Hope and Despair:

Visual Arts in the Drama of Tennessee Williams

By
Stephanie Wallace

Submitted to the
Office of Honors Programs and Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

1998-99 UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOWS PROGRAM

April 15, 1999

Approved as to style and content by:

[Signature]
Dr. Joanna Gibson
Department of English

[Signature]
Susanna Finnell, Executive Director
Honors Programs and Academic Scholarships

Fellows Group: Humanities
Abstract

Hope and Despair: Visual Arts in the Drama of Tennessee Williams
Stephanie Wallace – Undergraduate Fellow, 1998-99
Dr. Joanna Gibson – Advisor
Texas A&M University
Department of English

The following investigation will focus on three of Tennessee Williams’ later plays: The Red Devil Battery Sign, Vieux Carre, and The Two-Character Play. By drawing parallels between these three samples of his later work and various movements in the visual arts, I hope to draw attention to them as viable works of study. As Williams grew older, he became more cynical and his plays reflect that shift. Despair is a pervading feeling in these pieces—a reflection, for example, of the Expressionist movement. I focus on how Williams’ late works relate primarily to Expressionism, but will touch on the Symbolist movement (in a discussion of a furthering of Expressionist technique in the symbolization his characters’ physical ailments), and the Surrealism of Rene Magritte. I also study reviews of the actual productions of the plays as a possible cause of their subsequent inattention.
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Introduction

The plays written by Tennessee Williams after Night of the Iguana, 1961, have been largely overlooked. Many critics have noted that there is a marked decline in the quality of work written during and after his “Stoned Age,” the sixties. His later plays, however, are indeed works that deserve attention. Williams constantly revised his drama, and his later plays may simply be works of art in transition. A painter may have a concept of what he wants to accomplish and complete numerous sketches before creating his masterpiece. Tennessee Williams does the same in the literary theatrical world. He writes numerous drafts of each individual play, culminating in a masterful work of literary art in each of them. He paints his scenes, utilizing many of the devises which artists in the visual arts medium use.

Williams himself ties the two worlds of the performing and visual arts closely together in his later work. Mary Ann Corrigan points out that “Williams’ production notes reveal his consciousness of the special relation that exists between drama and the visual arts, for he frequently refers to specific works, artists or movements to explain the mood he wishes to create” (383). In a sense, his plays are part of the total theater that Richard Wagner developed. In his vision of the theater, he saw a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art (Vergo 11). Many artists have interpreted this term in ways that Wagner may have never intended. Williams was exposed to an array of Expressionist techniques
in the movies he viewed in the 1920s and 1930s (Corrigan 377). Many of these movies and several other works reveal these fortuitous mistakes. Peter Vergo contends that this misinterpretation of Wagner's ideas has led to some fortunate outcomes, some of which Williams incorporates into his own plays. These devices are especially clear in the three plays included in this study: The Red Devil Battery Sign, Vieux Carre and The Two-Character Play. As the focus of this paper, I will be referring to the 1988 publication of The Red Devil Battery Sign, the 1979 publication of Vieux Carre and the third version of The Two-Character Play first published by New Directions in 1979.

By drawing parallels between these three samples of his later plays and various movements in the visual arts, I hope to draw attention to them as viable works meriting further study. As Williams grew older, he became more cynical and his plays reflect this shift. While many critics maintain that a sense of hope is contained in Williams' work, I will attempt to show that in his later plays, despair is the pervading feeling, symbolized in part by the wide range of physical ailments he assigns to his characters. Despair is a major element in Expressionist paintings as well. This examination discusses several major art movements (with special attention paid to Expressionism) and their reflections in Williams' work. The study also includes an investigation of reviews of the actual performances of the three plays in order to better understand the complicated process of writing plays for this artist, often a concern for painters in the visual arts as well. Much of Williams' work concerns the role of the artist, in this case the literary artist and his place in society (or on the imposed outskirts of society). In this spirit, I will also draw parallels between Williams and one of his favorite artists, Van Gogh.
Both Van Gogh and Williams led complicated and tragic lives. Williams died on the night of February 24, 1983, at the Hotel Elysee in New York City. He was found with a medicine dropper lodged in his throat, and his brother suspected foul play. Williams' bizarre death ended an existence that was just as much true experience as it was a creation. The playwright was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. According to biographer Ronald Hayman, he was the second of three children born during the turbulent marriage between the belle Edwina Dakin and hard-drinking salesman, Cornelius Coffin Williams. Little more than a year his senior, his sister Rose was born in 1909. She would have arguably the biggest influence on the writer. Growing up, Rose and Tennessee lived in a world full of imagination, in large part to escape from the stormy marriage of their parents. Williams points to his Dakin grandparents, his nurse Ozzie, and of course to Rose for his few happy childhood memories (Hayman 6).

When he was five years old, Williams contracted a life threatening childhood illness believed to be diphtheria. Hayman notes that the intense guard Edwina placed over her young son, not only during the illness but also for long after, had serious consequences. In addition to problems caused by his overbearing mother, the aftereffects of the illness itself left the young Tennessee very weak for two years. Although the illness and its aftermath shaped his life in many damaging ways, it also afforded him a great deal of time to cultivate his imagination (Hayman 9).

In 1918, the family moved to St. Louis, which was to be the site of many trials for the young boy both at school and at home. Here he was "ridiculed for his Southern accent, for his smallness, and for being a sissy" (Hayman 9). The taunts did not stop at
school however, for even his father seemed ashamed of his son, calling him “Miss Nancy” (Hayman xii). St. Louis was also the site of heartbreak involving Rose. The pair had done everything together, but now suddenly Rose was becoming a woman. She had neither the time nor the desire to play the games that she had always played with her brother. Not only was she slipping away from Tennessee socially, but she was also slipping away from the world of reality. Faced with this terrible understanding, Williams turned to writing as an escape (Hayman 16). The use of art as an escape from the pain of life [(as well as the justification of suffering as necessary for heightened understanding (Gordon 50)] is a major characteristic he has in common with the Expressionists. His second-hand typewriter would become his outlet throughout his life.

These early experiences, and those that followed, would become fodder for his insatiable thirst for writing. The extended mental illness of his sister Rose culminated in a prefrontal lobotomy in 1937. Although he was not involved in the decision to give Rose this treatment, it was a source of guilt that plagued him for the rest of his years. He is reported to have said many times that everything he wrote was for her. Michael Korda interprets this as meaning that Williams searched for and attempted to bring across to his audience her “innocence and simplicity” (64). The turmoil of the situation involving Rose influences several main themes of his work, including the loss of innocence and the consequences of madness.

Aside from the personal guilt Williams felt, the lobotomy made the chasm between his mother and him widen. Williams was also to blame his mother for the uncomfortable relationship that he had with his father. Her suffocating watchfulness separated him from Cornelius as much as the father’s hard-drinking and closed-minded
nature. These strained personal relationships in his formative years molded him. He was distrustful of people in general and had difficulty forming close ties throughout his life. These occurrences, however, are also responsible for forging the mind of one of the best playwrights in American history.

While his early work is undoubtedly brilliant, critics have questioned the quality of his later plays. Toward the end of his life, Williams became anxious that his place in the theater was slipping away. Although he never claimed to fear death, he was in constant dread of growing old and faded (Hayman 230). He was dependent upon both drugs and alcohol, and felt that his sanity was slipping away more than ever. These strains affected his work. Although he remained a widely known character until his death, the legitimacy of his work withered. The lack of reception by audiences of his later plays hurt Tennessee immensely, but he refused to give up on his audience. He continued writing, revising and attempting new techniques.

Although these three plays vary widely in plot, Williams uses several of these new techniques in all of them. The Red Devil Battery Sign takes place in Dallas and on the surface is the story of two ill-fated lovers. The plot begins with the Woman Downtown living confined in the Yellow Rose Hotel under the constant surveillance of her husband’s security force. She holds damaging evidence against him, the head of the Red Devil Battery conglomerate. While there, she meets the ex-mariachi singer, King Del Rey, who has had to discontinue singing with his band and daughter due to a brain tumor. There is an immediate connection between the two and they have a brief, passionate love affair before King dies and the Woman Downtown meets her fate in a fantastical, apocalyptic ending. There are strong political undertones in the play,
touching on the subject of the Vietnam conflict and questions of conspiracy surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy.

