
This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

Paul Ibell's Critical Lives: Tennessee Williams and Jacqueline O'Connor's Law and Sexuality in Tennessee Williams's America

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875818001238>

PUBLISHER

© Cambridge University Press

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Brewer, Mary F.. 2019. "Paul Ibell's Critical Lives: Tennessee Williams and Jacqueline O'Connor's Law and Sexuality in Tennessee Williams's America". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/24267>.

Paul Ibell, *Critical Lives: Tennessee Williams*, (London: Reaktion, 2016, £11.99.) 192 Pp; 978 1 78023 662 9.

Jacqueline O'Connor, *Law and Sexuality in Tennessee Williams's America*, (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016, £79.28.) 215 Pp; 978-1-61147-893-8.

Paul Ibell's study of Tennessee Williams follows a long-established critical practice of reading the playwright's life through his creative output and, vice-versa, his plays, prose and poetry over and against his life experience. Following recent critical biographies by John Lahr – *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (2014), as well as earlier biographies such as Donald Spoto's *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (1985), Lyle Leverich's *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (1995), and of course Williams's own *Memoirs* (1975), Ibell's volume does not offer a substantial addition to our understanding of Williams's profile, or his place in the American literary canon; however, it provides an eminently readable compilation of significant milestones in the author's life and how Williams's personal evolution, particularly with regard to how he understood his sexual identity, intersects with the key themes addressed in his writing.

The book follows an historical trajectory, beginning with coverage of Williams's childhood and family relationships, as well as his itinerant working life before he became a prominent figure in the theatre. Chapter one further charts his earliest forays into writing plays (*Candles to the Sun*, *Not About Nightingales*, and *Battle of Angels*), in addition to short fiction ("The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" and "Hard Candy"), with attention given to texts that prefigure Williams's later and most successful major works. Ibell explores how Williams's empathetic approach to characters that are located on the peripheries of mainstream society and the relation between individual suffering and one's perceived 'difference' from normative forms of social identity, sexual or otherwise, is sustained throughout the corpus of his writing. Chapter two focuses on the 1940s, with *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke* receiving prominent treatment, but again alongside minor, yet complementary works, such as the one-act *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, and the short story, "Desire and the Black Masseur". Ibell's examination of Williams's dramatic output is noteworthy for its blending of literary and performance analysis to demonstrate how Williams's choice of staging and theatrical styles informs the meaning of his plays.

Chapters three through six cover a decade each, from the 1950s through the 1980s. Ibell's study of the 1950s concentrates on Williams's novella, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, mapping its setting as well as the dynamic of its central relationship between an aging actress and an attractive young gigolo onto the playwright's own travels and sexual encounters in Italy. Further, he offers a rapid overview of significant plays from this era – *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Williams's screenplay for the film *Baby Doll* is used as a case-study to illustrate his mode of adapting his own work in one genre into another, the film being based on two short plays.

In chapters four and five, Ibell discusses Williams's more experimental approach to playwrighting in the 1960s and 1970s in plays such as *The Mutilated*, *The Gnadiges Fraulein* and *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*. He records the increasingly hostile critical reception to Williams's

stage productions and their lack of commercial viability across these decades. How Williams responded to his changing critical and commercial fortunes, which continued to decline in the 1980s where his new writing was concerned, remains a key topic in chapter five. At the same time, Ibell is careful to make clear that Williams continued to be recognised and rewarded for the value of his earlier works, as supported by his election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the number of prestigious awards he was granted.

As well as assessing how Williams's relationship with his mother informs his last play to be staged during his lifetime, *Steps Must Be Gentle*, which premiered in 1980, the year in which the playwright's mother died, chapter six ventures into a fuller discussion of some of Williams's poetry and the way in which its themes connect to his drama. As with earlier chapters, here Ibell makes abundant reference to the critical and commercial reception of Williams's writing and how it varies over the course of his career. The final chapter attempts to assess briefly the continued relevance of Williams as a playwright for contemporary audiences.

Ibell has not written a standard academic text on Williams; for example, he provides a brief select bibliography but the chapters contain no footnotes. There are a few sweeping statements that remain unevidenced, as when he asserts a connection between the nostalgic tone of Williams's plays and his popularity in England, described as a 'nation with a longing for its glorious past'. Ibell does not venture into theoretical considerations of the themes he explores in the works, necessary for an in-depth assessment of the psycho-sexual aspects of the writing, but rather, he falls back on the notion that the appeal of Williams's work lies in its universality. Hence, the volume would be of limited use to researchers. However, as well as being of interest to a general readership, the text might serve as a useful primer for undergraduate students of drama and literature, because it surveys not only Williams's major plays but also a wide range of his lesser known dramas, short stories, novellas and screenplays, and poems. The illustrations, which feature throughout, are a bonus. Ibell presents his arguments in a highly accessible manner, and the easy flow of his prose renders this critical biography an enjoyable introduction to one of the most important canonical figures in American theatre history.

