

“Living in this little hotel”: Borders on Borders in Tennessee Williams’s Early Short Plays

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“I’m not like you, a solid, touchable being.”
—*The Strangest Kind of Romance*

Finally finished with college at the age of 27, Tennessee Williams embarked on a wandering life that never ceased; he became, like the character so named in *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, a “permanent transient.” Nancy Tischler argues that during the early years of his professional career he cultivated the image of this vagabond existence carefully, making it “the basis of his public biography and his youthful persona” (75).¹ Within ten years of his graduation from the University of Iowa in 1938, his success as a playwright had brought him financial stability and the freedom to settle wherever he chose; however, he remained a bird of passage, and not even the purchase of homes in New York, Key West and his beloved New Orleans could arrest his compulsion for movement.

His nomadic existence is often reflected in his work, and as his characters attempt to escape the past, outrun time, or search for an elusive peace, their surroundings resonate with their restlessness: bars and hotels, brothels and boarding-houses offer but fleeting shelter to these creatures of flight. In *Small Craft Warnings*, a collection of misfits gather in a beach tavern that one character calls “a place of refuge for vulnerable human vessels” (229), while the characters of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* find little refuge there from the pressures of their disintegrating lives. *Hello from Bertha* dramatizes the transitory nature of life in a brothel, as the title character maintains a tenuous hold on the bed in which she once made her living. Reverend Shannon seeks asylum from his “blue devils” on the veranda of a Mexican beach hotel in *The Night of the Iguana*; two hotels line the *Camino Real*, and that “royal highway” divides the luxury of the Sierra Mares hotel from the poverty of the “Ritz Men Only” flophouse. In the play’s Foreword Williams calls the work “an abstraction of the impulse to fly” (420).

Even more ubiquitous in Williams’s plays are the lower-class boarding or rooming houses that serve as the apt encapsulation of his characters’ vagabond lives. The lobby of a flophouse in a mid-western city provides the backdrop to social unrest and violence in the early unpublished play “The Fugitive Kind,” while in *Vieux Carré* Williams recreates the atmosphere of the French Quarter boardinghouse in which he rented an attic room in the 1930’s. The setting is so significant to *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde*, a one-act play published in 1984 in a single small printing by Alboncodani Press, that Williams includes it in the title. The rented room becomes a death chamber in *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde*, as the sadistic landlady kills residents

and visitors in order to reduce the “superabundance of fools.” His double bill *Slapstick Tragedy* presents two more versions of the rented room: *The Mutilated*’s action takes place in a New Orleans rooming house called The Silver Dollar Hotel, and in *The Gnädiges Fräulein* the porch of a Key West cottage represents Molly’s rooming house with its “big dormitory,” where “they’s always room for one more” (223).

The scope of this article does not allow for a thorough examination of all these plays, and so I will save my discussion of the full-length plays and the later plays for another time. For now I will analyze a selected group of one-act dramas from early in Williams’s career and outline some of the most important implications of the rented room settings in his plays. The plays, first collected in the volume *27 Wagons Full of Cotton & Other One-Act Plays*, are significant in that Williams wrote the bulk of them during his early vagabond years; indeed, their locales read like a cluster of travel stickers on the suitcase of the aspiring playwright: St. Louis, New Orleans, New York, Taos, the Mississippi Delta.

Even as he spread colorful stories about his own transient lifestyle through his letters of this period, through the short plays in this collection he explored the dramatic possibilities of the situations and characters he encountered. So while the very brevity of these short plays may dissuade extensive critical analysis and discourage theatrical production, an examination of selected one-acts from *27 Wagons* provides a unique opportunity for illustrating Williams’s preoccupation with human migratory patterns. These short works feature classic Williams outcasts who struggle with the poverty, instability and loneliness of the fugitive kind. Young Willie balances precariously on the railroad tracks that front the dilapidated yellow frame house in *This Property is Condemned*; her family members dead or otherwise departed, she lives upstairs and dodges the county investigator. Several of the plays demonstrate how an embrace of transience can lead to involuntary eviction: the title character in *Hello from Bertha* is removed from her brothel home to the “city bug-house” (193). A similar destination awaits Miss Lucretia Collins of *Portrait of a Madonna*, evicted from her “moderate-priced city apartment” (89) when her pension gives out. In *The Long Goodbye*, Joe stores the furnishings of his family’s tenement apartment and talks of moving to South America as a child in the street below calls “Olly—olly—oxen-free!” (179). In each case the character’s current residence represents a shred of economic or personal stability that departure threatens to dissolve. Willie and Bertha cling to their “homes,” Lucretia relinquishes hers unknowingly, and Joe goes willingly but with a “spasm of nostalgic pain” (179).

Four plays from the collection specifically dramatize “boarders on borders,” for their characters inhabit the metaphoric epitome of the transitory landscape: the rented room.² The desperate *Lady of Larkspur Lotion* occupies a roach-infested boardinghouse cubicle and shares a wall with her alcoholic savior the Writer; aging shoe salesman Mistuh Charlie of *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches* settles into his shabby hotel room for what Philip C. Kolin calls a “death watch” (218);

the pathetically lonely Little Man in *The Strangest Kind of Romance* rents a room whose walls have been inscribed by countless previous tenants; the Man and Woman from *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen . . .* live in a furnished room in midtown Manhattan and struggle to be more than just “a couple of strangers living together” (214). With these plays, Williams chronicles the life he led and the lives he witnessed as a young man on the move, and he demonstrates his concern for the social and economic struggles of Depression-era transients. But he also transforms the boardinghouse setting into a representation of the modern exilic situation, using it to explore issues of identity and existence.