_Vieux Carre_ contains no political statements; it is a more personal reflection on Williams' experiences in the apartments of the same name in New Orleans in 1938 (Hayman 229). The main action follows the narrator, a young writer. His attic room adjoins that of an old painter who is succumbing to the ravages of tuberculosis. Across the small hallway from their rooms lives a young couple, Jane and Tye. Jane is also dying and it is hinted that she goes mad toward the end of the play. The writer recounts his experiences in the boarding house run by the senile Mrs. Wire who believes at various points that the Writer is her son. The Writer chooses life and escape in the end and follows the mysterious stranger Sky through the open door to experience.

As with the characters in _Vieux Carre_, the experiences of life have had a profoundly disturbing effect on the brother and sister in _The Two-Character Play_. Felice and his sister Clare are actors in a traveling dramatic troupe. The rest of their group abandons them on the night of a performance in an unknown city, in an unnamed theater. The only explanation the brother and sister have is a telegram left by the group claiming that the two are insane. The actor/playwright Felice decides that they will perform anyway, and they will act a new play he has written called _The Two-Character Play_. This play-within-a-play is autobiographical and tells the story of the siblings. Their parents are both dead from a murder-suicide, and the brother and sister are so traumatized by witnessing this event that they refuse to leave the house, even for provisions. Clare and Felice are both intensely nervous people, balancing desperately over the abyss into madness. While presenting their play, they realize that the audience has also abandoned
them, leaving them locked in the cold, darkening theater. They decide to return to the play and to carry it out to its uncertain end.

*The Two-Character Play* is the most experimental play of his later years. It might also be said that it is the most revealing of his artistic mind. The new writing styles that Tennessee experimented with may have been the cause of some of the backlash against the once-praised playwright. Williams was never complacent with his drama. He felt trapped by the style expected of him after his earlier successes. It is said that his later plays lack the dramatic intensity of these previous plays; that they are merely unfocussed exercises used as personal therapy by the aging writer. These later plays, however, are much more than that. Williams is experimenting with his art, something that critics and audiences alike may not have been ready or willing to accept.

Possibly harder to accept than the changes in style was the appearance of a darker side to the playwright. With the wide range of perversion and unhappiness in his plays from the beginning (from cannibalism to incest), one might question if Williams could get much darker. Apparent in his later plays and not prevalent in his early work however, is a sense of hopelessness. The pervading sense of despair and lack of purpose in these plays reveal strong hues of Expressionism. This visual and dramatic movement which lasted roughly from 1905 to 1925 (Behr, et al, 2) attempted to reveal the inner landscape of the artist’s mind. This was a rebellious movement as well, and many works aimed at criticism of unjust social systems (*Red Devil Battery Sign* follows in this tradition). His writing, like an expressionist painting, contains a great deal of symbolism as well, a key to the “inner reality” of the playwright/artist. This is not only a reflection of the
Expressionist movement (which will be the main focus of this inquiry) but also the Symbolist movement.

While many have been critical of his overuse of symbols as well as other problems in his later work, they have also been critical of the productions themselves. Stage design is one of various factors leading to the success or failure of a play. Inevitably, situations such as this draw attention away from the play itself, yet audiences remember the experience as a “bad play.” Although many literary critics have indeed pointed to a marked decline in the quality of Williams’ writing, production and direction of those works influences their reception and subsequent attention. Unlike novels or poetry, drama is dependent upon many outside forces for its success. Therefore, it is beneficial to briefly consider the reviews of the plays’ productions as a reason why these plays were discounted before given an adequate opportunity to prove themselves.

The first section of this study, and the main focus of this examination, in large part discusses the role of Tennessee Williams as expressionist painter in his plays. It is entitled: Expressionism as the Mind’s Landscape. This section concerns what expressionism entails and how Williams uses it in his work. It also looks into the Symbolist movement and the paintings of the Surrealist Rene Magritte in relation to these three plays. In addition, included in this section is a brief discussion of Williams’ views of the artist as an entity, and a drawing of parallels between the life and art of he and Van Gogh. A discussion of production reviews is included in the middle section of this study, entitled Logistics. The third section of this investigation focuses on symbolism, specifically the symbolism of the physical afflictions of the characters in these plays. It is
called *Physical Ailments Manifest the Unruly Mind*. A hypochondriac and a man familiar with illness from an early age, Williams uses physical ailments as symbolic devices.

The aim of this study is to draw attention to three of the almost forgotten plays of Tennessee Williams’ later years. Williams was attempting a new kind of theater. He was delving deeper into his own mind and into the intricacies of human behavior and interaction. Always an innovator, he sought to accomplish this through new means that he had not previously concentrated upon. By comparing characteristics of these later plays to movements in the visual arts, a new perspective might be put on these works to remove the cobwebs that have kept them in near obscurity, outshone by his early plays for far too long.
Expressionism as the Mind's Landscape

Plays and Paintings

For most of his life, playwright Tennessee Williams believed his fragile mind balanced on the edge of insanity. This tenuous grasp on reality reveals itself through the characters in virtually all of Williams' plays. The characters all reflect aspects of the author himself and their struggles reveal conflicting impulses in his own mind: especially duality and ambivalence, key elements in expressionist painting (see Appendix, Fig. 1-3). Donald E. Gordon explains that the "prime emotional state of Expressionism is tension, ambiguity, and ambivalence" (xvi). Director Keith Hack explains that Williams manipulates this state in his writing as well, "[dividing] various aspects of himself or his experience of the world into three of four different characters to provide dramatic conflict" (qtd. in Clinton 273).

The Expressionist movement lasted roughly between 1905 and 1923. Three main themes constitute the phases that Gordon explains as the wave of German Expressionism: it "begins with the promise of renewal (1905-1910), but soon achieves in its greatest
masterpieces an optimistic/pessimistic tension (1910-1914) before ending in a grim standoff between latent hope and manifest despair (1914-1923)” (xvii). Paintings from this time reveal both the “renewal and decline,” apparent in Friedrich Nietzsche’s work, upon which much of the movement based its philosophy. The stages Gordon cites are also traced in the three later Williams plays (which end in this bleak impasse) as they reflect the turbulence of and his outlook on his own life and the world around him.

He exposes his mind most powerfully in *The Two-Character Play*. The brother and sister, Felice and Clare, represent two forces conflicting in Williams’ own mind. The play ends in an embrace between the pair as the lights dim to darkness in the cold theater. The siblings, at least for the moment, have dropped the loaded revolver and choose to continue the play. The reader is unsure of the events that will unfold from that point forward, just as Williams was wary of his own future. The comforting aspect, one might argue, is that the two survive and, more importantly, that they survive together. There remains the promise of some kind of renewal in their lives in the inner play.

Ruby Cohn, in her article “Late Tennessee Williams,” interprets these events differently however. She sees the embrace as a “way of facing a slow death” (289). It remains crucial, though, that the two face it together. In describing one expressionist painting, Donald E. Gordon explains that the artist is asserting that as long as one is not alone, one can be confronted with death and feel no fear (47). Felice and Clare, nervous creatures throughout the play, find solace in one another. They are able to face their future as long as they are together. Their actions are deliberate and calm, almost serene, at the end of the play as they embrace. This theme of “love-in-death or *Liebestod*” is
common in several expressionist works (Gordon 47), as well as a common thread in Williams’ plays.

Throughout his life, Williams searched for companions to fill the aching emptiness and remove the loneliness in his life. His work reflects this suffering. A parallel can be drawn between the struggle of Felice and Clare (Williams’ inner conflict and pain) and the expressionist painting by Heckel entitled *Two Men at a Table* (see Appendix, Fig. 1). Heckel embodies Dostoevsky’s vision of suffering, further discussed by Nietzsche, in this 1912 work. It portrays two men, one on the verge of assassinating the other. The murder weapon points to a painting within the painting of Christ prior to the Resurrection. Gordon explains that this implies the “authenticity of suffering” in the victim (50).

Gordon explains that the concept Heckel stresses in his painting comes from Dostoevsky’s novels, which point to the idea that one can reach a higher level of understanding through suffering. Williams felt that the artist is almost as much a victim of his role as artist, as he is a victim of the society that judges and excludes him. There is a great deal of turmoil in the life of an artist, and this places him more in tune with his inner being. Because the siblings in Williams’ play become separated from the outside world and become “attuned to [their] mental state,” they can face death with “equanimity” (Gordon 50). Society and the role of artist act as their would-be assassins, yet the pair faces them with calm acceptance of their fate.

Although this exercise gives a kind of peace in the face of adversity, there is a danger of becoming “too attuned” to one’s inner reality. When one delves into his inner mental state, the line between that state and the outside world often becomes blurred.
This occurs in *The Two-Character Play*, in which Felice and Clare shift in and out of character throughout the play.

