” We know from his essay “If the Writing is Honest” that Williams is dismissive of the surface truth that is reflected in a mirror. Here, for Blanche, it has nearly become a parody. Her mirror does not show her literal truth or her larger truth. All it reflects now is how Blanche is losing control of her performance at the same time her understanding of her factual history and present is spiraling away from her. At the start of the play, the source of her power was that she understood the difference between her biographical truth and her performed truth. Now her understanding of reality is slipping at the same time she loses the ability to maintain her performance. She imagines she speaks to a group of admirers about a moonlight swim, but she cautions them about diving if you aren’t sure of the water: “[I]f you hit a rock you don’t come up till tomorrow.”

Then the notes tell us, “Tremblingly she lifts the hand mirror for a closer inspection. She catches her breath and slams the mirror face down with such violence that the glass cracks. She moans a little and attempts to rise” (548). Blanche’s awareness is not completely gone; she may be teetering on the edge of madness, but she has not yet gone over the edge. When Stanley comes in, she tries to rally. As her mirror as shown her, though, the balance of power has shifted and is no longer in her favor. After Blanche asks after her sister, she tells Stanley that she is going away with Shep Huntleigh. Stanley mocks her when she tells him she has been searching
for the right clothes: “And come up with that—gorgeous—diamond—tiara?” (550). He is not being the idiot Stella accused him of earlier. Stanley knows the diamonds are fake. Blanche’s ability to present herself as she wishes to be seen is failing and soiled now, and Stanley forces her to look at it, to acknowledge what she has already seen in her own mirror: “Take a look at yourself! Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen do you think you are?” (552). By ridiculing her, Stanley refuses to allow her performance.

Stanley shows no mercy. He will not let go of what he sees as Blanche’s untruths, her attempts to deceive him. He needs to establish that he was not “took in,” that he never believed in her. “There isn’t a goddam thing but imagination!” he tells her. “And lies and conceits and tricks!” Then:

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 down my liquor! I say—

*Ha!*—*Ha!* Do you hear me? *Ha*—*ha*—*ha!* (552)

This is more than a refusal to believe her. He ridicules, berates, and attacks her, and at the heart of it, he insists that he never accepted the role she played, that her attempts to “pull the wool” over him are laughable. “Ha—ha—ha!” (552). He is a more powerful, crueler version of the Elevator Boy in “Portrait of a Madonna.” As Blanche loses power and becomes more pitiable, he mocks and bullies her.
Blanche’s control of the light, her use of costumes, and her “stage directions” have failed. When she is packing, allegedly to go be with Shep, she says, “The problem is clothes” (549). The problem is not clothes, but that she has lost her ability to use clothes to control the way she is perceived (or anything else). Mitch had already refused her performance, and she knows that he will no longer be an escape for her. Stanley has rejected her performance as well, and she is out of options. Like Cameron’s Madonnas, Blanche has been trying to vacillate between two truths to make them both “true.” She is a sexually powerful figure in a problematic way, and she is performing purity, which represents for her the inside of her heart. When Stanley refuses her constructed truth and then rapes her, he simultaneously refuses to allow her dual truths, and violates them both. He negates her performance of purity by forcing sexuality on her, which makes the rape scene even more violent and traumatic than it otherwise would be. His rape of her body is hard enough to face; he is violent, and he overpowers her and mocks her. Still, it is even worse than that: By raping her, he violently rejects her performance of herself. He destroys her truth.

In a letter to his agent, Audrey Wood, Williams reiterated what he told Kazan about Streetcar, that he believed there were “no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. . .” (Kazan 330). To Wood, he said, “I don’t want to focus guilt or blame particularly on any one character but to have it a tragedy of misunderstandings and insensitivity to others” (Letters 118). However, perhaps even more so for a modern audience in the age of #metoo, it is difficult to sympathize with Stanley when he rapes Blanche. In fact, some of the most problematic and difficult-to-read

---

15 Hovis suggests that the gown and tiara Blanche wears in this scene are what she “likely wore to the Moon Lake Casino the night her husband killed himself” as a means of returning to a “critical moment from the past that marks a missed opportunity” (14). If this is true, it is a heartbreaking visual reminder that Blanche has lost both her love and the life she had been raised to expect.
criticism about Tennessee Williams’s work, especially *Streetcar*, is the analysis of sexual violence in his plays and short stories. Henry Popkin’s article “The Plays of Tennessee Williams” was published in 1960, but his commentary on the rape of Blanche reveals a position that has not been completely abandoned in more recent criticism. Popkin writes of Blanche, “She is a pitiful figure, but, in a sense, she has been asking for what happened. Audience sympathy is more evenly divided than a summary would indicate” (48). In a book on Williams’s work published in 1987, Roger Boxill seems to suggest that it was not even rape: “Sex with her brother-in-law is the culminating event in a long period of sexual indulgence and self-degradation,” suggesting that Blanche made Stanley rape her to fulfill her own wishes (82). Boxill also refers to the “gratification of [Blanche’s] powerful attraction to Stanley evident from their first meeting,” as if having an attraction would lead one to feel gratified for being raped (86). In a more sophisticated and thus more troubling version of the “it’s not really rape if she needed it” argument, in his article “‘Stanley Made Love to her! —By Force!’ Blanche and the Evolution of a Rape,” John Bak argues that in order to understand how the rape functions dramatically, “we would be obliged to read it in a way entirely unorthodox (if not simply dangerous) to social order and convention: as an act of symbolic liberation of a trapped spirit . . . locked within the confines of a sexual body” (72). Bak analyzes the creation of *Streetcar* through Williams’s numerous drafts, and he makes a compelling case for why the climax between Blanche and Stanley had to be rape rather than rough consensual sex. However, there is something very uncomfortable about reading even a purely literary defense of rape as the “liberation of a trapped spirit,” because as Bak acknowledges, it is “dangerous” to frame rape in those terms; it makes it sound like a favor or a service.
In another article by Bak, “A Streetcar Named Dies Irae: Tennessee Williams and the Semiotics of Rape,” he suggests that reading the rape as symbolic becomes much more difficult when one sees the play performed rather than reads the script: “...[O]nce Streetcar’s floating ‘rape’ sign left the scripted page and entered into the fixed signification of stage or screen performance, its multiple meanings in the play were either lost, distorted, or irreversibly actualized, and theatrical mimesis replaced symbolic expressionism indefinitely” (1). Perhaps, however, representation of rape is always loaded, whether one reads it or sees it performed. It may be impossible to read or analyze rape the way we could examine virtually anything else because of the danger that Bak acknowledges, which is that of ever allowing ourselves to interpret rape as anything other than a crime of violence against an unwilling person. Similarly, Tischler’s suggestion that “Blanche may be asking Stanley to rape her so that she may expiate her sins against Allan” (Sanitizing 50) is impossible to read without wincing.

Conflicted and fraught scholarly analysis aside, in the world of the play Stanley uses sexual violence as a means of trying to control something he cannot understand. He is threatened by Blanche’s ability to be multiple, so he uses sex as a weapon to conquer her and to destroy her ability to lay claim to purity. But in his letters to Wood and Kazan, Williams did not say that Stanley is without guilt or blame; he said he did not want to put all the blame on any one particular character. Stanley is guilty. Blanche is guilty, too. She has also denied the truth and at least in a sense, tried to force her own version of reality through control of sex or sexuality, which we see in her history with her husband. In Scene Six, when it still seemed as if a relationship between Blanche and Mitch was possible, she tells him, “I loved someone, too, and the person I loved I lost.” She connects love to light: “When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a
blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that’s how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded” (527). For Blanche, “blinding light” is too strong, and it did not reveal the truth for her. When Blanche tells Mitch that she loved “much, much too completely,” it is clear that she does not intend to do so again. The light was strong and direct, but still managed to hide truths that were dangerous. She was “deluded” in spite of the light. If she was “half in shadow” before, the implication is that untruths or false reality existed in the bright light, not in the half shadows. When Blanche rejects bright light now, she is rejecting the deception of love. She is safer in the shadows, perhaps because she is less likely to be misled. She tells Mitch that her husband was gay but unable to tell her, and she was unable or unwilling to discover that truth:

There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s, although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate looking—still—that thing was there. . . . He came to me for help. I didn’t know that. I didn’t find out anything till after our marriage when we’d run away and come back and all I knew was I’d failed him in some mysterious way and wasn’t able to give the help he needed but couldn’t speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me—but I wasn’t holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn’t know that. I didn’t know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty—which wasn’t empty, but had two people in it . . . the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years . . . (527)

At that moment as she recounts her story to Mitch, we have one of the sound cues that Williams uses to make the internal reality of a character external: “A locomotive is heard approaching
outside. She claps her hands to her ears and crouches over. The headlight of the locomotive glares into the room as it thunders past. As the noise recedes she straightens slowly and continues speaking” (528). The headlight of the locomotive represents the bright, direct, temporary light of her love for her husband, which carried with it the threat of destruction, as powerful and real as an oncoming train. Critics and audiences have made much of the fact that Blanche’s husband was gay, but another critical component of her memory is more straightforward: Gay or straight, the fact is that she walked in on her husband with someone else. She loved him, and he was unfaithful. The sound of the train, or the threat, is not just the approaching reality of the end of her marriage, or the end of her illusions of her husband, or even the end of her husband’s life. It also refers to the moment her heart was broken. She loved him “unendurably,” and his loss was no more endurable.

The train also refers to the literal train from Scene Five, when the sound of an approaching train masks the sounds of Stanley’s arrival and he is able to eavesdrop on Blanche and Stella, where Blanche calls him “common,” “bestial,” “sub-human,” and “ape-like.” She implores Stella, “In this dark march toward whatever it is we’re approaching. . . . Don’t—don’t hang back with the brutes!” But when Stanley comes in, pretending to have just approached, Stella foreshadows her ultimate choice and Stanley’s victory: “Stella has embraced him with both arms, fiercely, and full in the view of Blanche. He laughs and clasps her head to him. Over her head he grins through the curtains at Blanche” (510-11). Stella’s choice is clear, while it is also clear that the struggle for power is between Blanche and Stanley, with Stella and control of the narrative as the prize.

In her scene with Mitch, Blanche also hears music: “Polka music sounds, in a minor key faint with distance.” The audience hears the music, as we’re meant to understand Blanche hears
it not just in her memory but actively, in the present. It’s the Varsouviana, the song she was
dancing to when “the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few
moments later—a shot!” As Blanche slips farther into her breakdown, these sound cues become
more prevalent and she loses her ability to control them. The Varsouviana no longer stops when
she hears the shot. Noises intrude without her control, as Williams uses these “unconventional
techniques” to “find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they
are” (see above). “As they are” means as they are for Blanche. The non-realistic stage techniques
allow the audience to see Blanche’s internal reality. In her article “Realism and Theatricalism in
A Streetcar Named Desire,” Mary Ann Corrigan claims that this marriage between the realism of
the plot and character development and the theatricalism used to reveal the inner character is
what makes Streetcar one of the “great American plays.” She posits that these non-realistic stage
techniques “enable the audience not only to understand the emotional penumbra surrounding the
events and characters, but also to view the world from the limited and distorted perspective of
Blanche. The play’s meaning is apparent only after Williams exposes through stage resources
what transpires in the mind of Blanche” (385). Corrigan also points out that these non-realistic
techniques “distort the surface verisimilitude of the play” (386). But like Cameron, Williams
values emotional truth more than “verisimilitude,” or the “photographic.”

---

16 The use of music in Streetcar to reveal Blanche’s inner struggle is a topic far too rich and detailed to be explored
in depth in this paper. For more on the ways music and sound effects allow an audience access to Blanche’s internal
state, see “Realism and Theatricalism in A Streetcar Named Desire” by Mary Ann Corrigan.
17 C.W.E. Bigsby uses a quote from Faulkner’s Requiem for a Nun, which he says “applies with equal force to
[Blanche]: ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’ So, the music playing when she forced her young husband to
confront his suspect sexuality still plays in her ears as the family history of debauchery seems to be enacted in her
own life” (48). Blanche’s past is not past—she continues to live it.
18 Schvey also emphasizes this blend of realism with expressionism, “held in perfect equipoise, creating a tragedy
completely satisfying as an aesthetic whole” (71). Like Corrigan, Schvey emphasizes the balance. The realism of the
plot and character development raises the stakes. We experience Blanche (and the others) as real, which makes us
invested in their inner realities.
The importance of Blanche’s story about her husband’s death lies not only in that it reveals her inner pain, but that it also uncovers more about her problematic nature. We know that Williams didn’t want any of these characters to be all good or all bad, and Blanche certainly is not all one or the other; she had the same expectations of her husband that Stanley has of her. She assumed her husband’s external appearance reflected his internal truth. Because her husband didn’t look “effeminate,” she did not think he was gay. But just as Blanche performs “pure,” Allan performed “straight.” When she found out that his performance was counter to the truth, she lashed out, as Stanley did. “[O]n the dance-floor—unable to stop myself—I’d suddenly said—’I saw! I know! You disgust me . . .’” And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this—kitchen—candle. . .” (528). Like Stanley, Blanche reacts violently when an internal truth (gay) and an intentional performance (straight) do not match. When Blanche rejected Allan’s performance and his inner truths, he committed suicide. Clearly, harsh words are not the same thing as rape, but as we know, Williams is not weighing these characters on a scale to see who made the worst decisions. What the play invites us to understand is that both (all) characters make mistakes, but when they lash out and hurt each other the most seriously, it stems from a refusal to see “anybody truly but all through the flaws of their own ego.” Streetcar isn’t the story of the angel Blanche against the devil Stanley any more than it is the story of a nymphomaniac homewrecker versus a family man. It is a tragedy about our unwillingness or inability to allow each other’s performances, and to accept the truth in them.\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\) It may be easy for a modern reader/audience to lose sight of the fact that when Streetcar was first staged in 1947, it was shocking to contemporary audiences. Tischler says “Homosexuality was not spoken of on stage in those days, nor was a woman of loose sexual mores made into a sympathetic character” (Sanitizing 50). Blanche’s sexual history and her husband’s gayness are topics that do not seem particularly racy now, but at the time, Williams was breaking new ground for the theater (and then the movie screen).
Through Kazan and Williams’s collaboration on the production of *Streetcar*, the true tragedy of the play was highlighted, according to Murphy: “With Williams’s urging, Kazan overcame his natural tendency to moralize. The play developed as a tragedy of subjectivity, a failure of each of the characters to see how differently they each perceived the same reality” (Collaboration 24). However, it is not so much a failure to “see reality” as it is a refusal to accept performance. In the beginning, Mitch is willing to accept Blanche’s performance. He is attracted to her and willing to believe she is as she presents herself to be, until he realizes it contradicts with the story Stanley tells him. Stanley is never willing to accept Blanche from the moment he sees her fake jewels and faded fox furs. Blanche has a history both of performing and of rejecting performance, but she knows the difference. For Mitch and Stanley, the only thing that matters is literal truth. For Blanche, the truth that matters is her performance, not her history. Her failure is that she cannot understand how much the literal truth matters to Stanley, and how badly he will react when her performance and her past do not match. Initially, it seems as if she understands him. In Scene Two, he tells her, “Some men are took in by this Hollywood glamor stuff and some men are not.” She acknowledges, “I’m sure you belong in the second category. . . . You’re simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think” (488). She claims to understand Stanley in a way that Stella does not, but she fails to see the threat he presents. She says, “Mr. Kowalski, let us proceed without any more double-talk. I’m ready to answer all questions. I’ve nothing to hide” (488-89). Blanche does answer his questions, but she does not sum up her sexual history for him, and that seems to be an unforgiveable sin of omission in his eyes. When he uncovers the details of her past, he tells Mitch, thereby denying her performance of purity and denying her escape.
Stanley’s betrayal is one that the audience can see coming, and perhaps Blanche should have anticipated as well; the most shocking and destructive betrayal comes from Stella. Initially, Stella seems to understand and make room for Blanche’s need for performance. When the sisters first greet each other, Blanche says, “You haven’t said a word about my appearance.” Stella says, “You look just fine.” Blanche replies, “God love you for a liar! Daylight never exposed so total a ruin!” (475). It becomes clear that this is part of their typical dynamic when Blanche continues to press her, and tells her that she hasn’t gained any weight:

STELLA: *(a little wearily)* It’s just incredible, Blanche, how well you’re looking.