In contrast to Ibell's more general approach to Williams, Jacqueline O'Connor's *Law and Sexuality in Tennessee Williams's America* offers a scholarly examination of Williams' creative output. It is a detailed and meticulously researched study of Williams's writing within the context of a post-War legal framework through which sexual identity was in part configured and sexual practice policed. The opening chapter focuses on sexual identity in relation to privacy laws during the Cold War period. *A Streetcar Named Desire* serves as a key text for illustrating the connections among sexual and national identities and a culture of fear and paranoia that progressively informed American legislation and allowed sexual behaviours deemed subversive to be criminalised. O'Connor traces the series of revisions that Williams made to *Streetcar*, which, even when absent from the final text, are shown to have informed the play's response to the legal situations that governed the lives of men and women who challenged dominant stereotypes of heterosexual femininity and masculinity.

In chapter two, O'Connor shifts to an analysis of Williams's short fiction, 'Hard Candy' and 'One Arm', exploring the notion of disgust in these stories. In addition to discussing how Williams could be more explicit in his expression of homosexual activity within the private

sphere of fiction compared to a public theatre space, O'Connor posits that Williams's narrative strategy aims to deflect a reader's negative judgment toward his characters' dissident sexual behaviours; even in the face of wider social demonization of homosexuals, she suggests, in his short fiction Williams encouraged his readers to adopt a liberal stance on sexual diversity.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and *Orpheus Descending*, as well as the latter's source text *Battle of Angels*, are explored in chapter three. The discussion of *Cat* focuses on questions of class status, sexuality and criminality. Big Daddy's wealth and corresponding high status within the patriarchy enables him to create a safe sexual space, where, O'Connor shows, he may engage in high-risk sexual activities that otherwise might easily incur severe criminal penalties. *Orpheus* functions to extend the discussion into a consideration of race. The play, in which questions of legality feature quite prominently, is used to explore Williams's perspective on the debates about sexual deviance that were circulating in 1950s America, this time in relation to heterosexual identity.

The final chapter tackles how Williams presents his own sexual identity, first as a closeted gay man, and after he publicly acknowledges his homosexuality: his appearance on the David Frost show in 1970 and his *Memoirs*, first published in 1975, are employed to help locate his position in relation to the emerging language of gay rights in the 1970s. O'Connor addresses how Williams's increasing openness about his sexual practice impacted on the critical reception of his work. Further, the chapter explores how emerging liberal attitudes toward homosexuality inform Williams's representation of sexuality, particularly in some of his later, more challenging theatrical productions. Here, the looser theatrical modes embraced by Williams are compared to the fissures in legal decisions as post-War laws governing sexuality began to face more challenges. A brief conclusion reiterates the main arguments of the preceding chapters.

Law and Sexuality in Tennessee Williams's America explores significant examples of his writing, spanning his career, within the context of critical legal studies, especially concerning issues of privacy, censorship, public morality and personal freedom; this novel approach to Williams's life and work adds considerably to the critical record not only regarding the stimuli underpinning Williams's treatment of sexuality across multiple genres of his writing, but also O'Connor's monograph provides an important contribution to LGBT studies. O'Connor makes a convincing case for the way in which Williams's representation of dissident sexualities was informed by his knowledge and opinion of the legal context within which Americans lived out their sexual lives during the pre- and post-Stonewall eras. Her thesis is based on close readings of Williams's creative writing supported by the playwright's notebooks, letters, and interviews, all of which are discussed within the context of the legislative frameworks in place when Williams was writing.

O'Connor's text challenges the idea of Williams's relative apolitical position vis-à-vis his writing compared to more overtly political writers of his generation such as Arthur Miller by demonstrating how Williams's narratives dramatize many of the situations debated in case law, even echoing the language of substantial legal rulings at times. Each chapter displays an impressive mastery of a vast array of criticism available on Williams. The readings are situated within the context of received critical views, but O'Connor uses her knowledge of the legal framework of American society in the twentieth-century to extend as well as challenge available

criticism. Most noteworthy is how her analysis calls into question the way in which the public/private divide is often depicted as a firm structuring principal of Williams's dramatic and fictional narratives. O'Connor offers a more nuanced picture of how Williams comprehends the causes of personal trauma and tragedy in the lives of his marginalised characters. Her explanation of how his writing intersects with twentieth-century legal discourses concerning heterosexual and homosexual practice reveals the cultural rootedness of his characters' experiences. Though *Streetcar's* Blanche, or Oliver in 'One Arm,' may make poor choices that bring about unwanted and painful consequences, these individual choices are shaped by wider social norms and strictures that are concretised in law.

The complexity of O'Connor's arguments means that this book will suit primarily postgraduates and researchers in literary and theatre studies, as well as gay studies. Having said this, her style is reader-friendly, and so it could make suitable reading for the more advanced undergraduate. Certainly, those academics who focus on Williams and/or post-War American drama would benefit from familiarising themselves with O'Connor's original assessment of the relation between American law and the depiction of sexuality in Williams' drama and prose.

Mary F. Brewer
Loughborough University