In addition showing the two sliding between their roles as actors and characters, Williams uses many other devices (including incomplete sets and a blending of the two sets) to portray the arbitrary quality of the line between outside reality and the mind. He writes in the stage directions that the set “must not only suggest the disordered images of a mind approaching collapse but also, correspondingly, the phantasmagoria of the nightmarish world that all of us live in at present...” (*TC* 1). Nicholas O. Pagan points to the stage directions and explains that “we may find ourselves wondering where the interior set ends and where the exterior set begins, and vice-versa” (69).

The fragmented sets reflect the shattered minds of the two lead characters. Pagan, however, interprets these devices not only as an instrument for commenting on the ease with which outer reality can be lost, but also as a remark on the art of writing drama. Pagan explains that *The Two-Character Play*, and its sister play, *Out Cry*, are “‘metadramatic’ because they investigate, analyze, and comment on their own nature as plays” (68). As Williams became older, he became more contemplative about his career and the line between life and art, which he often crossed. Pagan understands this play as a discussion of the hardships of playwrights in general (68). Like Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, Williams uses the play to comment on the art of fashioning plays and the complications involved. Some specific problems are noted by Pagan, including “problems of beginning and ending, and above all, the need for playwrights to eventually let go of their plays and allow them an independent existence” (68). This is a painful
process for the creator of these characters. He must let go of the lives he has felt so much pain and pleasure in creating (Timpane 756).

Throughout *The Two-Character Play*, the audience is made repeatedly aware that it is indeed watching a play. The lines that Felice and Clare speak constantly remind it of this. The obvious recognition of and reflection upon the fact that it is a play is reminiscent of the paintings of Rene Magritte. Through his paintings he often reiterated that one was indeed looking at a painting of something in life—not the real object. The main goal he attempted to achieve through his Surrealist paintings was of “engendering a disturbing poetic climate, plunging us into disorder and thereby bringing us closer to the mystery, the source of all knowledge” (Ollinger-Zinque 18).

*The Two-Character Play* attempts this as well. The climate created is disconcerting to the audience, and through this ambiguity, Williams sought to drive them toward discovering truth. The concept of a play-within-a-play is one technique he uses. In several of Magritte’s paintings, he portrays a painting-within-a-painting. For example, his 1933 painting, *The Human Condition* (see Appendix, Fig. 5) reveals an easel standing before an open window. The painting on the easel completes the scene that it blocks from being viewed through the window (Ollinger-Zinque 22). In *A Courtesan’s Palace* (1928), a woman’s torso is seen on a frame hanging on a wall (see Appendix, Fig. 4). One cannot discern whether or not the frame surrounds a painting on the wall or is an opening to a place beyond the wall. By portraying the images in this way, he presents a tension between “real space and represented space and [plays] on the ambiguity of the relationship between the two” (Ollinger-Zinque 22). This tension between the real and the represented is also a primary concern in Williams’ work.
The unease caused by the attention within the work to the concept of art is also apparent in other Magritte paintings. His pieces utilizing words range from those produced in 1927 to 1931 (Leen 26). In these, he touches on the same idea of reality versus the depiction of reality. In his 1964 work, *This is Not an Apple* (see Appendix, Fig. 6), an apple is painted in the center with the inscription “Ceci n’est pas une pomme” drawn above it. This is one example of many juxtaposing images and their corresponding (or non-corresponding) labels. One might interpret this painting as admitting that the painted image is *not* an apple; it is merely the representation of an apple. Williams reveals in his work that he is presenting us with his representation of reality. Felice, the playwright and actor, for example, utters passages like: “The audience is supposed to imagine that the front of the house, where I am standing now, is shielded by sunflowers, too, but that was impractical as it would cut off the view” (*TC* 46). In doing so, Felice (and Williams) emphasizes that this is a play, a depiction of reality, not necessarily realistic.

Along with becoming more reflective about his art, Williams also seemed to become more jaded with age. His later plays, especially *The Two-Character Play*, reveal a gloom not prominent in earlier works. This play reflects the impasse between “latent hope and manifest despair” apparent in the last phase of the Expressionist movement (Gordon xvii). Felice and Clare decide to willingly accept their enclosure into their minds’ landscape (they are two halves of the same mind), yet this acceptance is not without cost. There is a small note of triumph even as the famous Blanche Dubois is led away in the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is missing in this play.
The Two-Character Play deals not only with the process of writing plays and the subject of despair—this play is a discussion on madness. Jacqueline O’Connor, in her book, Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams, considers madness in his works, explaining that the inclusion of this subject in Williams’ plays reflects his obsession with mental illness. His experiences with his sister Rose, as well as his own encompassing fear of losing his mind, influence his work to a great extent.

O’Connor points out that rose imagery pervades his plays, and there are numerous references to specific situations that Rose was subjected to in the institution (3). Rose imagery is abundant in the plays. For example, the carpet in the home in which Felice and Clare are trapped in the inner play has a worn rose in its center (TC 34); and the action of The Red Devil Battery Sign takes place predominantly in the Yellow Rose Hotel (RD 1). It is here that we find the Woman Downtown a guarded prisoner. In a moment of confusion, talking to King, she says, “You are actually the only person I’ve encountered at the—Paradise—Rose?...” (RD 14). She inadvertently jumbles the name of the institution she was in (Paradise Meadows) and the hotel where she currently resides, revealing that she is imprisoned here as well. O’Connor explains that “the desire to avoid scandal by confining the source of the disturbance figures decisively in the outcomes of many of these plays” (18).

“Confinement” is the catchword in a great deal of Williams’ plays. As Rose was confined in an institution, Felice and Clare, in The Two-Character Play, become caged in the darkening theater. The sunflowers in the inner play stifle the house where Felice and Clare are trapped. This echoes the feeling of entrapment in Suddenly Last Summer, where the “jungle-like garden of the Venable home” encloses the events that unfold (qtd.
in O'Conner 23). O'Connor recalls that it reminds one of the “quotation from the Song of Solomon that Williams uses for the epigraph to The Two-Character Play: ‘A garden enclosed is my sister... a spring shot up, a fountain sealed’” (O'Connor 23). The character Felice even alludes to this quote within the play when speaking of Clare (TC 56). The house surrounded by a thick growth of sunflowers is the same house within which their father shot their mother out of fear of confinement in an institution. It is haunted by their ghosts in the minds of the two characters. The roses on the faded carpet, upon which Victorian furnishings are set (the Victorian furniture might also symbolize repression and a sense of suffocation), add to the history of the home and symbolize the struggle against madness and the confinement it may present.

In the outer play, the siblings are first isolated when their troupe leaves them because they are insane. Then, there is no contact with the front of the house, so they are unaware (until they peak through the curtain—out of their prison—already seemingly confined to the stage) of when the audience has finished filing in (TC 11). When the audience leaves them, Felice and Clare are finally incarcerated within the theater. Clare bluntly says, “So it’s a prison, this last theatre of ours?” She then tells Felice that she’s “always suspected that theatres are prisons for players...” To which Felice answers, “Finally, yes. And for writers of plays...” (TC 57). This seems to echo Williams’ own feelings of his position as a playwright. The pair, as an escape from this prison, then chooses to confine themselves within the reality of the inner play.

There is also an overriding sense of confinement in Vieux Carre, out of which only the Writer escapes. The inhabitants of the boardinghouse have small, cell-like “cubicles [that] are separated by plywood, which provides minimal separation...” (VC 4).
Mrs. Wire, the landlady, also takes up residence at the entrance of the boardinghouse. She seems to stand guard, checking her tenants' guests at the door and monitoring the hours when they leave and enter their apartments. She is like the warden of the institution, eyeing the movements of her patients. In many of Williams' plays, the "[settings often suggest] that the characters will face permanent confinement at the play's end" (O'Connor 20).

Isolation, as well as confinement, is the unbearable situation of those institutionalized. O'Connor focuses on Blanche's plight in A Streetcar Named Desire as it relates to the experiences of the "mad." The events that unfold in this play, however, are also seen to a great extent in the three plays discussed in this study. The actions against Blanche in the Kowalski household foreshadow the life she will inevitably lead in the institution. Here, "communication with the outside world is either forbidden or strictly controlled; if allowed, such freedoms as telephone privileges or letter exchanges are strictly monitored" (O'Connor 22).