BLANCHE: You see I still have that awful vanity about my looks even now that my looks are slipping! *(She laughs nervously and glances at Stella for reassurance.)*

STELLA: *(dutifully)* They haven’t slipped one particle. (476)

Stella does her duty; she flatters Blanche, listens to her, does not press her for details on ugly stories. Nevertheless, Blanche feels as if Stella’s gaze is pressing her, and she tells her that their home is lost. When Stella asks how, Blanche reacts violently. “You’re a fine one to ask me how it went! . . . You’re a fine one to sit there *accusing* me of it! . . . Yes, sit there and stare at me, thinking I let the place go!” (479-480). Blanche misreads Stella’s gaze as an accusation, and then fails to read Stella’s reaction to her story. “Oh, Stella, Stella, you’re crying!” (480). Blanche expects Stella to respond with accusations and when instead she responds with sorrow, Blanche initially misinterprets it. Throughout the play, Stella can read Blanche. She knows what Blanche needs, and unlike Mitch, Stanley and even Blanche herself, Stella always seems to know the difference between the real and the performed. When she rejects Blanche’s truth, it is to protect herself, it is not because she was ever under any illusion about the facts.
In Scene Two, Stella encourages Stanley to compliment Blanche. “When she comes in be sure to say something nice about her appearance . . . admire her dress and tell her she’s looking wonderful. That’s important with Blanche. Her little weakness!” (483-84). Stella indulges Blanche, and encourages Stanley to as well. When Blanche asks Stella to go get her a drink, leaving Blanche and Stanley alone to hash it out, Stella reluctantly leaves. When she comes back, Blanche congratulates her on her pregnancy. “(She embraces her sister. Stella returns the embrace with a compulsive sob. Blanche speaks softly.) Everything is all right: we thrashed it out. I feel a bit shaky, but I think I handled it nicely. I laughed and treated it all as a joke, called him a little boy and laughed—and flirted! Yes—I was flirting with your husband, Stella!” As the guests start to show up for Stanley’s poker night, Stella says, “I’m sorry he did that to you.” Blanche says, “He’s just not the sort that goes for jasmine perfume!” (492). It seems at this point that Blanche has power. She has presented “the facts” to Stanley, in the form of all the paperwork regarding the loss of the estate. Stanley is sheepish, Stella is apologetic, and Blanche seems to have navigated the interaction deftly.

But after poker night when Stanley strikes Stella and then they reunite, it becomes clear where Stella’s loyalty really is, and that her priority is to stay with Stanley no matter the cost. When Blanche talks about getting them out, Stella says, “You take it for granted that I am in something that I want to get out of.”

BLANCHE: I can’t believe you’re in earnest.

STELLA: No?

BLANCHE: I understand how it happened—a little. You saw him in uniform, an officer, not here but—

STELLA: I’m not sure it would have made any difference where I saw him.
BLANCHE: Now don’t say it was one of those mysterious electric things between people! If you do I’ll laugh in your face.

STELLA: I am not going to say anything more at all about it!

BLANCHE: All right, then, don’t!

STELLA: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant. (Pause) (509)

Blanche thinks that Stella fell for Stanley’s performance. The setting was different (“not here”), and he was in the costume of a uniform. Stella denies it: “I’m not sure it would have made any difference where I saw him.” Stella was not “took in” by Stanley’s setting or costume, she was drawn to him because of “what happens between a man and a woman in the dark.” Stella tells Blanche that on their wedding night, Stanley “smashed all the light-bulbs with the heel of my slipper” (505). Blanche is horrified, but Stella admits “I was—sort of—thrilled by it.” If Blanche’s lighting of choice is filtered, shadowed light, the source of Stanley and Stella’s power and connection is the dark.

Stella defended Blanche when there was no risk to her own way of life. If Blanche and Stanley had gotten along, if Stanley could have learned to humor Blanche like Stella did, at least long enough for Blanche to convince Mitch to marry her, then Stella could have had everything she wanted. She could help her sister at no significant cost to herself. But when Blanche pitted herself against Stanley and indicated that she could help Stella leave him (unlikely), Stella made her position clear. If one night of “what happens in the dark” was enough for Stella to forgive Stanley for verbally and physically abusing her in front of his friends, Blanche (and the audience) had no reason to believe that Stella would take Blanche’s side against Stanley for any reason. If Blanche performs Purity, and Allan performed Straight, and Stanley performs Virility,
then Stella performs Wife Whose Husband Is Not a Physically Abusive Rapist. She needs to create an alternate reality in which to be safe just as desperately as Blanche does. Blanche needs Mitch to accept her as pure, so he will marry her and keep her safe. Stella’s need is just turned around; she needs to believe Stanley’s performance so she can stay with him and remain “safe” inside a family. That role will demand that she accept Stanley’s lies as truth even when she knows better.

Hovis suggests that Stella makes a decision not to perform: “. . . Stella dispenses with the role of the belle and speaks candidly to her husband, trusting him to respect her openness with commensurate tenderness and honesty” (15). That may be a valid reading of Stella, although it is hard in the play to see any reason why Stella would trust Stanley since there is no reason to believe his physical abuse is something that first occurred during the Poker Night. But Hovis says that Stella “fails to recognize the dangers of not performing. Unlike Blanche’s, Stella’s passivity is real . . . Stella passively accepts Stanley’s denial of Blanche’s report and even acquiesces to his demand that her sister be institutionalized for her delusions” (15). But as we will see, Stella’s decision was not passive.

When Stella’s final betrayal comes, it is devastating. Blanche has survived everything up until now. The loss of her home, her job, her financial independence, her youth, her looks, her reputation. She is battered, and the lines are starting to get blurry for her between her reality and her performance, but the death blow comes when Stella sides with Stanley after he rapes Blanche. In spite of Hovis’s claim that Stella “acquiesces” to Stanley’s demand, it is clear that Stella made her choice intentionally, with an understanding of the truth (rape) over Stanley’s performance (“I didn’t rape her.”) Stella tells Eunice, “I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley.” Eunice encourages her: “Don’t ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No
matter what happens, you’ve got to keep going” (556). Eunice presents belief as a choice: Stella can choose which truth she will allow, and the stakes are survival, or at least the status quo.

Stella ignores her husband’s sexual truth in a way that Blanche could not or would not ignore Allan’s. Although Stella’s betrayal of Blanche in favor of keeping her relationship with Stanley is painful to read, even here, the play is showing the validity of performance over truth. Stella knows the difference. She knows what Stanley did. She chooses to reject that truth and accept his performance instead. In the end, it is not a question of who is “good” and who is “bad.” It is a question over which performance will be allowed to stand, and the answer is Stanley’s. He is not “better” than Blanche. As much as he claims to value truth, he certainly is not honest. The winner is the person who can sell a performance, and that is Stanley.20 C.W.E. Bigsby describes Stella’s power to negate Blanche by denying her performance: “To be is to act; to act is to be. But [Blanche’s] audience withdraws its belief—first Stanley, then Mitch, then Stella—and she is left, finally, an actor alone, her performance drained of meaning, inhabiting a world which is now unreal because unsanctioned” (45). Without an audience to accept her alternate truth, Blanche no longer exists.

Before Blanche is taken away, Stanley takes one last opportunity to reject her performance of purity, although ironically, it comes at a time when Blanche’s madness has, in a sense, made her pure. Schvey points out that the imagery in this scene “is suggestive of divine innocence and purity aligning her with the Virgin Mary.” Her jacket “is Della Robbia blue. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures, . . . moments later, the cathedral bell

20 In the interest of fairness to Stella, I will point out that to a modern audience, it seems that Stella has more choices than it would have appeared to an audience watching the play in the 1940s or ’50s, when a single woman with a new baby would be even less likely to be able to escape an abusive marriage than a woman in similar circumstances would today. A contemporary audience would have known that a woman with no job and no financial means to support herself would be in a very difficult circumstance if she were to leave her husband, and would perhaps have been more sympathetic to Stella’s decision to make it work.
chimes—“the only clean thing in the Quarter,” according to Blanche. Even the grapes she is given to eat seem to allude to images of defiled innocence and self-willed martyrdom (81).

Blanche has vacillated between white and pink and red and white, but now, in her defeat, she wears the robes of Mary, and performs the role of Virgin every bit as overtly as Mary Hillier in a Julia Margaret Cameron photo.

Still, Stanley refuses to be a gracious winner and takes another opportunity to attack. When Blanche is struggling with the Matron, he tells her not to worry about her things, he will send her trunk along later. Then, even as the victor, he does not miss an opportunity to be cruel. He says, “You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old empty perfume bottles—unless it’s the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern? (He crosses to dressing table and seizes the paper lantern, tearing it off the light bulb, and extends it towards her. She cries out as if the lantern was herself.)” (562). The shaded light represented and enabled Blanche’s performance, so in a very real way, it was herself. Earlier in the play as Stanley tells Stella about what he found out about Blanche’s recent history, how she lost her job and was essentially run out of town, Blanche sings “It’s Only a Paper Moon” from the bathtub: “Say it’s only a paper moon/Sailing over a cardboard sea/But it wouldn’t be make-believe/If you believed in me!” (530). Just as it would not have been “make believe” if she had managed to convince Mitch to marry her. Her performance of purity would have been true—or at least, true enough. Stella asks Blanche if she really wants Mitch, and Blanche replies, “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 . . .” (517). If Mitch had believed in her, she could have been safe. If she had believed in Allan and allowed his truth and his performance both, perhaps things would have ended differently. But it is Stella who has the power to grant belief, and she believes in Stanley.
As the lyrics say: His innocence isn’t make-believe because Stella believes in him, or she chooses to behave as if she does, and that is close enough.

As Stella allows Blanche to be led away, Blanche delivers one of the most famous and heartbreaking lines in American theater when she says to the doctor: “Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (503). Blanche has not been shown kindness from her sister, and she may be unlikely to find it from strangers as an anonymous patient in an asylum. Stella’s decision sends Blanche to a world where her performance can never succeed, because she will always be read as a madwoman.

Kazan’s reading of Stella is more sympathetic:

[A]t the end of the play—always an author’s essential statement—Stella, having witnessed her sister’s being destroyed by her husband, then taken away to an institution with her mind split, felt grief and remorse but not an enduring alienation from her husband. Stanley was the father of her child. Stanley had turned on the ‘colored lights’ for her. Above all, Stanley was there. As he’d declared, they’d been perfectly happy until Blanche moved in. The implication at the end of the play is that Stella will very soon return to Stanley’s arms—and to his bed. That night, in fact. Indifference? Callousness? No. Fidelity to life. Williams’s goal. We go on with life, he was saying, the best way we can. People get hurt, but you can’t get through life without hurting people. The animal survives—at all costs. (351)

That reading works when it is applied to Stella and Stanley. For characters like Streetcar’s Blanche and Madonna’s Lucretia, the animal does not survive, both in the sense that these characters are taken into asylums, but also in the sense that they do not reproduce. The “animal,” in the sense of the species, does not survive in women who fail to reproduce and then go mad.
Stella is the victor on all fronts. She gets the man, she maintains her way of life, and she reproduces: This is the ultimate animal survival—one which Maggie will fight tooth and nail for in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.\(^{21}\)

Barthes tells us that a portrait has subversive power when it is pensive, when it vacillates between truths. Both Lucretia and Blanche put everything they have into performing a sexual role that is removed from their biographical reality—into creating a portrait that vacillates, that contains multiple truths. Lucretia the Virgin imagines that she has been raped and is pregnant. Although she convinces no one other than herself, she does garner sympathy from other characters for a while, although eventually she is committed to an asylum. Blanche is much more powerful than Lucretia in the sense that she knows the difference between her biography and her performance, and she does manage to temporarily deceive Mitch, and Stella is initially willing to play along. Ultimately, her performance is rejected, and she too is committed. Barthes says, “A photograph only has worth if one desires (even in rejecting it) what it represents. This is even a good criterion for deciding whether a photograph exists . . . or if it is consigned to the massed ranks of the insignificant snapshot” (*Signs* 115). As photographs/performances, Blanche and Lucretia finally fail to vacillate between truths. The characters are confined to what Barthes would call a “unary” reading, and so they cannot function as portraits. Barthes says, “the Photograph is unary when it emphatically transforms ‘reality’ without doubling it, without