The Woman Downtown has many of the same experiences in The Yellow Rose Hotel that Blanche has with the Kowalskis. These events seem to foreshadow her return permanently to an institution. The Woman Downtown has lived in an institution, and although her guardian has rescued her from it, she remains under its spell. She explains: "For some reason I'm not able to make outside calls from my suite; the calls are not completed. I've complained to the operator; still they're not completed" (RD 3-4). She must use a friend of King's to relay messages to her guardian on the "outside." There is also a failed attempt at a phone call in The Two-Character Play (30-1). The isolation of the siblings in this play forces them to depend solely upon each other. Both characters,
already separated from society, cannot function without the other. Pagan quotes a line in *The Two-Character Play* that illustrates this dependence: “I stand here—move not a step further. Impossible without her. No, I can’t leave her alone” (70).

Even the Writer in *Vieux Carre* suffers from a terrible loneliness, a major theme in Williams’ work, in the beginning of the play. Although he appeared a “social butterfly,” loneliness plagued Williams throughout his life and he describes his feelings lyrically in the stage directions to the second scene in the play. He explains the crying of the character fashioned upon himself; it is “a sound of dry and desperate sobbing which sounds as though nothing in the world could ever appease the wound from which it comes: loneliness, inborn and inbred to the bone” (VC 16). Through the actions of his lead character, Williams opens a window to his own soul, to his own struggles. He projects this ache onto not only the Writer, but also many of the other characters in this play as well as the vast array of characters in all of his plays. This pitiable situation, for many of these unfortunate characters, is never remedied.

While the inhabitants of the house in *Vieux Carre* face a dismal future, the Woman Downtown is shown almost triumphant in the conclusion of *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, though surrounded by a crumbling and destructive situation. Williams explained that the play is “about the fate and destiny of two people and at the same time a parable of a world corrupted and eroded by civilization” (Kahn 363). Human suffering at the expense of a corrupt world is a major consideration in the expressionist movement. Colby H. Kullman expands a discussion of this topic:

> Fully aware of the threat of mind-manipulating Big Daddies and their all-
controlling ways, and forecasting future forms of tyrannical dominance (the science fiction dystopias of his worst nightmares), Tennessee Williams creates dramatic worlds that explode with violent images of a Big Daddy-Big Brother-‘Catch-22’ world...Orwell, Heller, and Williams were obviously responding to the signs of their times. (669)

The violent worlds colliding in the end of The Red Devil Battery Sign are emphasized even more clearly when juxtaposed with the relatively realistic style of the rest of the play. While many critics attacked the fantastical ending of the play, it can be seen as underlining the drastic measures needed to counteract the stifling forces of authoritarian conspiracies. Along with the drastic shift in style Williams displays in the ending, comes a shift in setting in the second act. The action progresses from the hotel to the streets, “[revealing] a pattern of dire events in a darkening landscape” (Kahn 367).

This change in scenery can be seen as reflecting the change that is taking place in the lead character’s mind. The Woman Downtown transforms from a fragile woman to a defiant leader. As the scenes shift to the more ragged atmosphere, Woman becomes darker, stronger, and more menacing. Although Kahn reports that a reviewer commented that this play and another similar one by an Austrian playwright are merely “old men’s desperate and despairing answers to a violent world” (qtd. in Kahn 367), The Red Devil Battery Sign is much more than that. It is about the triumph against evil, manipulative forces. Woman Downtown is an avenger for those who have been crushed by the powers that be.

In an alternate ending to the play Williams wrote, an even more dramatic treatment is written. The gang, at the direction and insistence of Woman and Wolf,
bombs the Red Devil Battery building. She orders that a bomb be placed directly underneath the bed of her husband in the penthouse of the building. The ending of a 1976 draft is written in pen and contains the explosion of the building after a small expanse of time in which the Woman has become completely accepted by the gang as mother and leader. As the fire blazes, "The Woman Downtown, raises her arms, shouting 'King.' As if summoned by the cry, King's apparition appears dimly on the embankment with his mariachis: a song of transcendental richness and power, blends with the chant [of the Hollow gang, 'Burn, burn, burn!']" (1976 draft with revisions).

Although one may not be comfortable with the leap from realism apparent in these endings, it cannot be denied that they are powerful and affecting. Kahn explains that the play moves "toward a patently symbolic statement of its meaning—a projected consequence of Williams' reading of contemporary society" (368). He compares Woman's role to Daughter's in Strindberg's Dream Play. The two female characters fall from lofty heights and are exposed to the torments of humans; however, in the more patently expressionist Dream Play, there is a symbolic vision of hope in the end. Kahn points out that in The Red Devil Battery Sign, "no magical flower bursts into bloom at the top of a castle, no ultimate vision promises humanity salvation" (Kahn 368). However, the bomb bursting in the top of the building in the revised ending of Williams' play, may be seen as this flower. Although violent, this bomb finally destroys the symbol and leader of the despotic, powerful organization and purges the world of its influence.

One might put yet another interpretation upon this ending. The switch from realistic action to fantasy takes place at the beginning of the third scene in the final act of the play. The abrupt change is preceded by the rape of Woman Downtown by a man
hired by the Red Devil conglomerate. The events that unfold in this world may simply be
all taking place in the mind of Woman. The ghostly mariachis enter to protect her and
King as soon as she meets him in the pharmacy, and this seems to be the turning point in
the action.

The fact that the play followed a realistic tone until this point makes the visions of
Woman Downtown more powerful. Corrigan discusses the theater of the Expressionist
movement, emphasizing Strindberg as a prototype for the drama of the genre:

Both Strindberg's reduction of characters to types or to projections of the
protagonist's mind and his metaphoric use of setting and props were
imitated by the German Expressionist playwrights, who aimed, like
Expressionist painters, at the depiction of intensest emotion. On the
German stage, revolt, personal or social, was the keynote; the rallying cry
was...the regeneration of mankind. (376)

*The Red Devil Battery Sign* has all of this. The Woman Downtown revolts
against not only her husband and his conglomerate, but also against her own past
repression. The play depicts the vast range of her emotions, from fragility to raw,
animalistic passion. She becomes the power behind the revolution. This revolution,
however, takes place in such an atmosphere of phantasmagoria that perhaps it is actually
all taking place within her imagination.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the rape of Blanche by Stanley "brings on her
commitment" (O'Connor 22). It is the breaking point beyond which Blanche cannot
survive mentally and must retreat from the world of reality. The same might be said of
Woman Downtown. Her lover is dying, her guardian is dead, and she is violently abused
by a man working under her husband. A strong character despite the many things that had been done to her, even the Woman Downtown may have a point where she cannot cope with reality any longer. The events that occur in the last scenes of the play take place in her mind, a way of escape and revenge upon her husband that she could not accomplish in the world of reality.

This departure from reality is understandable. O'Connor explains that "the suggestion that Williams makes is that a person's natural reaction in these circumstances would be to break down in the face of this harsh, critical world...Society's brutal nature offers little opportunity for a peaceful existence; those who lack the necessary survival techniques are destroyed or ostracized, or both" (28). The Woman Downtown sees herself joining the gang in her mind, where she is no longer a victim of her husband's (and in a larger sense, his world's—an inhumane society's) handiwork.

The Woman Downtown fits Phyllis Chesler's profile of a woman driven mad. O'Connor discusses her book, *Women and Madness*, briefly, and quotes her as saying that "the search often involves 'delusions' or displays of physical aggression, grandeur, sexuality, and emotionality...Such traits in women are feared and punished in patriarchal mental asylums" (qtd. in O'Connor 34). O'Connor explains that Williams uses these stereotypes of mentally ill women to comment upon the society that labels them as such (34). In the play, the Woman Downtown is only forced into the institution for political reasons, but in the end of the play, she might be seen as truly mad—a victim of this cruel society.

The fantastical ending of the play lends credence to the position that the events that unfold are taking place within the mind of the Woman. King, as he dies, says, "Si,
sueno. Dreams necessary” (RD 90). Then once King dies, the door to the pharmacy is left open and the street gang, “a fantastic group,” enters. Williams writes: “They seem to explode from a dream—and the scene with them. It is here that the play stylistically makes its final break with realism. This break must be accomplished as if predetermined in the mise en scene from the beginning, as if naturally led up to, startlingly but credibly” (RD 92). This final break with reality coincides with the break with reality in the Woman’s mind. These fantastical expressionistic devices reveal the action in the dreamlike state of her mind.

This tension between reality and dream is also prevalent in the Symbolist movement’s drama and visual arts. In her article, “Tennessee Williams: Optimistic Symbolist,” June Bennet Larsen discusses Williams’ work in relation to this genre. In both cases, the sensitive souls of the world are forced to seek comfort in a place outside of the realm of reality: “Tennessee Williams is a direct descendant of the Symbolists, whose concern with man’s struggle against the void led them to seek refuge in dreams...The new drama abounded with dualisms, especially dream-reality and life-death” (Larsen 413). These dualisms are played out in all three of the later plays discussed here.

For instance, in The Two-Character Play, Felice and Clare are profoundly affected by the violent deaths of their parents and, refusing to use the gun left on stage, choose to break with reality and return into the play. The ending of The Red Devil Battery Sign can be interpreted as a final break with reality for the lead character. The contrast between reality and dreams, as well as the necessity of those dreams, is apparent throughout the play. The theme of reality versus dreams is also vital to the story of Vieux
Carre. Life is so painful and lonely for Mrs. Wire that she hallucinates that the Writer is her lost son, Timmy (VC 106-7). Jane, faced with the terrible prospect of her encroaching death, also retreats into another reality.

Her plight, and the predicaments of a score of Williams characters, also concerns another theme of Symbolist work. Larsen explains that “they recognized the immediacy of death and were always haunted by isolation and morality” (414). The ghosts of loneliness and death engulf the characters in almost all of Williams’ plots. Larsen holds, however, that he breaks with the Symbolist tradition by incorporating an optimistic note into his plays. Faced with inevitable death, his characters still struggle against the void (Larsen 415). Many of their attempts to reach out fail, but the fact that they do indeed make the attempt reveals a sense of hope.

I disagree, however. Although the attempt to reach out is valiant, one must take note of the resolutions of the situations the characters are placed in. The Woman Downtown attempts to reach out to King, to find love and salvation, and he dies of a brain tumor. She is raped and sent into a world within her own mind. A similar situation takes place in The Two-Character Play. Felice and Clare cannot survive in the real world either, and retreat into the reality of their play. Many of the characters in Vieux Carre have become disconnected from this world as well because life has been too cruel. They struggle, but one wonders to what end.

In A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche is led away to an institution but holds her head high. She receives the kindness of a stranger in the end. There is also a sense of hope for Brick and Maggie in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, even though it is slight. In his later plays however, and especially these works, there seems to be only darkness. Although
the Writer escapes the boarding house of the dying, he only does so by turning his back
on them. He has become callous in his time there, which reveals a strange prescription
for success in life. There seems to be no hope for anything greater, only a grim
acceptance of the cruelty of the outside world. In his own life and encroaching old-age,
Williams saw himself as that writer, becoming less hopeful, despite the fact that he
continued writing.

Williams himself was a "survivor" (Larsen 415). Although he suffered a great
deal from the rejection of his plays, and the stress of his "Stoned Age" took its toll on
him, he continued to write and to attempt new techniques. Michael Korda, who worked
with Tennessee in his later years, recalls that by 1982, "he was on a roller coaster of pills
and booze; his writing, which he persisted in almost defiantly, showed the consequences"
(67). Although it is widely held that his work toward the end of his life (including the
plays discussed here) was inferior to past successes, the fact that he continued reaching
out through his plays proves that he did not surrender.

He felt that critics were unfairly judging him based on his earlier work. Ruby
Cohn explains that "sex, South, and violence brought Tennessee Williams to a Broadway
that then allowed him no deviations" (286). He did not view his later work as
fundamentally different from his earlier plays, however. He holds that all of his
compositions aim to accomplish the same goal. Larsen quotes his production notes from
one of his earliest plays, The Glass Menagerie (in 1945):

Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have
only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. 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...

These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre... (qtd. in Larsen 416)

Williams made the effort to establish this "plastic theatre" a goal throughout his career. However, critics note that while his later plays such as The Two-Character Play employ many expressionistic devices, Williams falls short of the ideal. Rodney Simard echoes William J. Free's feeling that his later plays are "inadequate expressions of whatever is in the playwright's imagination" (qtd. in Simard 67). The very goals of expressionist art are the search for truth and the portrayal and universalizing of the inner feelings and thoughts of the artist. However, many critics feel that Williams' later work becomes too personal, and loses its connection to the audience. Nicholas O. Pagan quotes reviewer Herbert Kretzemer discussing The Two-Character Play: "It would need a psychoanalyst—and preferably Tennessee Williams' own—to offer a rational interpretation for the enigmas that litter the stage like pieces of an elaborate jigsaw" (qtd. in Pagan 75).

Still, Tennessee Williams is an expressionist by the revolt he attempted. Behr, Fanning, and Jarman explain in the introduction to Expressionism reassessed [sic], that the act of labeling Expressionism as a movement is questionable. They go on to say that "the Expressionists were united only in their...rejection of the classical ideals of beauty, their youthful passion and their belief in an art that would break the bounds of
aestheticism in its pursuit of emotional and psychological intensity” (Behr 3). They were in “pursuit of raw truth, regardless of the inhibitions imposed by tradition” (Behr 3).

Williams claimed that this was his aim, and he continued in his attempt even after critics and audiences turned away from him. In The Red Devil Battery Sign, King bestows the Woman Downtown with the name of Truth: “You? Respect? --Yes! La verdad! Truth. I give you that name, now” (RD 91). The quest for truth is a driving force in Williams’ work as well as that of the Expressionists and the Symbolists. John Timpane recognizes this and notes that “in his stage notes, he constantly asserts that his settings are not real. They are transformations that lead to the truth, and therein lies the pleasure” (753).

In his search for truth, Williams was not only rebelling against the norms of the theater in place at the time, but he was also rebelling against the style expected of him from his earlier work. He, however, did not understand the attacks of the critics. His confusion is apparent in a quote from an interview in Playboy. Williams explains that “the critics still want me to be a poetic realist, and I never was. All my great characters are larger than life, not realistic” (qtd. in Larsen 416).

While critics like Larsen perceive hope in Williams’ plays, Timpane asserts that “Williams continually flips the card of plastic reality, in which the exhilaration of the free becomes the anguish of the lost” (755). There are many lost and anguishing souls in Vieux Carre. For example, while the Writer escapes from the boardinghouse, Jane and the other tenants are left alone and defeated. One feels sympathy for many of the characters, but none are completely innocent. Williams’ major characters cannot be easily defined. The audience is torn in many directions concerning these figures; it is meant to feel uncomfortable with its inability to simplify them (Timpane 759-60).
This “ambivalence” engendered in the audience is also achieved through the androgyny of his characters (Timpane 759). This is a further reflection of the Symbolist movement, in which a great deal of the paintings contain androgynous subjects (Larsen 413). The inclusion of androgynous figures in the pieces of this movement is a manifestation of their tendency to represent reality in an altered state. In Williams’ writing, men and women are both seen as desirable, sexual creatures. He does not separate the sexes; he endows them both power in their sexuality (Timpane 758-9). The character Jane in Vieux Carre undergoes a brief remission through her sexual awakening with Tye, an extremely sexual creature. In The Red Devil Battery Sign, the Woman Downtown and King are both sensual characters, and Woman Downtown feels that she “comes alive” through her sexual encounter with King (RD 27).

The androgyny in Williams’ plays is especially apparent in the characters of Felice and Clare in The Two-Character Play. They are both seen as desirable creatures, although they are tainted by their experiences. Williams describes both characters as having “a quality of youth without being young” (TC 3). Both are actors, maintaining a facade in their portrayals of their characters as well as in their own lives. Williams had these characteristics, and wrote a great deal of himself into their parts. They are two halves of one consciousness, Williams’ own rather androgynous being.

As he writes himself into his plays, Williams is accomplishing Expressionist work. He reveals his inner self through his work by utilizing devices such as distorted settings and direct dialogue to the audience. The direct dialogue to the audience reminds one of the Surrealist paintings of Rene Magritte as well. Expressionistic devices, in
addition to those used by the Symbolists, reflect Williams' knowledge of other art forms and his bravery to experiment with their forms.
Tennessee and Vincent

An innovator in the art world, Vincent Van Gogh held many of the same views as Tennessee Williams. Both artists experimented with their art forms and experienced periods of success and periods of trial as consequences of these explorations. The also share common views of "the artist." These men have not only that in common, but they also share many of the same life experiences. Both artists used their mediums as outlets for the personal anguish that they felt. Their work was an obsession for them, a vital need.