\(^{21}\) John M. Clum offers a reading of *Streetcar* as a critique of heterosexual marriage: “Ostensibly Stella and conventional heterosexual marriage win, but only through Stella’s denying the truth about Stanley’s rape of Blanche. For all Stanley’s macho posturing, it is Stella’s denial that sends Blanche to the asylum, not Stanley’s rape.” Furthermore, he says, the character of Blanche brought the “possibility of homosexuality . . . into the play through the story of her husband and through her own camp behavior” (129). It is an interesting reading, one in which for the “straight” characters, no cost is too high to pay to suppress the possibility of gayness. As Clum says, the “homosexuals in Williams’s plays and stories always die a grotesque death, not so much as the expected punishment for their proscripted desire, but as the victim of rejection by those closest to them” (130). In *Streetcar* this applies to Allan’s death by suicide when Blanche identifies him as gay, and the theme will reappear in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, where the character of Skipper dies as “punishment” for his love for Brick.
making it vacillate …” (CL 40-41). For Lucretia and Blanche, it would not have been “make-believe” if they had been believed. When Blanche and Lucretia are taken to the asylum, they are relegated to the equivalent of “insignificant snapshots” if they exist at all, in Barthesian terms. It wasn’t until Maggie the Cat in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof that Williams would give us a portrait of a woman who can perform successfully enough to make her performance truth.
When Julia Margaret Cameron photographed her niece and goddaughter Julia Jackson, she almost always presented her as *Julia Jackson*, not as a fictional character, or an angel, or a saint. Unlike most of the women and children Cameron enlisted as models, Julia Jackson was rarely costumed or enlisted to perform a role in an established narrative. She was portrayed as
her biographical self, and portraits of her were titled with her name, which both empowered and limited her. As Violet Hamilton says, Cameron bestowed power upon her women models “by associating them with female personas from history and literature who represented knowledge and potency. Cameron’s depiction of real women as ideal female types or heroines was a response to the notions of acceptable images of women recognized by the conservative social climate of her time . . .” (71). For example, Mary Hillier, though not of the same class as Julia Jackson, could be presented as both herself and as the Madonna, or Sappho, or any number of angels or literary characters. However, since the insistently realistic nature of a photograph means that Mary Hillier is also always present as herself, she is both the real (her biographical self) and the ideal (Virgin Mother, etc.). The texts of the images we have looked at of her are largely concerned with the tension (vacillation) between the reality of an actual woman and the power of the fictional or historical women she was made to represent. That vacillation confers power. It makes Mary Hillier irreducible.

Julia Jackson does not borrow power from a historical or fictional character; any power she has comes from her own character and the way Cameron represents her. With no obvious theatrical role for us to respond to, we focus more on the actual woman, the ways she is presented, and what that says about the nature of looking at women and being seen as a woman. This is an entirely different conversation. When Mary Hillier is presented as the Madonna, we

22 Part of the debate over Julia Margaret Cameron’s portraits of women versus men is that the men generally were presented as themselves while the women more frequently were presented as fictional or historical characters. Lucy Smith addresses this in her recent article, claiming that the “outcome of this mixture is not to make these character portraits [of women] secondary to the portraits of ‘great men’, who go by their own names, but, in my view, to create an alternative archive of ‘great women,’ casting them all into a fictional, temporally fluid atmosphere in which they are given aesthetic equality” (172). On one hand, placing the women in a “temporally fluid atmosphere” gives the women’s portraits greater power, since they are not anchored to a particular historical time. Yet this remains a somewhat unsatisfactory answer to the question of why women had to be presented as more than themselves in order to be given power. There is also the financial aspect to consider. Cameron was determined to make money through photography, and there was a market for photographs of men such as Charles Darwin and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, but perhaps not such a great demand for photographs of Cameron’s household staff.
are invited to consider the nature of performing the Virgin. When Julia Jackson is presented as herself, we are invited to consider the nature of the role of a real woman, and the ways she performs and is read.

The portrait contains powerful clues about the context of this real, biographical woman and how we can read her performance or role. In traditional portrait photography, there is an appropriate amount of “lead room” or “nose room,” which is the space in front of the sitter’s gaze. The way this image is cropped, Julia Jackson has very little lead room. She is so close to the edge of the photo that it creates the sensation of being hemmed in. There is no room for her to move forward or get out of the frame. The space behind her is so dark as to be nearly illegible, and we cannot tell what is in front of her or what she may be looking at; she is visually boxed in, contained. The photographer is close to her, too, which also leads to the feeling of her being trapped for, or by, our gaze. She gains some level of control by averting her eyes and refusing that level of contact to the viewer, but there is still the sense that she has been pinned and mounted for our observation. The way she is turned and the way the tendon of her neck strains makes it appear that she is trying to lean back, away from the viewer. The feeling that she is trapped leads one to consider the nature of being a woman at that time and the restrictions she may have faced. There were few roles for her to choose from: angel, whore, mother, wife. Julia Jackson was young, beautiful, and upper class; she would be expected to perform as wife and mother. The way Cameron presents her in this image leads a viewer to consider the claustrophobic reality of having to conform to a predetermined role.23

23 For contrast, see Cameron’s image Call and I Follow (Appendix D). Mary Hillier does not have much more lead room here than Julia Jackson, but because of the way her chin is tilted up and her hair is free, she appears confident, even defiant, rather than restricted or trapped.
In her portraits of her niece, Cameron acknowledged her individual power at the same time she highlighted her essential unknowability and limited options. That we do not know this woman’s story becomes clear when there is no visual chatter about other women and other narratives. When we look at Mary Hillier as Mary Madonna, there is a narrative that we already know and understand, and we join it in progress. When we look at Julia Jackson, we have to take our cues and build our meaning from the text of the image. Sylvia Wolf says “[n]o angel in the house or fading flower from romantic poetry was she. Nor was Jackson typecast as a member of a sisterhood of women who was born with an innate capacity for nurturing which made her ‘great thro’ love. . . .’ In fact, the more Cameron photographed her niece, the less we know about Julia Jackson and the more Cameron herself is on display” (78-79). Cameron’s presence is strong in this image, much like Tennessee Williams’s voice comes through with such clarity and urgency in his works *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*; and the conversation about the ways one’s options are limited by gender (and sexuality) is something we can imagine that Maggie (and Williams) would definitely understand. Just as Julia Jackson’s performance as herself was limited to a choice between preexisting roles, Maggie was boxed in, forced to perform the role of wife and procreator with a man who did not love her.

As Tennessee Williams’s women protagonists’ power grew in their ability to control others’ perception of them, his ability and willingness to articulate his intentions also increased, as evidenced by his writings both within his plays and outside of them, all of which indicate a laser focus on the concept of truth and the ways we read each other. In a letter to Elia Kazan about the staging of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams said, “I just want all of it to measure up to the truest and best of it, and to make it plain to everybody that this play is maybe not a great play, maybe not even a very good play, but a terribly, terribly, terribly true play about truth,
human truth” (Letters 567). In another letter to Kazan, Williams called *Cat* “a goddam fiercely true play” (549).

In a letter to reviewer Brooks Atkinson, Williams discussed the two versions of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The play that Williams initially wrote, and the revision that he reluctantly created for Elia Kazan’s theatrical production (known as the “Broadway version”), have both been published. “Sometime I would like you to read the original (first) version of it before I re-wrote Act III for production purposes,” Williams wrote to Atkinson. “Both versions will be published and, confidentially, I do mean confidentially, I still much prefer to original. It was harder and purer: a blacker play but one that cut closer to the bone of the truth I believe” (Letters 569). The “bone of truth” was what Williams was trying to expose, even when the truth was “hard” and “black.”

Truth for Williams, in this context, meant a level of accepting ambiguity and allowing for a lack of resolution. In his journals, Williams wrote about the debate with Kazan over rewriting the end of his play: “I do get his point, but I am afraid he doesn’t quite get mine. Things are not always explained. Situations are not always resolved. Characters don’t always ‘progress.’ But I shall, of course, try to arrive at another compromise with him” (Letters 558). Williams’s resistance to explanations and resolutions are reflected in his treatment of the characters in *Cat*. He spoke to his approach in character definition, specifically for Brick:

The poetic mystery for BRICK is the poem of the play, not its story but the poem of the story, and must not be dispelled by any dishonestly oracular conversations about him: I don’t know him any better than I know my closest relative or dearest friend which isn’t
well at all: the only people we think we know well are those who mean little to us.

(559)²⁴

Like Cameron photographing her niece and goddaughter Julia Jackson, Williams concedes that his characters remain to some degree unknowable. Even in the context of the play, Williams admits he cannot always read Brick any better than Maggie can: “Margaret, back at the dressing-table, still doesn’t see Brick. He is watching her with a look that is not quite definable.—Amused? shocked? contemptuous?—part of those and part of something else” (888).

Mary Hillier isn’t (just) a Madonna, Julia Jackson isn’t (just) a wife, Brick Pollitt isn’t (just? at all?) a gay man, and Maggie the Cat is more than we can see of her. Cameron and Williams take no shortcuts and do not allow their audience to fall back on tidy definitions. They create and present characters who are only partially knowable, and not reducible to a unary reading. When someone is important, Williams says, one does not impose a truth or search for an “answer” to them. The only people we think we have an answer for are those who “mean little” to us. The best one can do when it matters is to leave room for more than one reading. Cameron’s soft focus reminds us that we never see everything about a person, the way Williams permits his characters to have multiplicity and ambiguity. Characters do not have to progress, they do not have to be singular, they do not have to be knowable. Sometimes the truth of a character is bigger than a single interpretation.

²⁴ Rebecca Holder addresses Williams’s love for Brick, and how he moves the audience to love him, too: “. . . Brick’s quiet contempt seduces the audience into loving him too, or at least into identifying with his disgust for mendacity.” I would argue that the reason we love Brick is because Maggie loves Brick, and we root for her. Dean Shackelford says that when “Maggie gazes on her beloved Brick’s body, the audience itself is so directed” (108). In other words, even our love for this character is a reflection of Maggie’s power. In an older discussion of Brick, Signi Lenea Falk says, “[h]e has nobility only in Maggie’s imagination; his treatment of her and his father is like that of a small peevish boy striking back. When Joseph Wood Krutch says that there is no tragic nobility in the plays of Williams—only an ‘unsavory mess’—he could well be referring to Brick Pollitt” (109). Maybe he is an unsavory mess, but he is Maggie’s unsavory mess, and at least this reader found herself sympathetic to him.
The characters of Brick and Maggie were both so important to Williams, and both so true, that he initially drafted the play in alternating viewpoints, giving both of them authorial authority even when their versions of reality clashed. In her memoirs, Audrey Wood describes the first draft of Cat that Williams shared with her: “In his version, if you had a scene between Brick and Maggie, the first scene would be written from Brick’s point of view. Then you’d turn a page and there would be the same from Maggie’s point of view. Page after page it went on, a massive piece of work” (165). That Williams would put the narrative in the mouths of both of these characters shows that the literal, factual truth was never his point. He was invested in the characters’ versions of truths. Cat is a work of extended portraiture.

That this play, and these characters’ truths, were very personal for the author is evident in his commitment to their voices and also how present he is in the script, even to the point of being intrusive. About an author’s presence in his work, Williams said:

Of course it is a pity that so much of all creative work is so closely related to the personality of the one who does it. It is sad and embarrassing and unattractive that those emotions that stir him deeply enough to demand expression, and to charge their expression with some measure of light and power, are nearly all rooted, however changed in their surface, in the particular and sometimes peculiar concerns of the artist himself, that special world, the passions and images of it that each of us weaves about him from birth to death, a web of monstrous complexity, spun forth at a speed that is incalculable to a length beyond measure, from the spider-mouth of his own singular perceptions. (Essays 83)

Williams is fully aware of how much of himself is reflected in his art, and he finds that “sad and embarrassing and unattractive,” but in true Tennessee Williams fashion, he does not hide from it.
His presence is so obvious in *Cat* that he almost functions as a narrator in the published script, both in setting the scene, and then later by inserting his own voice in the middle of a pivotal scene.

In *Madonna*, Williams sets the scene in a clipped, utilitarian way. In *Streetcar*, he builds the setting in the mind of his reader with poetic, beautiful descriptions of the light, setting, smells and sounds of a New Orleans neighborhood. In *Cat*, he uses an introductory section of “Notes for the Designer” to ground the play as coming specifically from *him*, the autobiographical Tennessee Williams.

This may be irrelevant or unnecessary, but I once saw a reproduction of Robert Louis Stevenson’s home on that Samoan Island where he spent his last years, and there was a quality of tender light on weathered wood, such as porch furniture made of bamboo and wicker, exposed to tropical suns and tropical rains, which came to mind when I thought about the set for this play, bringing also to mind the grace and comfort of light, the reassurance it gives, on a late and fair afternoon in summer, the way that no matter what, even dread of death, is gently touched and soothed by it. For the set is the background for a play that deals with human extremities of emotion, and it needs that softness behind it.

(880)

Williams references Robert Louis Stevenson (the author of *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, speaking of characters with multiple truths), as a way of connecting himself to a literary tradition, a life and existence of writers and by doing so, brings the reader’s attention to the process of creation and the creator. Williams’s direct address to the reader (“I once saw”) grounds us in the world of the personal; he is speaking to the reader in his own voice.
Williams establishes another key understanding in these opening directions. Big Daddy’s home was originally owned by “Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. It other words, the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon” (880). Before the play even begins, we know that we are located in a world that has been controlled and owned by gay men, and this is a truth that is presented in a matter-of-fact tone. We are not meant to be shocked or startled, only situated in a world where men can love each other and build a life and a home together.25

For all that Barthes may claim that the author is dead and we cannot depend upon him to give us the answers to his texts, Williams has placed himself as a narrator/character/voice inside this work, which will deal with the concerns of “the artist himself” even when those concerns are “sad and embarrassing and unattractive.” In the first two pages of the script, Williams himself has placed the reader directly in a world that is gay, literary, and his.

From the beginning of Act One, Maggie and Brick are both costumed in ways that reveal their inner state. Like Blanche, Maggie knows the power of the right costume, and like Lucretia, her clothing reveals her inner state of mind. Lucretia wears the coquettish frilliness of a southern girl, which is at odds with her age and her sexual desire. Maggie wears clothes that highlight her sexuality in an attempt to get Brick’s attention. She’s dressed when she comes in from dinner,

25 There is some ambiguity, however, in their ability to build a home. In his article “‘By Coming Suddenly Into a Room That I thought Was Empty’: Mapping the Closet with Tennessee Williams,” David Savran points out “[t]he very setting of the play foregrounds the question of inheritance by commemorating the birth of the plantation”—a childless couple. “What is most striking about this pattern of estate ownership is . . . the homosexuality that stands at its imputed origin and so determinedly ‘haunts’ its development” (63). We are in a world where gay men can own a home and it can be mentioned in such a matter-of-fact way. At the same time, you could argue for a reading that says the legacy of two gay men started out complicated and never got straightened back out. (See Savran’s article for more about how gay themes in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Streetcar Named Desire are contradictory and complicated.) Michael P. Bibler asserts, however, that the “definitional center” of the play, “the loving relationship” between Straw and Ochello “. . . reveals the various emotional defects of every straight relationship in the play” (385).
but “[s]he steps out of her dress, stands in a slip of ivory satin and lace” (883). She was properly dressed for her dinner with Brick’s family, but once she is back in their room, she is dressed in white satin and lace, a combination of unwilling purity and aspirational sexuality. Her costume reflects both her unwilling, forced purity and her attempt to seduce Brick, or at the very least to get him to look at her.

She does not manage to garner the kind of response from Brick that she is looking for. Brick is wearing even less than Maggie, but his undress shows indifference rather than an attempt at (or openness to) seduction. Williams lets the light treat Brick the way Blanche was always hoping it would treat her: “He is still slim and firm as a boy. His liquor hasn’t started tearing him down outside. . . . Perhaps in a stronger light he would show some signs of deliquescence, but the fading, still warm, light from the gallery treats him gently” (884-85). The light is not quite gentle enough for Maggie, however: “(She adjusts the angle of a magnifying mirror to straighten an eyelash, then rises fretfully saying:) There’s so much light in the room it—” (885). Brick interrupts her to ask about Big Daddy, but Maggie crosses to close the blinds. The light is soft enough to hide Brick’s imperfections, but it is not soft enough for Maggie’s taste when she looks in a magnifying mirror.

The fact that Maggie is looking in a magnifying mirror in spite of the fact that she shares at least some degree of Blanche’s anxiety over her appearance shows her willingness to face the truth, no matter how unpleasant. Part of what accounts for the power differential between Maggie and Blanche is that Blanche’s approach was negative, and Maggie’s is positive. Both characters need a man in order to become or remain safe in the society of their time. In order to try to get one, Blanche needs to obscure the truth: She is older than she wants Mitch to think, and she has been sexually active in a way that was not acceptable in her world. She needs to suppress
or deny those truths. Maggie is younger than Blanche, but she has become unattractive to her husband and she needs to pretend to be something that society would say she should be but is not—in other words, trying to start a family with her husband. Blanche needs to perform purity (not sexuality), but Maggie needs to perform sexuality (not sterility); she needs Brick to see her as desirable, and she needs her audience to believe that she and Brick will carry on the family line. Her struggle is framed at the end of Act One:

MARGARET: . . . Brick?—I’ve been to a doctor in Memphis, a—a gynecologist. . . . I’ve been completely examined, and there is no reason why we can’t have a child whenever we want one. And this is my time by the calendar to conceive. Are you listening to me? Are you? Are you LISTENING TO ME?

BRICK: Yes. I hear you, Maggie. (His attention returns to her inflamed face.) —But how in hell on earth do you imagine—that you’re going to have a child by a man that can’t stand you?

MARGARET: That’s a problem that I will have to work out. (913)

Maggie’s challenge is one of production, not hiding. Lucretia makes up sex she has not had in order to create an imaginary baby. Blanche lies about sex she has had in order to perform purity to entice a man she thinks will make her safe. Maggie is very clear with her audience (Brick and the reader/audience) that she can have a baby, and she fully intends to do just that in spite of Brick’s feelings on the matter.

Maggie’s context is different from Blanche’s and Lucretia’s in another way, too. Blanche was displaced, a refugee in a world that had moved on without her. She was born into a world of gentility, raised to be a lady of means. When she lost her home and suffered through the very real and messy deaths of her family, she was thrust into a world and a context that she had not been
raised to be able to navigate. Maggie, on the other hand, was born poor. She is beautiful, and she
knows that the way to use that beauty is to make sure it gets her safely anchored in a real
marriage with her husband. She can articulate the risk in a way that Blanche probably would not
have been able to: “You can be young without money but you can’t be old without it. You’ve got
to be old with money because to be old without it is just too awful, you’ve got to be one or the
other, either young or with money, you can’t be old and without it.—That’s the truth, Brick. . . .”
(908). This is what is on the line for Maggie. She knows that to get be safe, to be “old with
money,” she needs to make her marriage with Brick real enough that Big Daddy will not exclude
them from his inheritance.

Maggie’s commitment to speaking truth is a double-edged sword. She serves as Brick’s
scout, going out to gather truth and bring it back to him. In the beginning of the play, she has
been to dinner with his family and she brings him a report of what people said, what they did,
what they really thought, and how they observed each other. She tells him that Mae and Gooper
are using their status as child-bearers to try to gain favor with Big Daddy. She talks about how
Brick’s brother and sister-in-law behaved at dinner, and says, “Of course it’s comical but it’s
also disgusting since it’s so obvious what they’re up to.” “What are they up to, Maggie?” Brick
asks.

MARGARET: I’ll tell you what they’re up to, boy of mine!—They’re up to cutting you
out of your father’s estate, and— (She freezes momentarily before her next remark. Her
voice drops as if it were somehow a personally embarrassing admission.)

—Now we know that Big Daddy’s dyin’ of—cancer. . . .

BRICK: (softly but sharply): Do we?

MARGARET: Do we what?
BRICK: Know Big Daddy’s dyin’ of cancer?

MARGARET: Got the report today. (885)

Maggie speaks life and death truth to Brick *quietly*, as if it is something “embarrassing,” or perhaps something not to be overheard, in order not to share the power of truth with the always-listening Mae and Gooper. When Brick challenges her, she answers him directly with no evasion. The report from the doctors confirm what they have all expected: Big Daddy has advanced cancer. Williams warned us, and Maggie warns Brick: We are dealing with the “dread of death” and “human extremities of emotion.” Maggie may speak her truths quietly, but she *does* speak them. As she tells Brick, silence is not an option for her: “When something is festering in your memory or your imagination, laws of silence don’t work, it’s just like shutting a door and locking it on a house on fire in hope of forgetting that the house is burning. But not facing a fire doesn’t put it out. Silence about a thing just magnifies it . . .” (893).

Rebecca Holder’s article “Making the Lie True: Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Truth as Performance” dissects the various truths in this play, specifically how they move around Brick. She says that for most of the play, Brick “rarely even participates in the performance of the plot,” (81), however:

In all three of the central relationships in the play, Brick cannot or chooses not to perform the truth—in his relationship with Skipper, he hangs up the phone after Skipper presumably confesses his love for Brick; in his relationship with Big Daddy, Brick complains that they never talk to each other . . . and in his relationship with Maggie the Cat, he withholds both sex and affection because of Maggie’s involvement with Skipper’s death. (81)
If Maggie’s role is to speak the truth, Brick refuses it, by refusing to be present or to respond to her, whether that is because of her involvement with Skipper’s death, as Holder says, or because he cannot allow himself to accept the truth she speaks to him, either of Big Daddy’s death or Skipper’s love.

After Maggie’s speech about truth, Brick drops his crutch, perhaps to distract her. When she offers to let him lean on her, he screams, “... like sudden lightning.” “I don’t want your shoulder, I want my crutch!” Brick’s metaphorical crutch is alcohol, of course, and throughout the play he refuses attempts from Maggie and both of his parents to give it up. But Maggie takes his outburst as something positive. After first cautioning him to be quiet because they’ll be overheard, she says, “—but that’s the first time I’ve heard you raise your voice in a long time, Brick. A crack in the wall?—Of composure?—I think that’s a good sign. . . . A sign of nerves in a player on the defensive!” (894). When she can get the “brick wall” to react to her in any way, she sees it as a form of progress.

In his article “Obstacles to Communication in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” Philip Kolin points out that the emphasis on voices and volume is a device Williams uses throughout the play, frequently to highlight how ineffective the communication between these characters is:

The estranged and hardened Brick opts for silence; Mae and Gooper are caught up in the hurly-burly of greed; Big Daddy forcefully asserts where he should gently inquire; and Big Mama plays out her role as part harridan, part buffoon. Only Maggie the Cat attempts to break down barriers. (74)

Particularly compared to Brick’s silence and the unpleasant communication styles of the other characters, Maggie’s voice is described in favorable terms, indicating a difference in the way she communicates, or “tries to break down barriers.” Kolin says, Maggie . . . usually has a
melodious, tuneful voice” (75). In fact, Williams’s directions frequently use musical terms to describe her voice: “Margaret’s voice is both rapid and drawling. In her long speeches she has the vocal tricks of a priest delivering a liturgical chant, the lines are almost sung, always continuing a little beyond her breath so she has to gasp for another. Sometimes she intersperses the lines with a little wordless singing, such as ‘Da-da-daaaa!’” (883). A few pages later, the directions tell us, “Her voice has range, and music; sometimes it drops low as a boy’s and you have a sudden image of her playing boy’s games as a child” (885), and a few pages after that, “. . . her voice shakes with laughter which is basically indulgent” (887). Maggie drawls, sings, laughs. Even merely reading her voice, we have the impression that compared to the other sounds that are happening on stage, she would be a joy to hear. Still, Brick tries to silence her: “Will you do me a favor? . . . Just, just keep your voice down!” (894).

Maggie defies Brick, however, and employs her voice to control the narrative, and the truth, through the power of naming. When she insists on speaking about Brick’s friend Skipper in spite of Brick’s threats (“Maggie, you want me to hit you with this crutch? Don’t you know I could kill you with this crutch?”) she wrests control from him and speaks unwelcome truth in the present about having spoken unwelcome truth in the past:

BRICK: One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true!—I had friendship with Skipper—You are naming it dirty!

MARGARET: I’m not naming it dirty! I am naming it clean.

BRICK: Not love with you, Maggie, but friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing, and you are naming it dirty!

MARGARET: Then you haven’t been listenin’, not understood what I’m saying! I’m naming it so damn clean that it killed poor Skipper!—You two had something that had to
be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes!—and death was the only icebox where you could keep it. . . . (910)

Maggie tells Brick that speaking the truth about the love between Brick and Skipper is what destroyed Skipper, and the reader knows that this is what Brick refuses to forgive. “I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told him could not be told?—From then on, Skipper was nothing but a receptacle for liquor and drugs. . . .” Brick strikes at her and misses. He has failed to silence her, and she says, “I’m not good. I don’t know why people have to pretend to be good, nobody’s good. . . . but I’m honest! Give me credit for just that, will you please? Born poor, raised poor, expect to die poor unless I manage to get us something out of what big Daddy leaves when he dies of cancer!” (910-11).

Maggie named the truth to Skipper (that he loved Brick), and she names it to Brick as well (she and Skipper “made love to each other to dream it was you, both of us!” (909)). Neither man wants her truth, but she refuses to let either of them escape it. Her power lies in insisting that her understanding of the truth is spoken, and through speaking, she takes ownership. Later, when Brick is having a version of the same conversation with Big Daddy, Williams chimes in—in his own voice—to caution the reader against assuming she knows what she thinks she knows about Brick:

*The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man’s psychological problem. I’m trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis. Some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the*
revelation of character in life, even in one’s own character to himself. This does not absolve the playwright of his duty to observe and probe as clearly and deeply as he legitimately can: but it should steer him away from “pat” conclusions, facile definitions which make a play just a play, not a snare for the truth of human experience. (945)

The truth that Williams is trying to snare is that there is not a truth. Brick may be gay—the play certainly suggests that he is. Maggie does not think so: “I know, believe me I know, that it was only Skipper that harbored even any unconscious desire for anything not perfectly pure between you two!” (910). That is the version of the truth that Maggie speaks. There was a love between the two men. It was clean, she says, pure on Brick’s side if not on Skipper’s. When Williams inserts his own voice to caution us against a “pat” answer for Brick, the point is that what matters, what he wants to call our attention to, is the process of reading each other, and of being read. Blanche and Lucretia both ultimately failed because they could not control the ways others interpreted them. Both were read as mad, due at least in part to a sexual contradiction. Lucretia could not be a virgin spinster and also a pregnant rape victim. Blanche was not permitted to

---

26 Much of the scholarship about *Cat* centers on this topic. Is Brick gay? Is he straight? Is he homophobic, bisexual, asexual? Williams answered this question differently at different times. In an article published in 1999, Brenda Murphy says that at the time *Cat* was published and first performed, Williams would not have been able to address homosexuality more directly: “In 1955, Williams the writer was as unable to deal with the question of homosexuality in his protagonist as Brick was in his life” (Agonistes 44). John S. Bak concurs in his article “‘Sneakin’ and Spyin’ from Broadway to the Beltway: Cold War Masculinity, Brick, and Homosexual Existentialism.” “Certainly, it was dangerous for Williams to write openly about homosexuality at a time when Congressional witch-hunts of artists were daily fare . . . and honest treatments of homosexuality onstage were not the stuff of Pulitzer’s, an award Williams openly coveted” (226-27). Dean Shackelford’s article “The Truth That Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*” points out that the presence of Skipper’s erotic feelings for Brick made the play “subversive for its time” (105). Douglas Arrell writes about how the issue is complicated further by Williams’s decision to publish both versions of the play, in his article “Homosexual Panic in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.” Michael P. Bibler writes about how the uncertainty over Brick’s sexuality make the ending ultimately ambiguous, because a reader cannot be sure Brick will sleep with Maggie to make her pregnancy a reality.

27 Brick’s conversation with Big Daddy also only acknowledges Skipper’s truth: “BRICK: His truth, not mine! BIG DADDY: His truth, okay! But you wouldn’t face it with him!” (951) Maybe Skipper can be assigned a truth because he “means little” to Williams. However, as Holder says, “By admitting the truthfulness of Skipper’s feelings, Brick inadvertently acknowledges the very nature of truth in the play: the happening truth is irrelevant, and the performed truth is all that matters” (89).
perform as pure when her past included sexually promiscuous behavior, and her *actual* rape did not fit in the world view of the person in power (Stella). Maggie, though, can and does navigate these sexual contradictions. Her husband was in love with a man but is not gay. She is a woman who does not have sex with her husband, yet claims to be pregnant. She wins because she is able to force the other characters to accept her version of the narrative, which by the end of the play has become even more audacious. “Brick does not have a liquor problem at all,” she declares. “Brick is devoted to Big Daddy. This thing is a terrible strain on him” (965). Then, to counter Mae and Gooper’s role as the couple who carries on the family line, Maggie lays claim to Pregnant.