Van Gogh turned his quest for a religious life into a passion for art. He viewed his drive to produce art as a fire within him, and believed that he must carry on no matter where it led him. He, like Williams, saw the end of an artist as an inevitably dismal one (Meissner 109). The end is unimportant; however, what concerns him is the work itself. Williams exclaims in his memoirs: "Work!!--the loveliest of all four-letter words..." (qtd. in Cohn 286). Van Gogh felt the same, and wrote in a letter: "The work is an absolute necessity for me. I can't put it off, I don't care for anything but the work; that is to say, the pleasure in something else ceases at once and I become melancholy when I can't go on with my work" (qtd. in Meissner 110). This sentiment echoes Williams' obsession with writing, mirroring his claim in a 1975 article that "if you're an artist, everything except your art is auxiliary, a supplement." He goes on more vehemently to say, "I have no fear of death—except as it might intervene before my accomplishment of that. This is all! And I will live for it" (qtd. in Gussow).
Both men seem to have no other choice but to create art. Williams may not have shared Van Gogh’s deeply religious feelings, but the compulsions of the two are very similar. W. W. Meissner explains Van Gogh’s passion:

Vincent’s art was driven by an almost demonic, even fanatical, need to find expression, to communicate himself in meaningful ways to his fellow men and to the world, to find meaning, purpose and belonging through the medium of his art, and finally to pour into it all the intensity and fervor of his deeply religious instincts...a powerful impulse to create and express that drained his capacity to the depths and brought him to the brink of destruction. (111)

The artist is in constant peril of allowing his art to control him. Writing for Williams had the same suffocating grasp as painting for Van Gogh. The tragic drive to create eventually destroyed Tennessee. He viewed the creative energy within him and all artists as a “den of lions” in a short composition for an English class. He believed that unless the artist released these “savage beasts,” they would devour him. Although this is a brief, hurried essay, it portrays the idea of “the artist” which Williams held throughout his life. He even mentions Van Gogh in a short list of artists that he believes succumbed to the madness brought on by this draining force within.

This force is present in the artist from an early age and manifests itself when the sensitive child must deal with unfortunate circumstances in his family life. Vincent suffered from “harsh devaluation from his father,” and his mother gave him no support (Meissner 112). Tennessee also suffered from an uncomfortable family dynamic, and “in so many of Tennessee’s early plays and stories, the writing is impelled by a mixture of
guilt and resentment at his family situation” (Hayman 66). Vincent “managed to create an idealized image of his father,” and Tennessee held no illusions about his own. The two did desperately long for love and approbation from their fathers (Meissner 112).

The added pressure for Tennessee of a mentally ill sister and a homosexual lifestyle that ran counter to his “Puritanical” upbringing created a lonely world for him. The gifts that made these two men artists also set them apart from the people around them. Meissner explains why men like this turned to art: “When the artist finally finds the medium of creative expression and is able to immerse himself in it, only then does the sense of loneliness find relief” (112).

Since art was so much a part of their lives and vice versa, the line between art and life became blurred. Meissner explains that Vincent’s art reveals that he was unsure of his own existence. Tennessee was also unsure of who he was and of his place in society as well as his place within his own family. Vincent wrote in a letter: “...I am not an adventurer by choice but by fate, and feeling nowhere so much myself a stranger as in my family and country” (qtd. in Meissner 113). Tennessee’s fears are echoed by his characters. Clare, in The Two-Character Play says to her brother Felice, “The part of Felice is not the only part that you play” (TC 13). She goes on to say later that “the worst thing that’s disappeared in our lives is being aware of what’s going on in our lives” (TC 53).

These artists portrayed not only their own suffering, but also what they saw as the human struggle in general. For Vincent, it was the physical suffering of the less fortunate, “the poor and humble...who worked in the sweat of their brows and carried the burdens of the world” (Meissner 114). For Tennessee, it was the psychological suffering
of the fragile and weak creatures at the hands of an uncaring society. Van Gogh’s work, however, is not as focused on the self as Williams’ is.

Indeed, one of the complaints of Williams’ later plays is that he concentrated on his own worries to too great an extent. O’Connor praises much of Williams’ work for its universal appeal: “Although the characters in his plays are unusual people, they are not unknown to us; they are like ourselves or our family members or our friends” (6). His later plays, however, fall short of this connection. While Van Gogh succeeds in creating empathy for his subjects, Williams characters become too personalized and his plays lose the ability to connect with his audience. Pagan quotes critic Herbert Kretzemer, commenting on The Two-Character Play: “It would need a psychoanalyst—and preferably Tennessee Williams’s own—to offer a rational interpretation for the enigmas that litter the stage like pieces of an elaborate jigsaw” (qtd. in Pagan 75).

Tennessee lost his place in the theatre in part because he could no longer communicate with his audience. He was attempting a higher ideal, but became so focussed on his own idiosyncratic psychological states that audiences and critics lost the ability to identify with his work. Ironically, while success nearly destroyed Van Gogh, the waning of success into failure led to the destruction of the playwright.
"My inability to regard [the audience] as the stranger he actually is has led me to a number of humiliating experiences in the form of rejection," says Williams in a discussion of the artist and his connection to his audience. He had few personal confidantes in his life, and felt most comfortable communicating his thoughts and feelings to an audience through his work. Williams remained open to this amalgam of strangers, despite shrinking attendance at his plays and poor reviews.

He continued writing and attempting new productions of his plays until his death. This study discusses, for instance, the 1976 version of The Two-Character Play. This play, however, had been published twice before, once in 1969 and again in 1973 (Cohn 287). Each time, Williams progresses toward what he believed would be a masterpiece surpassing even The Glass Menagerie. Red Devil Battery Sign undergoes several revisions as well, and the 1939 Lady of Larkspur Lotion results in the version published under the title Vieux Carre almost forty years later.

One cannot attribute greatness to works that might have become so, but Williams shows his talent for reworking a manuscript and it remains a question as to what he could have accomplished if he had not died when he did. Ruby Cohn points out that Williams
improves *The Two-Character Play* in each successive version. Although she makes it clear that he still has work to do, she explains that the playwright portrays the inner story in a more compact manner each time, removing jarring interruptions in the dialogue so that the story flows better and more concisely (287). While Cohn praises the "cleaner and clearer" inner play, she also draws attention to Williams use of "excessive symbolism." This is a common complaint made by many critics of the play.

*The Red Devil Battery Sign* was also performed on several occasions with mainly lukewarm reviews. The Boston production of the play only survived for ten days, but it was not viewed as a lost cause. Mel Gussow, in a 1975 article, explains that it was seen as a "work in progress." Williams said in an interview reported by Gussow that the cuts he had been required to make had been numerous and left holes in the plot. The miscasting of Claire Bloom in the part of Woman Downtown, said Williams, presented another problem. Gussow noted, however, that Williams vowed that rewrites would be made and the play would be seen again (Gussow).

The next year in Austria, *The Red Devil Battery Sign* was attempted again. Sy Kahn discusses the 1976 Vienna production, which he notes was referred to as a "premiere" because Williams had previously revised it. Williams had looked forward to this performance after what he viewed as an uncomfortable pairing with David Merrick as the producer in Boston (362). He had been disappointed with the excessive demands for changes and technical problems there, and felt that he would not encounter such problems in Vienna. Williams was excited about the new version and considered it "equal to his greatest works" (Kahn 363).
His initial excitement over the new production must have faded when the reviews appeared. Many critics found the conclusion, for instance, awkward. *Red Devil*'s action proceeds in a relatively realistic style, and is marred by the fantastical ending (Kahn 363). Williams was experimenting further with his expressionistic style in the play, but critics found the sudden interweaving of these elements with a realistic plot upsetting (Kahn 364). The smoothness of the transition from realism to a dream-like quality is also affected by the acting, however. Critic Liselotte Espenhahn, compares the productions before and after the premiere. She notes that “the acting of the major parts...has become more passionate, more solid, so that the various styles (realism and symbolism) now blend more harmoniously” (qtd. in Kahn 370).

While it becomes bothersome when juxtaposed with a body given such a realistic treatment, the ending of *The Red Devil Battery Sign* is an important exercise in expressionism for Williams. Kahn points out: “The stylized, slow physical movements of the scene, amid cataclysmic sound effects, suggest the final moments be understood as an expressionistic and emblematic representation of a desperate alternative to a power-crazed and dehumanized world (364). Williams also utilizes a great deal of symbolism, a characteristic of expressionism, interspersing it throughout the play. As critics attacked *The Two-Character Play* for its excessive symbolism, they also found its use in *Red Devil* overdone. For example, the Red Devil Battery Sign Company’s incredible power is embodied in various pictures flashed on side panels throughout the action of the play. Many reviewers perceived this technique, as well as several others in the play, as “overkill.” At the time of Kahn’s article, the script had not been released because Williams was revising it yet again for another production (Kahn 365). It is possible to
see now, however, that this blatant display is not in the script; it was an addition by the director. Here again, factors outside the quality of the written work affected its acceptance.

While Kahn does recognize faults with the writing in the play, he does make a point of saying that there were problems associated with its success beyond the material itself. He explains that the lengthiness of the play, which bothered many in the audience, was "prolonged by slow-pacing and noisy, laggard shifts, but these are problems of direction and playing tempo more than of the script" (369). He also comments on the variance of the supporting actors' accents (the production contained a supporting cast of English, American, and Austrian actors) that disrupted the continuity of the play's action (Kahn 370).

Elements beyond William's control as author were attacked again in 1977, with the Broadway Production of Vieux Carre. It was given only five performances there and Hayman recalls that Williams did not help matters much, he "antagonized the critics by making repeated public attacks on them" (230). Walter Kerr, in his review, reveals problems with the set, the acting, and the direction. He is critical of the play itself to a certain extent, but admits that it is "disgracefully served" (Kerr 30D). He is especially derogatory when discussing the direction and set design. Kerr is disappointed with several recitations, yet by appreciating the few competent actors in the play, he points to the director as the culprit. T. E. Kalem echoes these sentiments in his Time review, writing that the play had a great deal of potential, but was ruined by the direction (qtd. in Clinton 265). Even the placement of the actors on stage is a subject of derision (Kerr 30D).
A play must fight through many possible obstacles in order to make itself heard by its audiences. It is difficult for viewers to appreciate a production when they are irritated by bad performances, or distracted by unpleasing sets. Clive Barnes, in his review of the same production, is also disappointed with the play. He does not regard *Vieux Carre* as a masterpiece, but, along with Kerr, addresses the problems with both the direction and the sets. Kerr concludes his review by saying that he would attend the play again, if it will not again be “so ruthlessly masked by an irresponsible production” (30D).

*Vieux Carre* was attempted again in London a little over a year later. Under the direction of Keith Hack, the play received much better reviews. In this case, not only Williams was praised, but the cast and director were also given accolades. Both the *Times* and the *Observer* commented upon the excellent direction (Clinton 266). A critic for the *Observer* even writes that “Keith Hack’s loving production…is served by actors obviously overjoyed to have, for once, something to act” (qtd. in Clinton 266).

The marked change in reviews between the two productions is largely due to the influence of the director. Hack worked with Williams a great deal, and their relationship was clearly beneficial. Williams even dedicated the play to Hack for his role in the success of the play. Hack directed the London performance as well as a pre-run in Nottingham.

In an interview, Hack recalls the association fondly. He not only appreciated working with Williams, but he also regarded the play itself as well done: “It’s an important play about art—about whether the artist is a maimed human being because in some strange way his experience of life is at one remove” (qtd. in Clinton 268). He had
seen the Broadway production and noticed several changes that needed to be made to do justice to the play.

He explains that the producers took no real interest in the performance, and that they were merely interested in striking up bargains for the film rights (Clinton 269). Hack notes that the director had never directed a play before, the set changes took too long, and those involved seemed to have little stage experience. Hack did, however, see the possibilities and asked to meet with Williams for a possible reworking of Vieux Carre.

Their meeting began an almost ten-week pairing of the two during the months before Nottingham. Three drafts later, with almost seventy-five percent new material (qtd. in Clinton 271), the play was presented in Nottingham with warm reviews. One might say that it was only successful due to the collaboration, but even Hack said, “You can’t make someone write good lines and you can’t tell someone how to write a good play. You’re hitting chords that are already there...He had a tremendous facility for rewriting and was totally open to reworking things” (qtd. in Clinton 270).

Williams’ openness to change went awry, however, during the London production. Hack explains that Williams forced him to unnecessarily remove two passages which were, as Hack recalls, “some of the best writing in the play” (qtd. in Hack 274). Hack was disappointed in these changes but remembers the collaboration fondly. Many of those who worked closely with Williams remember him well. The fact that he did work with so many people reveals just how much of a collaborative process producing a play is. Timpane explains that the actor who takes on a role in any of his plays is simply
representing the image of an idea... Not the author's (he isn't with us) but the actor's, the director's, the producer's, the other cast members' and crew members' (lighting, set design, and costume), and not least the audience's, with their own readings and interpretations... it cannot be exactly what Tennessee Williams intended, it is (usually) a guess, a version, of what he might have intended (751).

We are left to wonder how much of what we see when presented with one of Williams' plays (for that matter, any play) is really the vision of the playwright. Until the plays are published, we are not privy to the actual stage directions and precise dialogue created by the writer himself. Even when the manuscripts are published, the text may not be the playwrights unique vision. Williams' later work indeed demands a closer review, despite the disappointing productions attempted of all three plays.
Physical Ailments Manifest the Unruly Mind

A closer review of these works can't help but put point the way to a clearer understanding of the use of physical ailments in Williams' plays. He wields them as Symbolic and Expressionistic devices to reveal a tangible clue to inner turmoil. A physical affliction is obvious; it is visible. The physical distress of his characters is a clue, as were the distorted sets and language use in The Two-Character Play, and the fantastical ending of The Red Devil Battery Sign. These devices aid us in discovering the hidden turbulence in the characters.

Nearly every play written by Tennessee Williams contains at least one character suffering from some sort of physical affliction. Williams assigns ailments to his characters as a way of making a statement. In some plays, he uses illness as a sort of "tag of identification," marking characters removed from society. The affliction is a physical manifestation of their separateness. Like Hawthorne's vivid scarlet letter, the character's physical state marks him as the Other. Not all of his ailing characters are forced to the fringes of society, however. In some cases, Williams uses the illness assigned as a tool; he makes the malady itself actually mean something independent of the character. In one of his more famous plays, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Williams portrays the character Big Daddy as dying of cancer. In this case, Big Daddy is not one of the moth-like fragile
creatures scorned by society. He is society, and yet is dying. The cancer growing inside of him symbolizes “mendacity,” the lies that pervade daily life and that will eventually destroy everything.

Inevitable destruction is the fate of many of the characters in *Vieux Carre* as well. Rodney Snared discusses the “rapid declines of the principals, who almost all face deaths at the end” (68). The play contains a veritable cornucopia of illnesses: the Writer has a cataract; the painter Nightingale is dying of tuberculosis; two old spinsters are starving to death; and the young woman Jane is dying of leukemia. Although *Vieux Carre* is a memory play, these physical ailments are not merely recollections of circumstances Williams encountered in that period of his life. He uses these illnesses as symbols.

For instance, Williams comments on the consequences of repression in the character of Jane. The play’s London director, Keith Hack, explains that Jane’s disease is “the naturalistic expression of mental, moral, and sexual repression” (qtd. in Clinton 274). In the play, Jane leaves her home in New York on the advice of doctors, and comes to New Orleans. Here, her cancer goes into remission. Hack interprets this as occurring because she is no longer “cut off from a side of herself” (qtd. in Clinton 274). She undergoes a sexual awakening with Tye, and by leaving the environment of the north, leaves other repressed aspects of her personality behind.

Her cancer goes into remission for a time, but returns at the end of the play. Her prognosis is unfortunate, and along with a recurrence of her cancer, Jane’s mind weakens. She realizes that her relationship with Tye has no solid foundation, and as her relationship with Tye weakens, so do her will and physical defenses. Kahn explains that in many of Williams’ plays, “psychologically uncomplicated sex offered some defense
against, or recompense for, the natural terrors or the world, as well as a basis for love” (Kahn 369). This cannot last forever, though. Her connection with Tye gives Jane a brief respite from her physical trials but in Vieux Carre as well as in The Red Devil Battery Sign, “sex is debased and love doomed” (Kahn 369). Mere sexual relationships cannot save the characters in either play. Simard explains that “while [Tye] does seem genuinely attached to her, he offers little security for her, especially since she discovers that her (apparently) fatal blood disease is no longer in remission and tries to send him away” (Simard 71). The transitory escape in fleeting sexual encounters does not, as in so many other Williams characters, offer lasting relief from the world.

Nightingale, the artist with whom the Writer has his first homosexual experience, also attempts to find relief through his transient love affairs. This attempt, as Williams himself found, is doomed to failure. Simard echoes Esther Merle Jackson’s remark that in his plays, “[Williams] concludes that the only hope for man is compassion” (qtd. in 73). This compassion is missing in Vieux Carre, and so the characters’ fates are mainly unfortunate. The real saving grace for the characters would be to “connect and form bonds that would make them survivors in a modern oasis” (qtd. in Simard 74). They, however, are unable to surmount the real and metaphorical walls between them and are destroyed.