Mae says, “Do you know why she’s childless? She’s childless because that big beautiful athlete husband of hers won’t go to bed with her!” (967). Literally, of course, this is true, just as it was literally true that Stanley raped Blanche. However, when the person in power—Stella in *Streetcar*, Maggie in *Cat*—contradicts a truth, it is negated. As the battle for control continues between Big Mama, Maggie and Brick, and Mae and Gooper, Maggie takes control. “Everybody listen. . . . I have an announcement to make. . . . Brick and I are going to—*have a child*!” (971).

In and of itself, that announcement is not necessarily an untruth. They probably are going to have a child, because Maggie has the power to make that happen. Mae says, “*That woman*
isn’t pregnant!” Gooper responds, “Who said she was?” “She did,” Mae responds (972). But she did not. She said she and Brick are going to have a child. She did not say she was pregnant yet.28

When Mae and Gooper leave their room, Maggie thanks Brick for not contradicting her. “OK, Maggie,” he says. Then he tries to go to sleep on the couch, like he does every night, but Maggie will not allow it. She says: “Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn’t want to be overpowered by you. But now, since you’ve taken to liquor—you know what?—I guess it’s bad, but now I’m stronger than you and I can love you more truly! Don’t move that pillow. I’ll move it right back if you do!” (975). She tells him this is the time of the month when she’s fertile, and she will not allow him to move to the couch:

MARGARET: And so tonight, we’re going to make the lie true, and when that’s done, I’ll bring the liquor back here and we’ll get drunk together, here, tonight, in this place that death has come into . . . .—What do you say?

BRICK: I don’t say anything. I guess there’s nothing to say.

MARGARET: Oh, you weak people. You weak, beautiful people!—who give up.—What you want is someone to—(she turns out the rose-silk lamp.)—take hold of you.—Gently, gently, with love! And—(the curtain begins to fall slowly.) I do love you, Brick. I do!

BRICK: (smiling with charming sadness): Wouldn’t it be funny if that was true? (976)

28 As noted in the beginning of this discussion, I am focusing on Williams’s first version of the play, not the revised Broadway version. If I were to analyze the Broadway version, however, I would point out that it is very significant that Big Daddy is the only character who corroborates Maggie’s pregnancy: “Uh-huh, this girl has life in her body, that’s no lie!” (1002). (Brick responds with “JESUS!”, perhaps referring to the sort of miracle that would have been required for Maggie to be pregnant.) When Mae objects, Brick defends Maggie: “Mae, Sister Woman, not everybody makes much noise about love. Oh, I know some people are huffers an’ puffers, but others are silent lovers” (1003). This paper is not going to concentrate on that alternate version, but if it were, those would be some of the things worth calling out. For an interesting analysis of the differences between the two versions and the ways the Broadway version made Brick less gay and Maggie more conventional, see “Mendacity on the Stage: ‘Lying and Liars’ in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” by Kenneth Elliott.
Brick does not say it *is not* true, but he does not say that it is, either; he echoes Big Daddy’s words to Big Mamma when she insists she has always loved him (923). Neither man is able to accept, much less return, the love of their wives. The difference is that Big Mamma cries and runs from the room while Maggie never stops fighting. In a letter to Kazan, Williams said that *Cat* was “a play about good bastards and good bitches. I mean it exposes the startling co-existence of good and evil, the shocking duality of the single heart” (Letters 549). Maybe “plurality” would have been better, since there are more than just two versions of the hearts in this work. Of all the characters, Maggie is the one who is able to harness and own that plurality. She is a woman with a husband who refuses to sleep with her, and is nevertheless pregnant. It *is* true, if you take it out of chronology. We have every reason to believe that she will become pregnant, since she has told Brick on multiple occasions that it is her time of the month to conceive: (“I really have been to a doctor and I know what to do and—Brick?—this is my time by the calendar to conceive!” (975)). She has won.

As with *Streetcar*, the text of this play refuses to allow us to neatly stack characters in terms of “good” and “bad.” Perhaps most readers would root for Maggie, although an overview of scholarly articles about this play indicates that certainly not everyone does, but if one imagines switching gender roles for a moment, this closing scene between Maggie and Brick is very problematic. Brick is seduced. Although he is physically stronger than Maggie, the fact remains that he is drunk, and he does not consent. Maggie “takes hold” of him. “Gently, gently, with love” or not, she is imposing her sexual will on someone who has made it clear that he does not want it. This is a reading that Williams himself encouraged:

I thought that in Maggie I had presented a very true and moving portrait of a young woman whose frustration in love and whose practicality drove her to the literal seduction
of an unwilling young man. Seduction is too soft a word. Brick was literally forced back to bed by Maggie, when she confiscated his booze.” (Memoirs 169)

When one partner “forces” an “unwilling” (and drunk, and hampered by an injury) partner to have sex, we normally call that rape. Maggie is depicted as powerful and in some ways heroic because she holds on to her marriage and forces her version of it to become true. However, to a modern audience trained to also consider the notion of consent and of power differentials, this is more complicated than a woman taking control of her own destiny. Brick is too drunk to give consent, he is injured, and he has limited mobility. If the gender of these characters were reversed, this becomes an unambiguous rape scene, an aspect that critics seem to have glossed over in spite of Williams’s own statement that Maggie took Brick by force. Maggie wins, but she is not necessarily totally worthy of our admiration. A reading in which she is labeled a liar and a rapist may not be that big of a stretch.

Maggie is the character whose version of truth lends the stamp of validity. Maggie says Brick was not gay, and that they do have sex, and that she is pregnant. The last two things, at least, we think she will be able to make come true just by insisting upon them, in the same way that Stella had the power to make Stanley a not-rapist just by refusing to accept a truth in which he was. Like Stella in Streetcar, what Maggie says in Cat becomes true through the power of her validation. Also like Stella, she understands that the “animal must survive,” to paraphrase Kazan’s words. In order to secure that survival, Maggie, like Stella, must (and does) continue the family line at any cost. In terms of Streetcar characters, Maggie is Stella.29

Maggie is also Blanche, however. She is a woman who is trying to become safe in her world and society through her relationship with a man. Blanche was trying to get a man and

---

29 Except in the undisussed Broadway Version, where Big Daddy plays the role of Stella by deciding which version of the truth wins.
Maggie is trying to *get with* the man she already has, but both women perform versions of their sexuality that are counter to the literal truth. Blanche has the power to make hers true for a short time, but Maggie has the power to turn her fabrication into the literal truth and by doing so, the implication is that she will remain safe. Her fear is of being old and without money. At the end of the play, we have reason to believe that she is on her way to having the money, the man, and the baby, well before she becomes old.  

Perhaps most troublingly, Maggie is also Stanley. She insists on speaking her version of the truth to Skipper and Brick, even when that truth destroys Skipper and leads Brick to threaten on multiple occasions to beat her with his crutch. She overrides Brick’s truth—that of not wanting to be with her—through imposing her sexuality on him just as Stanley did with Blanche. It is true that Brick does not try to fight her off with a broken bottle the way Blanche did Stanley; Brick sort of half-heartedly objects and then allows himself to be led to bed. Stanley rejects and destroys Blanche’s purity by raping her; Maggie rejects Brick’s rejection of her by seducing—or raping—him and, presumably, becomes pregnant. C.W.E. Bigsby also equates Maggie with a rapist, but suggests she forced herself on Skipper: “Brick must live with the person who ‘raped’ his friend as Stella has had to live with Stanley who had raped her sister” (54).  

It is almost as if Maggie becomes pregnant through the power of her own words; she *speaks* her pregnancy into existence. In this sense, she is a progression from Lucretia in “Portrait of a Madonna.” Lucretia claimed pregnancy, but she never had the power it would have taken to

---

30 Roger Boxill makes an interesting case for a parallel between Brick and Blanche: “Indeed it is his puritan ‘disgust’ with homosexuality, no less than Blanche’s, that results in the analogous loss by suicide of his closest human tie. Blanche and Brick, as the symbolic white they wear reminds us, had both wished for a kind of marriage of pure souls” (113).  
31 A case for Maggie as Skipper’s rapist does not bear up to close scrutiny, although Maggie tells us that Skipper was also drunk. When Maggie told Brick to “STOP LOVIN’ ON MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM” (911) Skipper hit her. She went to his room later and “he made that pitiful, ineffectual little attempt to prove that what I had said wasn’t true. . . .” Maggie confronted Skipper and then put herself within his reach—which is not the same thing as raping him.
force that truth to be born of her language, and the truth that matters is the truth that is successfully performed. Holder asserts that “Maggie’s ultimate goal in her relationship with Brick is to manipulate him into participating in the performed truth of their marriage . . .” (89). There is no greater evidence of a successfully performed marriage than a pregnancy. Starting a family with Brick will give Maggie a near-guarantee that her future is certain. As she says, “What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof?—I wish I knew. . . . Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can. . . .” (893).

To revisit his words to Kazan, Williams called this a “terribly, terribly, terribly true play about truth, human truth” (Letters 567). Because of Williams’s unmistakable, direct presence in the play, we are led to consider his message in the same way we consider what Cameron is trying to tell us in her portraits of Julia Jackson and, as we will see, Julia Norman. When the author’s voice is insistently present, it lends an urgency to their message, as if they are speaking directly to the reader, willing her to understand and connect with their vision. For Williams, the urgency of that message increased along with his heroines’ power. To the degree that they have the power to control the way they are perceived, they are able to direct their destiny. Maggie has the largest portion of that power of the women we have analyzed so far. In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams shows us what it looks like on the other side, from the perspective of a woman who has fallen from her position of power and is aging into irrelevance. Maggie may have thought that you could be old as long as you had money; but Princess Kosmonoplis would perhaps have disagreed.
We have seen that a photograph of Julia Margaret Cameron’s niece, Julia Jackson, includes the presence of Cameron’s visual voice as part of the text of the photograph. This image of Cameron’s daughter, Julia Norman, announces Cameron’s own presence even more clearly, not only because of the nature of their relationship, which a viewer may or may not know, but
also because this photograph holds the sitter even more tightly and restricts her even more dramatically, limiting the conversation more strictly. Visually, Julia Norman has even fewer options than Julia Jackson does in her portraits. She is even more hemmed in—she is not oriented toward an edge of the photograph, given a visual, virtual escape. She is presented against a dark background as many of Cameron’s subjects are, but here she looks down, not out. We have no visual information about this sitter’s context. We cannot even see her hair, which was an indicator of femininity and sexuality, and her collar is high and severe. The only skin that we can see, other than a bit of her throat, is her face, which guides us to study her expression rather than gathering data about her clothing (costume) or ornamentation.

The lack of superficial visual direction makes this portrait more timeless than many of Cameron’s images. Sylvia Wolf suggests that these later, less traditionally narrative portraits are more effective, or at least more interesting to a modern audience: She claims that “the more literal illustrations of texts—the ones in which women wear theatrical costumes or act out specific situations, as in the pictures for Tennyson’s *Idylls* . . . seem to me the least successful of Cameron’s works, resembling the *tableaux vivants* of Victorian after-dinner entertainment . . .” (14). It is certainly true that those images seem anchored in a particular time. A viewer does not have to know much about the Victorian tradition of staging scenes from famous narratives in order to read those images as located within a period of time in the far past: “They become dated. They lose their universality. Cameron was right to make her models take their hair down and wrap themselves in shawls and turbans. It eternalizes their beauty, the way nudity might, if nudity were an option” (14). Removing details that ground this image in a certain time period (even Julia Jackson is grounded by the details of her dress), changes the conversation. Some of Cameron’s images seem almost campy; it is sometimes tempting to read or dismiss them as
quaint artifacts of another time, but this portrait is different. Without the visual markers of another era, we can identify with the sitter.

Cameron’s focus technique is also more subdued here than in some of her other portraits. The left side of Julia’s face is in sharper focus, along with the beautifully-lit right edge of the fabric that covers her hair. The degree of difference is smaller, though, and serves more to gently direct the eye and balance the overall image than it does to distract or emphasize certain details.

Julia Norman is older here than the models in most of Cameron’s other images, even those of Julia Jackson. Much of Cameron’s images of women focus on “milkmaid Madonnas” — young, beautiful, rounded women playing roles from other narratives—but those women would not have been young forever. Here, the viewer is permitted—even directed—to see the ways in which Julia’s face is aging. Her face is harder, and she has lines around her mouth. Cameron’s hands, the processing chemicals, dust in the air, and imperfections in the process leave traces on her prints the same way that time has left traces on Julia’s face. As Williams will show us through the journey of his character Princess in Sweet Bird of Youth, these imperfections can be beautiful and can add pathos to a performance, although perhaps only temporarily. Evidence of aging or of touch call attention to the process of performing, and of being performed upon. In the Essay “Melancholy Objects” from On Photography, Susan Sontag says that a damaged or imperfect print sometimes adds to the beauty or power of the finished product:

Photographs, when they get scrofulous, tarnished, stained, cracked, faded still look good; do often look better. (In this, as in other ways, the art that photography does resemble is architecture, whose works are subject to the same inexorable promotion through the passage of time; many buildings, and not only the Parthenon, probably look better as ruins. (79)
Julia’s face is certainly not in “ruins,” but it is worn enough to suggest the passage of time in a way that is beautiful and/or sad, perhaps depending on the viewer’s feeling of the process of aging. We are a society that is obsessed with youth, but we do allow for a certain beauty in the natural aging of a woman’s face, for a time. The clock is ticking on that, though, as Princess knows. The early indicators of a beautiful woman’s face beginning the aging process can be acknowledged as being expressive, but “old” is something else entirely.

Cameron’s images of women are challenging to a viewer in another way: These women do not smile for the camera. We have been conditioned to expect a portrait sitter not only to smile, but to appear as if she is smiling at us. Especially in the age of the selfie, we have learned to expect eye contact and an expression that engages the viewer. Even when Cameron’s models meet our gaze, however, they do not smile. Part of the reason for this is purely technical, of course. With her limited light leading to long exposure times, holding a natural smile would have been very difficult for Cameron’s sitters. But that technical reality does not change the way we read this image. Women, especially, are expected to smile in portraits and in life. When we are denied a smile and a connecting gaze, it changes the way we view the image and the sitter. As Phyllis Rose points out,

Their poses embody sorrow, resignation, composure, solemnity, and love, determined love, love which will have a hard time of it. . . . If Cameron’s portraits of women convey a message, it’s “I’m ready for the worst. I have resources that can be brought to bear on the tragedies I know lie ahead of me, that lie ahead of every woman who lives and loves other creatures who are mortals.” (17-18)
This image was taken only a few years before Cameron’s daughter died in childbirth. Tragedy did lie ahead of her, and for Cameron, and for “every woman who lives and loves other creatures who are mortals.”