These characters, all victims of an insensitive society, are contrasted with the Writer and his escape. He begins the play suffering from a cataract, an uncommon ailment for one so young. By the time the mysterious stranger Sky enters the play toward the end, however, the Writer has had an operation on his cataract and is cured. While Jane and Nightingale succumb to their conditions, the Writer surmounts his. His baptism
into the wider, cold world is symbolized in the removal of the object clouding his vision, the cataract. He is no longer a victim of insensitive society; however, he has become a part of that society. No longer an “Other,” he is cured. He turns his back on those who remain with affliction and “tags of identification.”

The Writer is initiated into the callous world and changes to adapt to it. He becomes more insensitive to the suffering of those around him. The removal of his cataract shows that he has grown up: “The Writer, having seen the reality behind [the other characters’] various masks, seemingly rejects their worth as human beings...” (Simard 74). Jackson’s remark that, for Williams, compassion is the only possibility of salvation for mankind is not brought to bear in the character of the Writer. Williams viewed artists as sensitive souls who are champions of this compassion, yet here his main character, the Writer, displays none of this compassion. Simard explains that “for the first time in Williams...soullessness is embodied in the artist figure” (74).

This change may be in part because Williams had himself grown older and become more jaded with the failures he endured. These changes caused him to view himself, and by extension the artist figure, in a different manner (Simard 75). Williams may have even identified more in his later life with the cynical Nightingale. One of the most important characters in the play, Nightingale is dying of tuberculosis, and has had to become a quick-sketch artist to earn money. In Nightingale’s case, his illness is a manifestation of not only his separateness (as a homosexual) (Simard 71), but also is a comment on the renunciation of his art.

Simard explains that Nightingale’s “corrupt and earthy ‘art’ contrasts with the Writer’s pure art that can, one assumes, produce this very play, and his diseased,
perverted, and worldly passions contrast with the innocence and inexperience of the Writer” (Simard 71). To turn away from art means to turn toward death. In The Two-Character Play, the two siblings’ only salvation is a total immersion into their artistic outlet, the inner play. Nightingale, however, has discontinued his serious artistic work: “I could do it, in fact I’ve done good painting, serious work. But I got to live, and you can’t live on good painting until you’re dead, or nearly” (VC 22). This is an ironic statement since he is indeed dying, and Williams alludes that this is due to the surrender of his art.

Simard acknowledges that the artist figure is incredibly important in Williams’ work. The interaction between and juxtaposition of the Writer and Nightingale reveal his changed views on the artist and more clearly, about himself. Simard quotes Donald P. Costello in his interpretation of what is termed Williams’ “fugitive kind:”

The fugitives’ attempts to escape corruption are marked by the retaining of a childlike, free or wild nature, by attempts to recapture a lost past of innocence, by sacramental purification of fire and water, by attempts to escape into artistic visions of sex, by attempts to counter barren death with fruitfulness, and by seeking as a symbol of hope some pure natural object which has risen above earthly taint. (qtd. in Simard 75)

These tortured fugitives are portrayed in all three of these works. The sacramental purification of fire and water also figure predominantly in his plays. While Blanche, in A Streetcar Named Desire, bathes constantly in an attempt to purify herself, the imagery of fire pervades the three plays studied here. From the beginning of The Two-Character Play, fire is a recurrent image. Felice’s opening monologue compares
fear with fire, beginning by saying, "To play with fear is to play with fire" (TC 2). Along with many other allusions to fire, the siblings’ father was an astrologer and his element was “cardinal fire” (TC 31). Fire again occurs often in *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, which ends with a series of flares from explosions occurring in the distance.

One version of the ending to this play contains an incredible explosion, a final symbolic blow to the Red Devil Battery Company. This explosion is masterminded by the Woman Downtown in retaliation for her lover, King’s death. This all-powerful conglomerate defeated him and the Woman finally, in this version, takes her revenge upon him.

He has a debilitating brain tumor from which he dies in the end of the play. His tumor is a symbol of “corrupted and vicious human relationships;” it is “another way Williams expresses the malevolency of the *Red Devil Battery Sign* world” (Kahn 366). This world destroys him, and the King is “deposed” (Kahn 367). The strength that he had maintained as father, lover, man, is sapped from him. The callousness and treachery of powerful organizations seems to have the upper hand when King dies from the tumor. However, in one version, Williams hints that the Woman Downtown will become a leading force in the destruction of the very machine that killed King, and in another actually portrays this retribution.

Another interpretation of these glorious endings, though, is that they only occur in the mind of the despairing Woman Downtown. The power that is responsible for King’s death is also responsible for what Woman becomes. While Jane’s (in *Vieux Carre*) illness and subsequent madness are connected with repression, Williams gives Woman a different treatment. She is also a victim of sexual repression and abuse, but “in this play
it is not sexual frustration that primarily accounts for the psychic distortion and disharmony; rather it is the evil of super-organizational power” (Kahn 366).

The Woman Downtown’s madness is a direct effect of her treatment by her husband’s conglomerate. As with many of his characters, Williams shows in Woman a fragile creature crushed by the insensitivity of the impersonal, outside world. Felice and Clare as well are victims of an uncaring society that abandons them. The world has also certainly forgotten the inmates of the boarding house in *Vieux Carre*. These sensitive characters are suffering both in spirit and in body. All of these characters are not only marred psychologically, but physical ailments are expressions of their inner scars. These bodily afflictions are manifestations of the turmoil inside of their minds.
Conclusion

Williams utilizes these physical ailments in order to emphasize the points he strives to make in his work. The illnesses he assigns to his characters are further symbols in his legend to unlock the map to further understanding of the human spirit and its struggles. As he paints his scenes, he reveals that the afflictions of his characters are visible signs of internal psychological trauma. He uses the tangible to reveal the unseen. This window to the inner strife of his characters and, by extension, himself, is a reflection of the influence of Expressionism in his work. The ailments, distorted settings and languages of his plays, especially the three later works discussed here, are manifestations of the search for truth that Williams performed.

The majority of critics, however, did not feel that Williams accomplished this task in his later plays. After his "Stoned Age," Williams remained a widely known persona while his reputation in the field of serious drama dwindled. He began experimenting with his work more, including techniques borrowed from the Expressionists and the Symbolists. These innovations were not well received by audiences and critics alike, who had become comfortable with his earlier plays. Williams himself, in a newspaper article entitled "I am Widely Regarded as the Ghost of a Writer," said, "I suspect that
what happened is that after *Night of the Iguana* in 1961, certain radically and dreadfully altered circumstances of my life compelled me to work in correspondingly different styles" (D3).

One of those styles is Expressionism, and a consequence of this shift was his embrace of a sense of hopelessness. The vast majority of Williams' plays concern despair and madness, yet until the end of his career, he steered away from endings with no form of optimism. While many maintain that there is a sense of hope in his plays, I contend that this feeling is missing in his later work. He had grown older, lost lovers was drinking heavily and using drugs, and was becoming more and more paranoid toward the end of his life. His later plays in turn become jaded and cynical. His plays reflect the inner despondency of Williams the playwright.

Although the writing in his later plays may not be as solid as that of his earlier successes, these exercises remain strong pieces of literature. Williams is accused of simply working over the all-too-familiar material that led to success for his earlier plays to no real purpose. However, as Ruby Cohn points out, "directors and actors continue to discover what critics have cast aside as self-repetition...Williams' repetitions enfold new explorations in light, sound, stage space, plot structure, character configuration, and especially dialogue" (232-3). It is time that the critics take note of these plays and open their minds to the possibility that these later plays, especially *Red Devil Battery Sign, Vieux Carre, and The Two-Character Play*, are indeed worth a second look.
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Appendix
Figure 1  Magritte, Rene. *Two Men at the Table.* Hamburger Kunsthalle. 
Figure 2  Meidner, Ludwig.  
Corner House (Villa Kochmann, Dresden)  
Sammlung Kirste, Recklinghausen.  
Expressionism, Art and Idea.  
By Donald E. Gordon. New Haven: Yale UP,  
1987. 85.
Figure 6  Magritte, Rene. This is Not an Apple (Ceci n'est pas une pomme).
Private Collection, Galerie Christine and Isy Brachot. Magritte 1898-1967.