Even though Julia Norman may not have been playing a role, she, like Julia Jackson, is still performing, with Cameron as the director. As Joanne Lukitsh says, “The portrait is a performance—Cameron as mother and writer—revealing her understanding even then of the possibilities of invention in front of the camera” (3). That performance may be more complicated and more poignant when the performer is her daughter, but a viewer does not need that information in order to read it. There is another way in which a future of inevitable loss is present, and that is with the visual reference to the Pieta. With her downcast gaze and the way her hair is covered, it is possible to read Julia as a reference to Mary, but a Mary located much later in the Jesus narrative than Madonna with Two Children, for example. If this is the Madonna, is it an older Madonna who has experienced the loss of a child. Given Cameron’s preoccupation with Marys and locating her models in this narrative, it is easy and somewhat satisfying to make this connection, but the image is named “Julia Norman,” not “The Pieta,” or “Mary in Mourning.”

Cameron frequently wrote the phrase “from life” in her handwriting on her prints. She intended this to be a note to her audience that her images were not created by manipulating negatives in the ways that some of her contemporaries did, such as Oscar Rejlander with his composite prints made from multiple negatives. Verisimilitude was never Cameron’s goal, or perhaps she would have used the phrase “of life.” Her images were not intended to function as a reproduction of what a viewer could see had she been there. She was making art, but she wanted to make sure her audience knew she was making art from what already existed around her,
including her own family. Victoria Olsen discusses what it means to photograph one’s own children in her book *From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron and Victorian Photography:*

. . . Cameron presents us with an older female artist creating art to recover idealized children. By replicating her daughter figures and clinging like Mary to the sons she will lose, she wrote her own story into the history of art. In this sense, the Madonna and Child images dramatize the essence of Cameron’s photographic project: to track the process of loss. Her letters full of longing for her children and her photographs full of close-up faces illustrate an urgent desire for presence. (Olsen 171)

If this is Julia Norman as Pieta, it is in order “to track the process of loss.” Cameron will lose her daughter, because however urgently we desire their presence, we cannot recover our “idealized children.” *Julia Norman* reflects an awareness of the constant reality of losing those we love; a viewer does not have to make the mother/daughter connection between Cameron and her sitter in order to create that text.

The presence of the Mary narrative makes the message of loss more urgent without any loss of the biographical specificity. If Julia Norman is Mary in mourning, so too is Cameron, and so too are we. We are not immortal. Even our offspring are temporary. The animal never survives infinitely. Through Princess, Williams gives us an awareness of that inevitable process, but also the hope that the art we create can and will survive.

Perhaps by the time he wrote *Sweet Bird*, Williams was also considering his own mortality in a more urgent way. He was no longer young. His letters and journals of the time
reveal a preoccupation with aging and death. His gaze had moved past figures such as Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat, women who were still young-ish but were preparing for the reality of aging. Now, twelve years after he wrote *Streetcar* and four years after he wrote *Cat*, he gave us a heroine firmly located much later in her aging process, past the years when she could convincingly perform youth or purity. At the same time, his focus grew tighter on his thesis, a study of our ability to perform multiplicities and contradictions, and our willingness or ability to allow those multiplicities and contradictions in others. In a letter to agent Audrey Wood, written in July of 1956, Williams said that *Sweet Bird of Youth* “has the biggest and clearest theme of any work I have done to this point. It is almost a synthesis of the ideas in the other plays, comes to a needle-point of clarity, and directness” (Letters 620).

In spite of Williams’s opinion of his own work, critical reception of *Sweet Bird* was hardly unanimously positive, and scholars are still divided on their opinion of its success. Drewey Wayne Gunn’s article “The Troubled Flight of Tennessee Williams’s *Sweet Bird*: From Manuscript through Published Texts” traces the genesis and evolution of the play, and points out that although the play opened “to lavish praise from New York newspapers reviewers, . . . magazine reviewers, who had had longer to reflect . . . were generally less kind and often outright hostile” (33). Signi Lenea Falk’s analysis is scornful: She quotes a phrase originally about Baudelaire, “Rainbow-tinted refuse,” to describe Williams’s work at this time, including *Sweet Bird*, in a scathingly-titled chapter “The Degenerating Artist.” About *Sweet Bird of Youth*,

---

32 The process of aging seems to have been as much of a concern for Williams as for his heroines, as a passage from his *Notebooks* written more than fifteen years before *Sweet Bird* was initially staged reveals: “I was told that I had a lovely body and the compliment was apparently sincere. As we increase the distance from our youth, such speeches have more and more pathetic value to us. It used to be taken for granted, that we were as desirable to the other as that one to us. Now we seldom are or we do not see how we could be, for we pursue the younger and lovelier than ourselves—Why do I write in the plural? Is it too sad to say ‘I’? But I don’t think much about losing my youth. It happens and is accepted gradually. I feel very young. In a way. And in a way very old. I do not feel the time sense of much longer living. No, it seems as though it would not be long to the finish. But I started feeling that a number of years ago.” (337)
she complains “The predominant interest . . . lies in the sexual theme—and an increasingly morbid interest in the distorted variations upon this theme seems to have had an obsessive fascination for Williams during these later years” (143). In his 1959 review of the play, titled “Williams’ Nebulous Nightmare,” Robert Brustein criticized, “. . . Williams seems less concerned with dramatic verisimilitude than with communicating some hazy notions about such disparate items as Sex, Youth, Time, Corruption, Purity, Castration, Politics and The South. As a result the action of the play is patently untrue . . .”: a curious criticism given how clear Williams always was about how little he valued verisimilitude or “the photographic in art” (255). To call a work of fiction “patently untrue” as a means of devaluing it is startling, to say the least, but Burstein goes on with one of his main objections, which is to the character of Chance Wayne: “Since Chance has had about as much universality as a character in an animated cartoon, to regard his experience as an illuminating reflection of the human condition . . . borders on the grotesque” (255). Brustein wraps up his highly critical review with the following: “But it is useless to document any further the evasions and contradictions of this inferior work. If it has a single virtue, it is in its uniqueness—no one but Williams could have created it” (260). So, in a sense, perhaps he agreed with Williams’s claim that Sweet Bird was a “synthesis of the ideas in the other plays.”

The “needle-point of clarity” focused on the ways we are connected and must continue to strive to understand each other. In the foreword to this play, Williams wrote, “I think that hate is a thing, a feeling, that can only exist where there is no understanding” (153). This is the heart of his willingness to give us characters who make destructive, violent decisions, and his essential unwillingness to judge them for it, or to let the audience off the hook by allowing them to be read as pure villain. Stanley, Blanche, Stella, Maggie, Brick—these characters are liars, they are
sexually problematic, and they hurt each other, but Williams refuses to hate them and does not give his audience that easy out, either. We are called upon to understand even what we cannot condone. It would be difficult, for instance, to argue for a reading of *Streetcar* that paints Stanley as an unambiguous hero, but I have argued that rather than labeling him as a villain and setting him aside, we are called on to examine his behavior in context. Blanche is somewhere on the spectrum between deceptive and dishonest about her past in an attempt to convince a man to marry her. Stella has her sister committed. Maggie lays claim to a false pregnancy and then “seduces” her drunk and unwilling husband. Williams creates characters who are deeply flawed, and then asks us to recognize the truths that drive their behavior, even or especially when those truths seem to run counter to what we think we know. His work calls upon us to leave room for the ways we present the truths of ourselves to each other because if we can only understand, Williams claims, there is no hate.

He also calls on us to recognize ourselves in each other. He does this not only in Chance’s gorgeous parting words sent directly out to the audience (“I don’t ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you . . .”), but also even more directly, in his own voice, in the foreword:

> In fact, I can’t expose a human weakness on the stage unless I know it through having it myself. I have exposed a good many human weaknesses and brutalities and consequently I have them.

> I don’t even think that I am more conscious of mine than any of you are of yours. Guilt is universal. If there exists any area in which a man can rise above his moral condition, imposed upon him at birth and long before birth, by the nature of his breed, then I think it is only a willingness to know it. Hence guilty feelings, and hence defiant
aggressions, and hence the deep dark of despair that haunts our dreams, our creative work, and makes us distrust each other. (153-54)

Williams is willing to acknowledge as his own those faults he shows us, and in *Sweet Bird* perhaps more than any other play, he makes a direct plea for us to admit that we recognize the same faults in ourselves. He does not ask us to change; he only asks us for “a willingness to know” that we are all flawed. In many ways, the character of Princess can be read as Maggie after the fall. This is a woman who had power and fame and wealth. She was Maggie’s ideal, perhaps—Maggie says you can’t be “old and without [money],” but Princess was young with money. Now she’s old (older, anyway), and she does have money, but she has lost or surrendered her power because she is humiliated by the loss of youth. She hides under a fake name and depends upon a young stranger to administer sex, drugs and oxygen to keep her going.

As Williams asks us to see these faults in ourselves, and to recognize ourselves in each other, he unites us against a common enemy—time. Blanche lived in terror of it. Maggie built up defenses against it. Princess recognizes that she has lost the battle already, and time has stripped her of her power. On the other side of that war, her relationship with light is much different than Williams’s other heroines. In the opening scene, which takes place on Easter morning, the Princess refuses light entirely: “[t]he sleeping woman’s face is partly covered by an eyeless black satin domino to protect her from morning glare” (157).\(^3\) She is on the run from reality and she intends to forget, so she is sleeping with a mask over her eyes to keep out any light. The use of a mask here is also interesting in that we know, according to Chance, that “[s]he’s travelling incognito” (159). The mask serves to partially obscure her face (as cosmetics will later), but also

---

\(^3\) Much has been made of the fact that the play opens on Easter, and audiences may be tempted to assign a Christ-role to Chance. He strives for the “Heavenly,” after all, and there are suggestions of atonement and redemption in his “sacrificial” castration. See Peter L. Hays’s article “Tennessee Williams’ Use of Myth in *Sweet Bird of Youth*” for a discussion on Christian and pagan mythology in Williams’s work.
“protects her from the morning glare” while it makes it impossible for her to see anything. She is the opposite of Maggie studying herself in a magnifying mirror and adjusting an eyelash. Princess does not look at herself or anything else.

Chance, on the other hand, is younger, vain, and hungover. When the waiter comes to the door with coffee, Chance directs him to open the shutters “a little. Hey, I said a little, not much, not that much!” If Princess is a version of a fallen Maggie, Chance is our fallen Brick.\textsuperscript{34} Like Brick, he is “exceptionally good looking” and has “the kind of a body that white silk pajamas are, or ought to be, made for” (157-58). Upon being told that his mother died in his absence, Chance lowers the blinds a little more, further restricting the light in the room while Princess slumbers on behind her mask. Chance is willing to see more than Princess, perhaps, but he certainly is not willing to see everything clearly.

When she comes awake from a nightmare, Princess launches into an anxiety attack. Chance, whom she does not remember, removes her eye mask and then brings her oxygen, a pill, and vodka. Then she starts to want to be able to see, but Chance is in control of her and he limits her ability. “My vision’s so cloudy! Don’t I wear glasses, don’t I have any glasses?” Chance tells her that she fell on them and a lens is cracked. “Well, please give me the remnants. I don’t mind waking up in an intimate situation with someone, but I like to see who it’s with, so I can make whatever adjustment seems called for . . . .” (166). (When he does finally give her the cracked glasses, she puts them on, examines him and says, “Well, I may have done better, but God knows I’ve done worse.”) The point of this scene, other than the fact that it is funny (Princess’s voice

\textsuperscript{34} John M. Clum says “Chance, figuratively, is the black-sheep brother of Brick Pollitt in \textit{Cat on a Hot Tin Roof}. Like Brick, he wants his world to be what it was when he was a teenager, but Brick had real athletic ability while Chance never had much more than his looks to depend on” (140-41). One could make the comparison that Brick is to Chance as Maggie is to Princess. The \textit{Cat} characters end on a high(ish) note: A reader can imagine their marriage will resume and they will secure Brick’s inheritance by producing an heir. The \textit{Sweet Bird} characters end on a decidedly ominous note: forthcoming castration for Chance and a strictly-temporary Hollywood encore for Princess.
sounds suspiciously like William’s own in his letters and journals), is that Princess is initially unwilling to let in any light, but when she takes her mask off, she is under Chance’s control. She cannot see until he agrees to hand over her glasses. Even then, through a cracked lens, her vision is compromised, fractured. She looks at him through her damaged glasses while they talk, and then she instructs him to “[t]ake that splintered lens out before it gets in my eye.” He knocks the glasses on the nightstand to remove the rest of the broken lens (167). Throughout this interaction, the power between them is a tug-of-war. She cannot see until he removes her mask and then brings her glasses to her, so he is in control. On the other hand, she orders him around and he does what she tells him to do. He insists on using her real name in spite of her instructions not to, and records their conversation in order to blackmail her with it later. Then when she wants sex to help her forget, she insists upon it and he complies, but for money. It’s a constant push-and-pull for dominance, just like Princess is in a constant battle with her memory. At times it seems as if her amnesia is genuine. She is panicked when she wakes up, and seems not to know where she is or who she is with. Then when Chance brings her a drink, she says, “I want to forget everything, I want to forget who I am. . . .” (163). She does not say “I have forgotten,” she says she wants to forget. When Chance refers to her “disappointment,” she says, “What disappointment? I don’t remember any.” “Can you control your memory like that?” he asks. “Yes. I’ve had to learn to.” And then she insists, “I tell you I don’t remember, it’s all gone away!” “I don’t believe in amnesia,” Chance says. Princess replies, “Neither do I. But you have to believe a thing that happens to you” (165). It is not entirely clear to what degree she remembers and to what degree she honestly does not. But when she asks Chance to break out the splintered lens so does not damage her eye, we understand that what she does not know or remember can hurt her. She is trying to suppress her memory just like she is trying to avoid both seeing clearly and being seen
for who she really is, but she understands the danger of it: “It gives you an awful trapped feeling this, this memory block. . . . I feel as if someone I love had died lately, and I don’t want to remember who it could be” (168).

Lucretia, Blanche and Maggie were all preoccupied with the lighting in terms of how it made them look. Lucretia was horrified by the “glittering” sunlight, Blanche tried always to be under her shaded bulb for best effect, and Maggie softened a light that was already so soft and warm that it disguised the effects of Brick’s alcoholism and made him appear beautiful. At this stage of her life, Princess is willing to block the light when it suits her, willing to wear absurd cracked glasses when she wants to see something, and then asks for Chance’s help to go to the window when she decides she does want to see. She looks out, and then “(Pauses as she gazes out, squinting into noon’s brilliance):”

CHANCE: Well, what do you see? Give me your description of the view, Princess?

PRINCESS: (faces the audience) I see a palm garden.

CHANCE: And a four-lane highway just past it.

PRINCESS: (squinting and shielding her eyes): Yes, I see that and a strip of beach with some bathers and then, an infinite stretch of nothing but water and . . . . (She cries out softly and turns away from the window.)

CHANCE: What?

PRINCESS: Oh God, I remember the thing I wanted not to. The goddam end of my life!

(170)

Chance gets her back into bed and at her command, brings her hashish. Just when we start to think that Princess is braver than the other characters (she can face the light even at “noon’s brilliance”), and less vain (she will wear cracked glasses), we learn that what initially appeared
to be bravery was actually a form of (real or faked) amnesia. When her memory returns, she rushes back to bed and demands drugs, and then, the stage directions tell us, “[s]he turns to the audience” while she talks about the end of her career:

For years they all told me that it was ridiculous of me to feel that I couldn’t go back to the screen or the stage as a middle-aged woman. They told me I was an artist, not just a star whose career depended on youth. But I knew in my heart that the legend of Alexandra del Lago couldn’t be separated from an appearance of youth . . . . if I had just been old but you see, I wasn’t old . . . . I just wasn’t young, not young, young. I just wasn’t young anymore. . . . (170-71)

Princess is not necessarily braver than Blanche or Maggie, but she is on the other side of the battle. She is a “middle-aged woman,” and no amount of soft lighting is going to disguise that fact. She does not bother with theatrical soft-lighting to try to hide a truth that she already knows “in [her] heart”: She may not be old, but she is “not young, young.” As an actor, Princess knows that she has to be young, not merely not-old. Even worse, there is no escaping the truth of an actor’s face as it is revealed in a close-up, something to which Julia Norman and Julia Jackson could also attest. Princess says:

The screen’s a very clear mirror. 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. . . . People gasped. . . . I heard them whisper, their shocked whispers. Is that her? Is that her? Her? (172)

Princess does not hide from the light anymore in the beginning of the play because her truth/age has already been revealed in that “thing called a close-up,” with the light “blazing” while her
“terrible history screams.” She has been revealed. This is an echo of Lucretia’s dash through that terrible last block past her would-be lover’s house, where he lives with his wife: “The walk is simply glit-tering with sunlight. . . . Not a branch, not a leaf to give you a little protection! You simply have to en-dure it. Turn your hideous red face away from all the front-porches and walk as fast as you decently can till you get by them!”

After Princess and Chance have spent more of the morning together, Chance wants to leave to cash checks from her. She refuses to be left alone or to leave the room before she has applied her make-up: “I just don’t want to be left alone in this place till I’ve put on the face that I face the world with, baby,” she says. She asks him to open the shutters a little, and he doesn’t respond. She asks him twice more.

PRINCESS: . . . I won’t be able to see my face in the mirror. . . . Open the shutters, I won’t be able to see my face in the mirror.

CHANCE: Do you want to?

PRINCESS: Unfortunately I have to! Open the shutters! (180)

On the other side of the aging curve, Princess doesn’t have the luxury of soft light like Blanche and Maggie do. She needs bright light, so she can see her face in the mirror, so she can “put on the face” she uses to “face the world.” She has to be able to see the truth of her aging face in order to be able to disguise it. Then, as Chance tells her his “life story,” he tells her that he grew up without money and without a big name. “What I had was. . . (The Princess half turns, brush poised in a faint, dusty beam of light.)” She says, “BEAUTY! What you had was beauty! I had

---

35Fleeing humiliation is something that Williams was always prepared for in his personal life, which may have something to do with why his heroines suffer so acutely in their own dashes away from viewers’ reactions. In her memoirs, his agent Audrey Wood talks about Williams attending opening nights for his plays: “. . . Tennessee, preparing to face that packed house of tough first nighters, would hire a limousine and a driver to stand by outside the theater. The car would be waiting, ready to take him away at a moment’s notice, to enable him to make his getaway, to some other town, far from Broadway” (199).
it! I say it, with pride, no matter how sad, being gone, now” (181). She openly acknowledges in multiple places that her beauty is gone, and she is without self-consciousness in front of Chance as she uses the light to cover up her appearance, applying another sort of mask. Blanche and Maggie wanted to be seen, but only to the degree that could control their environments. Princess wants to see herself, so she can modify her appearance before anyone else (other than Chance, whom she has already purchased) sees her. She owns her past beauty and the loss of it, and encourages Chance to own his, as well.

In Act Three, the light returns to Princess in the form of a spotlight, but first as the flickering light of flames. The scene for Act Three is set: “A while later that night: the hotel bedroom. The shutters in the Moorish Corner are thrown open on the Palm Garden: scattered sounds of disturbance are still heard: something burns in the Palm Garden: an effigy, an emblem? Flickering light from it falls on the Princess” (226). The chaos was summoned by Chance or Boss Finley, or the conflict between them, but Princess Kosmonopolis calls the light to herself as any diva would, aging or not, and when she breaks the fourth wall to speak directly to the audience, she reclaims the spotlight and gives a direct plea to be seen and understood.

If this portrait of Princess is in some ways analogous to the portrait Julia Norman, then Williams is the equivalent of Cameron in the same way. Both artists are speaking directly to the audience about the process of aging, of life and death, about survival, through their stand-ins. Williams speaks through Princess, as Cameron speaks to us through her daughter, of the progression of time. Williams positions his spokeswoman: “(The Princess moves out onto footstage; surrounding areas dim till nothing is clear behind her but the palm garden.)” She allows Chance to call a gossip columnist. He thinks he is calling her to get a break for him and his girlfriend, Heavenly, but Princess has allowed him to place the call because she is now
willing to hear public reaction to the movie that caused her to flee from the theater. As she prepares to face the truth, her panic eases.

Something’s happened. I’m breathing freely and deeply as if the panic was over. Maybe it’s over. He’s doing the dreadful thing for me, asking the answer for me. He doesn’t exist for me now except as somebody making this awful call for me, asking the answer for me. The light’s on me. He’s almost invisible now. What does that mean? Does it mean that I still wasn’t ready to be washed out, counted out? (230)

Blanche and Lucretia never reach a point where they are able to “[breathe] freely and deeply. They are never empowered enough to face the truth and accept it, so they never lose their “panic.” As Chance the man fades, Princess embraces chance as fate, willing to hear and accept whatever truth her audience pronounced after her performance. We can see why Williams said this play was a “needle-point of clarity” of his ideas. Princess’s “performance” is a literal performance. Lucretia, Blanche, and Maggie are all performers in a sense, but Princess is an actress. Her light is not a representation of a bulb shaded with a Chinese lantern; it is literal stage light, which she steps into intentionally. The fourth wall dissolves and we no longer have to interpret her words to other characters in order to get at the truth of her character; she is speaking directly to us as she reclaims her power:

Well, one thing’s sure. It’s only this call I care for. I seem to be standing in light with everything else dimmed out. He’s in the dimmed out background as if he’d never left the obscurity he was born in. I’ve taken the light again as a crown on my head to which I am suited by something in the cells of my blood and body from the time of my birth. It’s mine, I was born to own it . . .” (230).
When Chance reaches Sally Powers, he says Princess Kosmonopolis is calling, but she corrects him and reclaims her name as she has reclaimed the light: “Alexandra Del Lago.”

When the play opens, Princess is in bed, and all we are told of her costume is that she wears a domino mask to block the light (and to obscure her identity). We are not given any additional description of her costume in the first scene, but it may be safe to assume she is in loungewear of some sort. Then, in Act Two, the description of her costume provides us with insight into her state of mind as her memory has returned:

*The Princess looks as if she had thrown on her clothes to escape a building on fire. Her blue-sequined gown is unzipped, or partially zipped, her hair is disheveled, her eyes have a dazed, drugged brightness; she is holding up the eyeglasses with the broken lens, shakily, hanging onto her mink stole with the other hand; her movements are unsteady.*

(216)

She has been drinking and taking pills, her memory has returned, and Chance is failing to hold up his end of the bargain. He has left her alone and has refused to come when called, so she comes out in search of him. When she does, her inner turmoil is outwardly visible, and she is recognized by Miss Lucy, Boss Finley’s lover, in the bar: “I know who you are. Alexandra Del Lago.” There is “[l]oud whispering” and a “pause,” but Princess seems not to notice. Miss Lucy helps make her more presentable: “Honey, let me fix that zipper for you. Hold still just a second. Honey, let me take you upstairs. You mustn’t be seen down here in this condition . . ..” (216). It is an indication of her inner state that even when it is pointed out that she is in no condition to be seen in public, Princess does not care. She is only concerned with connecting with Chance:

“Chance suddenly rushes in from the gallery: he conducts the Princess outside: she is on the verge of panic. The Princess rushes half down the steps to the palm garden: leans panting on the
“stone balustrade under the ornamental light standard with its five great pearls of light . . .” She is in the light as she tells him what happened to her:

Chance, when I saw you driving under the window with your head held high, with that terrible stiff-necked pride of the defeated which I know so well; I knew that your comeback had been a failure like mine. And I felt something in my heart for you. That’s a miracle, Chance. That’s the wonderful thing that happened to me. I felt something for someone besides myself. That means my heart’s still alive, at least some part of it is, not all of my heart is dead yet . . . I almost died this morning, suffocated in a panic. But even through my panic, I saw your kindness . . . (216-17)

We know from the way Princess will dismiss Chance once she gets the gossip columnist on the line that her connection to him is temporary ("he doesn’t exist for me now"), but the connection has happened, and it rejuvenated her. She saw herself in Chance, in that “stiff-necked pride.”

Even though after her speech, he shuffles her off while he turns his attention back to his girl Heavenly, the momentary jolt of recognition served to reawake her confidence. When she returns to the room and the hotel staff come to try to remove her, she is still wearing her crazy dress and her jewels and furs, reminiscent of Blanche DuBois’s costume jewelry right before her altercation with Stanley, when she has been rejected by Mitch and has realized she is out of options. But Princess, perhaps because she is a professional performer, is able to harness the power of her costume and make it work for her. When she answers the door to the men, she is in command: “PRINCESS: (throwing open the door): What did you say? Will you repeat what you said! (Her imperious voice, jewels, furs and commanding presence abash them for a moment)” (227). What came across as sad and crazy when she was down in the bar is now used to a totally different effect. Princess is in the process of reclaiming herself, and now she has the power to
intimidate. She tells the men, “My check-out time at any hotel in the world is *when I want to check out* . . .” Based on her moment of recognition of her own failure when it was mirrored by Chance, Princess “felt something” for someone other than herself, and she has decided that she is not ready to “check out.” At that moment, her costume, as disheveled as it seemed earlier, becomes the costume of a powerful star. Her costumes reflect a journey from hiding, to panic, to an eventual reclamation of her past power.

Like Maggie the Cat at the height of her power, Princess has the power of naming. When she talks to the gossip columnist, she reclaims her name, she admits to remembering the trauma that sent her running, and she allows that she is ready to hear the truth: “Well, why not, after all, I’d have to know sooner or later,” she says to the audience (230). From the columnist, she hears that her fears of being ridiculed or humiliated have been unfounded:

Do you really think so? You’re not just being nice, Sally, because of old times—Grown, did you say? My talent? In what way, Sally? More depth? More what, did you say? More power!—well, Sally, God bless you dear Sally. . . . No, of course I didn’t read the reviews. I told you I flew, I flew. I flew as fast and fast as I could. (232)

When she hangs up the phone, she announces that her picture has “broken box-office records in New York and L.A.!” (232). She shifts into business mode immediately. She starts travel plans, speculates about publicity, and ridicules Chance when he tries to continue to bully her into talking to the press about him and Heavenly:

Talk about a beach-boy I picked up for pleasure, distraction from my panic? Now? When the nightmare is over? Involve my name, which is Alexandra Del Lago with the record of a—you’ve just been using me. Using me. When I needed you downstairs you shouted, “Get her a wheel chair!” Well, I didn’t need a wheel chair, I came up alone, as always. I
climbed back alone up the beanstalk to the ogre’s country where I live, now, alone.

Chance, you’ve gone past something you couldn’t afford to go past; your time, your youth, you’ve passed it. It’s all you had, and you’ve had it. (233)

When Chance tries to throw her own words back at her (“Who in hell’s talking!”), she names herself yet again: “Alexandra Del Lago, artist and star!”

She calls Chance a monster, then says, “Of course, I know I’m one too. But one with a difference. . . . Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture, almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true” (233). Princess lays claim to her creation and names it as truth. Robert Skloot explores the role of the artist in Williams’s work, in the article “Submitting Self to Flame: The Artist’s Quest in Tennessee Williams, 1935-1954.” He analyzes the theme in William’s essays, plays and short stories, and how the struggle of the artist is a fight against time: “In Williams’ work it is the terror of growing old that filters so often into his characters’ consciousness, and it is this terror which lends urgency to the conflicts which show man attempting to fill his life, or at least prolong the ‘quest for completion’” (203). The “thing” that Princess has created, her weapon in the “fight against time,” is her art, and so like Maggie names herself Pregnant, Princess names herself Artist. This gives her a form of immortality that theatrically could (but ultimately does not) make her victorious over our common enemy, Time.

Unlike Maggie, however, Princess is proclaiming that she will move forward without a man. She is not young, and she will not have the protection of a man. When Lucretia went on that journey, it drove her mad. Blanche gambled everything to try to get the protection of a man when it was too late, and she was forced by her only family into an asylum. Maggie was determined not to grow old and poor, so she secured herself a fortune by locking down her man.
As Elia Kazan said about the characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, “[T]he animal survives—at all costs” (Kazan 351). At this point in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, it seems as if Princess will manage what Williams’s other women could not: She will survive, and even thrive, at all costs, past youth and on her own.36

If there is one quality that Princess has more strongly than any of the other characters analyzed, however, it is honesty, and that honesty will not let her behave as if she has gained anything other than a temporary reprieve. Maggie was the pinnacle of Williams’s heroines because she was able to create a truth that would keep her safe, and Williams ended *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* while Maggie was flying high, about to achieve all of it. Princess has had it, lost it, has it back, and knows she will lose it once more. After her fiery speech to Chance, she tells him that the men who came to talk to her in her room told her that if Chance stays, he will be castrated. He says that she already castrated him when she made sex a condition of giving him money. “You did that to me this morning, here on this bed, where I had the honor, where I had the great honor. . . .” When he trails off, she says, “Age does the same thing to a woman” (233-34). Her power deflates.

*All at once her power is exhausted, her fury gone. Something uncertain appears in her face and voice betraying the fact which she probably suddenly knows, that her future course is not a progression of triumphs. She still maintains a grand air as she snatches up her platinum mink stole and tosses it about her: it slides immediately off her shoulders; she doesn’t seem to notice. He picks the stole up for her, puts it about her*

36 Interestingly, the strength of the Princess as a character is frequently cited by critics as one of the reasons they feel the play failed. Chance “should” be the center of the play, but Princess is too compelling. Gilbert Debussher says, “With the Princess, Williams had completed in 1958 one of his supreme feminine portraits in an already long gallery. In fact, the author’s growing concern with her through the various drafts may be in part the cause of the play’s ultimate lack of integration . . .” (25). It is curious that the strength of this “feminine portrait” could be held against the play; but critics frequently held that the center was Chance and Williams was too preoccupied with Princess.
shoulders. She grunts disdainfully, her back to him; then resolution falters; she turns to face him with great, dark eyes that are fearful, lonely, and tender. (234)

The expression on Julia Norman’s face in Cameron’s portrait of her could be interpreted the same way: “she knows that her future course is not a progression of triumphs.” Any resurgence she has now is temporary, and that understanding and fear shows in her eyes when she turns towards Chance. Her awareness is very poignant—she is “fearful” because she knows she has already been castrated. She is lonely because she understands that she is and will continue to be alone. Still, in spite of his betrayal, she looks at Chance with tenderness. He is a “monster,” but so is she.37 Williams’s stage directions are heartbreaking and display that “needle-point of clarity, and directness,” that he referenced in his letter to Audrey Wood, but this passage also shows the compassion Williams has for his characters, and in their recognition of each other, his recognition of himself:

In both Chance and the Princess, we should return to the huddling-together of the lost, but not with sentiment, which is false, but with whatever is truthful in the moments when people share doom, face firing squads together. Because the Princess is equally doomed. She can’t turn back the clock any more than can Chance, and the clock is equally relentless to 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. She makes this instinctive admission to herself when she sits down by Chance on

37 This tenderness towards Chance and her empathy for him is something that many critics overlook. Bigsby’s comment is indicative of many scholars’ take on Princess: “When she is unexpectedly reprieved by Hollywood . . . she reinvests her role with energy and conviction, abandoning her lover to his fate” (62). But Chance is her “lover” only in that they have sex, which she pays him for. In another gender, he would be called a whore. And, in fact, Princess does not “abandon” him, she tries to convince him to come with her. He chooses to stay behind.
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. (234-35).

As they sit facing their doom together, Chance hears a clock. “It goes tick-tick, it’s quieter than your heart-beat, but it’s slow dynamite, a gradual explosion, blasting the world we lived in to burnt-out pieces. . . . Time—who could beat it, who could defeat it ever?” (235-36). Not Chance, and not Alexandra Del Lago. She does not have Maggie’s optimism, or Lucretia or Blanche’s “escape” into madness. She goes back to her acting career, back to her art, knowing that “[a]ge does the same thing [castration] to a woman.” For Princess and for Chance, the animal will not survive. She has a reprieve, but she has come through her blaze of resurfing power to realize that the clock “tick-ticks” for her and any revival she enjoys in her career will just be for now, while she’s “not young” but not quite old, either.

When Princess is informed that her driver has arrived to take her back to her former life, she tries to convince Chance to go with her, but he will not. She leaves him in the room, on the bed, facing the audience, while she goes on to make what she can of the time she has left. Chance, perhaps in Tennessee Williams’s voice, says to the audience, “I don’t ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all” (236).

Again, not all readers and critics have been willing to recognize themselves in these characters. Falk says that in this work, Williams “has crowded his play with an assembly of sorry characters. In this psychiatric ward the artists have not retained any appearance of youthful innocence”, which is missing the point (155). They are not young or innocent, and neither lays claim to it. In fact, Chance admits, “Princess, the age of some people can only be calculated by
the level of—level of—rot in them. And by that measure I’m ancient” (235). What critics including Falk seem to overlook is that time is an enemy for “us all.” Princess and Chance are no longer young, but that is the same journey that all of us are on, if we are lucky.

When the curtain closes on Chance and Princess, it is also the ending of a sort of optimism that was building up through Maggie the Cat. Maggie “wins,” in a way. Maggie has the power and control that Lucretia and Blanche were reaching for and missed. Initially, we think Princess was able to move past where Maggie landed. It appears that her career will have an Act Two, that she will thrive as an artist and an actress into middle age where she is not old, but she “just [isn’t] young, not young, young” any longer. She may have a resurgence, but it will not last. Princess—like Maggie, Blanche and Lucretia, like Chance, like Williams, like me, like you—is working with a clock ticking in the room. Whatever success she builds as an artist or as a woman is temporary and fleeting. The emotional power of her character comes from the fact that she knows it; the emotional power of the play is that the reader/audience knows that it is true for us, as well.
“A Defence of Poetry,” written in 1821 by Percy Bysshe Shelley and published posthumously in 1840, claims that the aim of literature is to act upon our morals, and that “[t]he great secret of morals is Love: or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” (596).
Shelley optimistically asserts that literature “purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know”, or to imagine that which we thought we knew, and thereby make it more; once we are “purged” of the “film of familiarity,” once we eliminate our assumptions, we are able to allow for a greater and more complex understanding of each other, which leads to a more profound identification (611). Tennessee Williams echoed Shelley’s call for “an identification of ourselves” with the “beautiful” (and also the pain) which exists in others when he had his character Chance Wayne say, “I don’t ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you . . .” (236).

Barthes says that the essence of photography (and, by my extension, theatrical portraits) is “that-has-been.” We look at a photograph, taken in the past, and are aware of the “true” history of it. That has been. That moment occurred. That woman looked that way at that time. This is all *studium*. Cameron and Williams refuse to settle for that. Their portraits are not so much “that-has-been” as “it’s-like-this.” Their photographs and written works are never just records of something that was, or something that might have been. They are explorations of what it’s like to look at each other. It’s like this to allow room for each other’s performances. It’s like this to see me in you—the ultimate *punctum*, or opening, or wound. It’s like this to allow the me I see in you to lead to love, acceptance, and in Shelley’s idealistic mind, equality:

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. . . . Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. (596)
We can only be “greatly good” by seeing ourselves in each other, and it is great art that allows us to do that. As Williams says, “I think that hate is a thing, a feeling, that can only exist where there is no understanding . . . I can’t expose a human weakness on the stage unless I know it through having it myself.” (Bird 153). Williams says we can’t hate what we are; literature can build the muscles it takes to recognize ourselves in each other.

For Cameron and Williams, photographic and theatrical portraits are not, as Barthes claims, “intractable” records of “that-has-been.” The portraits these artists create are about what it is like to read each other—what it means to make room for and allow multiple truths, even those which contradict what we think we know, or even what we *do* know of the biographical truth of a person, to allow them the room to be more. To somehow embody the strength and power of the Virgin Mother while simultaneously owning the truth and power of a regular, lower-class single woman who works for a living. To be an artist’s niece and also the tragic heroine of a classic narrative. To be an older single woman who still has feelings of sexuality and a desire for motherhood. Sexually active but still pure; married and unwanted but also pregnant; aging, retired and addicted but also Artist.

Throughout her relatively short career, Cameron grew more assured and more intentional in her message, which I have argued is that in calling our attention to the performative nature of her images, she was able to foster a visual discussion about the roles we play and the ways we read each other. Her body of work is a running “it’s-like-this” conversation about what it was like to be a woman in that time, to transcend a reality of being a maid to a wealthy artist but also to be an upper-class woman trapped in the expectations society has for her—to be a maid with the power of the Mother of God, or to be an upper-class woman half-suffocated in constrictive clothing and a narrow set of expectations. Her women are limited and transcendent, victorious
and grieving, and the power of Cameron’s portraits is that by calling attention to the performance, she shows a viewer all of those truths, and allows for them to be simultaneous rather than contradictory.

In the progress of the women in the four plays discussed here, “Portrait of a Madonna,” A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Sweet Bird of Youth, Williams’s power to compel his audience to read his characters as “it’s-like-this” only increases, along with his heroines’ power to control their own “audiences” of the other characters in the play. In “Portrait of a Madonna,” Lucretia’s power is limited. She inspires sympathy, but only convinces herself of her invented truth, and even that, only intermittently. There are moments when she seems to believe herself, and moments when the audience sees that she knows the sad reality of her life and her even sadder fate. In A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche is both more aware and more powerful. She knows the truth from the illusions she creates, and she is willing and able to tell the truth when pressed. When her performance is rejected, however, she too is taken off to an asylum. Maggie in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof has the most control of any of the women analyzed here. Her words and her performance become truth and like the cat she is, she lands on her feet, with the audience believing that she has the power to make her performance real, and that she will become pregnant and make her story real. In Sweet Bird of Youth, Princess is a version of an older, unsuccessful Maggie. She is “not young” any more, and she is no longer able to convincingly act the roles she has chosen. Even when her career is revived, and she seems to be on a successful path once again, Princess is as aware as the audience that her revival is short-lived. Because of the temporary nature of her reprieve, and because she knows she will age out of her ability to capture an audience, her power is diminished and will ultimately fail.
However, if we accept that a pensive portrait is one that is not unary, one that vacillates, then perhaps my analysis of Princess can be permitted to vacillate as well. It is true that Princess is aging and aware of it. If the “animal survives,” in Kazan’s words, for Maggie in *Cat* and Stella in *Streetcar* because they reproduce and carry on the bloodline, then the opposite must be true for the childless Princess. Princess has something Maggie does not have, however, and that is her art. In the final scene of *Sweet Bird*, when she is admitting that both she and Chance are “monsters,” she says, “We are two monsters, but this is the difference between us. Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture, almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true” (233). What she has created is her body of work, her art. Princess will survive in a more profound way than any of the other characters we discussed, because her art will live. Cameron’s portrait of her daughter, *Julia Norman*, shows us the ravages of time; even our children will age and die. The survival of the animal in the form of the flesh is always temporary and finite. Princess’s art, however, will live beyond her. It is captured and held, the way the art of Julia Margaret Cameron and Tennessee Williams has survived its creators.

Consider the image *Sappho*, made by Cameron in 1865. To a student of Cameron’s work, Mary Hillier’s profile is unmistakable. To a student of literature, the title of “*Sappho*” is initially startling. However we envision Sappho, it is probably not usually in traditional Victorian clothing. But this is what Cameron does. This woman is not Sappho anymore than she is Mary Hillier; this is a performance, one which Cameron valued so highly that she printed and exhibited the image in spite of the obvious crack in the negative. Cameron is not showing us the historical Sappho any more than she is showing us the real Mary Hillier. She is showing us a performance. The image asks us to consider the nature of how we present ourselves and how we read each
other. Perhaps this presentation of Sappho is meant to be a statement about the ways artists outlive their lives and transcend the limiting specifics of their era.

The initial consideration that led me down a long road to this particular topic is why we read and why we look at photographs, or why we write and why we photograph. I think both arts are ways we try to make sense of one another. If that is the case, then the works of Cameron and Williams have something very powerful to say about how we can or should do that.

If the greatest purpose of literature is, as Shelley suggests, to teach us how to read each other so we can see each other as equals, perhaps the greatest purpose of photography, or at least of portraiture, is to teach us how to see each other. If that is the case, then what we have to learn from studying the works of these artists is that no one is ever unary, and everyone is always performing. Perhaps our greatest hope for an “identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” is to leave room for the vacillation, for multiple, simultaneous truths.

In the preface to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams quotes his preface to *The Glass Menagerie*, in which he said:

There is too much to say and not enough time to say it. Nor is there power enough. I am not a good writer. Sometimes I am a very bad writer indeed. There is hardly a successful writer in the field who cannot write circles around me . . . but I think of writing as something more organic than words, something closer to being and action. I want to work more and more with a more plastic theater than the one I have (worked with) before. I have never for one moment doubted that there are people—millions!—to say things to. We come to each other, gradually, but with love. It is the short reach of my arms that
hinders, not the length and multiplicity of theirs. With love and with honesty, the
embrace is inevitable. (867-77)

It is difficult to imagine a more articulate declaration of what Barthes calls desire on the part of a
text. Williams’s text desires us, and he was so confident that audiences would come to him with
love that he said the “embrace” was “inevitable.” He had faith in our ability to understand him,
to desire his message, to forge a connection “more organic than words.”

In the conclusion of his essay that prefaces Cat, Williams refers to his earlier words and
says:

This characteristically emotional, if not rhetorical, statement of mine at that time seems to
suggest that I thought of myself as having a highly personal, even intimate relationship
with people who go to see plays. I did and I still do. . . . I want to go on talking to you as
freely and intimately about what we live and die for as if I knew you better than anyone
else whom you know. (74)

It is the him in me, and the me in him, and the multitudes in us both, that allow us to forge that
connection.
Appendix A: Julia Margaret Cameron. *Blessing and Blessed*. 1865.
Appendix B: Julia Margaret Cameron. *Goodness*. 1864.
Appendix C: Julia Margaret Cameron. *The Angel at the Tomb*. 1869.
Appendix D: Julia Margaret Cameron. *Call and I follow*. 1867.
Julia Margaret Cameron. *Beatrice*. 1866.
Julia Margaret Cameron. *Madonna with Two Children*. 1864.
Julia Margaret Cameron. *Mary Mother*. 1867.
Julia Margaret Cameron. *Julia Jackson*. 1867
Julia Margaret Cameron. *Julia Norman*. 1868.
Julia Margaret Cameron. *Sappho*. 1865.
Works Cited