When Williams located characters in hotels and boardinghouses, he dramatized experiences that millions of Americans knew first-hand. For over two hundred years, many Americans have chosen hotel life over other living options, and the proliferation of hotel homes in American cities and towns has influenced urban development, promoted industry and challenged the dominant cultural ideas about homes and their influence on American society (Groth 1). Technically, the hotel and the rooming house differ from the boardinghouse in their original conception, for the latter was designed in part to provide a stable and supervised home-like atmosphere for young men and women who had left their families to work in nearby cities or factory towns.³ Before the 1920's, in fact, many families took in one or two boarders at a time; boarding was so common that the term single-family home was quite misleading (92). The landlady acted as surrogate parent and “wielded authority over parlor life and over curfew and guests” (92). In 1929, when Williams was a college freshman enrolled at the University of Missouri at Columbia, he took up residency in a boardinghouse his mother selected for him, owned by a widow named Effie Graham. The house was segregated sexually, and he recalled in *Memoirs* that the “boys and girls met only at meals” (24).

After he obtained his bachelor's degree almost a decade later, however, Williams would experience a very different kind of life as a boardinghouse and rooming house tenant. Social and economic changes brought about by the Depression and by the growing modernity of American cities led to an increase in the number of more commercial and more liberal residential establishments that offered benefits now standard for urban hotel homes of all types: unsupervised individual freedom, a cosmopolitan mixture of neighbors, diverse neighborhood services, mobility, and liberation from material possessions (Groth 7-8). While they appealed to many patrons who yearned for an unfettered existence, these freedoms also created cultural anxiety in their loosening of domestic and social connections, connections that many people believed were necessary to insure moral order. This anxiety was partly responsible for producing persistent myths about SRO (single room occupancy) tenants: that all are “presumably socially marginal, all mildly psychotic, all alcoholics and drug addicts, all drifters and transients who never live anywhere more than a few months” (10). In part, of course, these myths were grounded in reality, and sociological studies from the modern period describe the

urban rooming house district as an “economic and residential limbo” (Groth 103), and as a “universe of anonymous transients, not rooted for long to any object, either job, family, home, church, club, or friend” (Cohen 319).

As Williams borrowed liberally from his personal experiences in boarding-houses and rooming houses during the thirties and forties, he included many details in his plays that reflect them. While living in New Orleans during the latter part of 1941, he records a move from a “pleasant, comforting room to a horrible windowless brown cubicle with a lumpy bed and a musty odor and big roaches crawling about the walls” (Leverich 432). The next day he writes: “Roaches in my big valise: I am a victim of the insect kingdom” (431). Despite the discomfort of his new environment, however, the location provided inspiration that produced a new one-act play he mentions in one of these journal entries, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*; he sets the play in a “wretchedly furnished room” in the French Quarter, and throughout the work Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore, the “Lady,” harps on her own victimization from the flying cockroaches that she does not consider “the most desirable kind of roommates” (27 *Wagons* 65).

Williams’s move from a private room to an windowless cubicle partitioned off from other rooms by imitation walls represents a significant shift in his fortunes as a roomer, for rooms were separated into three levels of accommodation determined by price: the private room, the semi-private cubicle or ward, and the dry space on an open floor (Groth 141). Just before he made the switch to less expensive lodging, Williams wrote in his journal that he was experiencing “[d]ifficulties—financial. . . I am flat broke—stony—literally—not one cent” (Leverich 429). He complains: “I wake up with no money for breakfast and the land-lady right outside my door” (430). A loan from a friend and the sale of a suit allow him to settle up his bill and relocate, but in the play Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore is not as successful in her efforts to generate funds. When the landlady comes to collect the rent, Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore says that paying it “is out of the question”; her attempts to make money through prostitution have succeeded only in attracting the landlady’s unwanted attention (27 *Wagons* 67). Mrs. Wire’s accusations about her tenant’s late-night assignations correspond to one of Williams’s anecdotes: he writes in his journal that a “misunderstanding about some sailors who come in occasionally to discuss literature with me provoked a tedious little quarrel with the landlady—I told her I could not live in such an atmosphere of unwarranted suspicion” (432).⁴

Even the title of this short work reflects Williams’s immediate experience: his note explains that “Larkspur Lotion is a common treatment for body vermin” (27 *Wagons* 63), and in a journal entry just a week before he wrote the play he complains of having “crabs” and determines to “buy an insecticide and be purified at last of my parasite companions” (Leverich 430). The character he creates is not so inclined to admit her infection, however, and she tries to convince Mrs. Wire that she uses the lotion to remove fingernail polish; however, the landlady recognizes the implausibility of this story, just as she doubts the Lady’s claims to nobility and

the ownership of a Brazilian rubber plantation. Rather than providing her with respect, the stories the Lady creates allow the landlady an excuse for ridicule: “One of the Hapsburgs! Yes! A titled lady! *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion!* *There’s your title!*” (27 *Wagons* 69). In fact, Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore’s attempts to deny her nighttime activities and Mrs. Wire’s determination to reveal them produce the dramatic conflict at the heart of this short play.

As the work transforms Williams’s personal life into drama, it also illustrates the buoyancy of his creative spirit. For with roaches, crabs, and hunger his only companions (he’s interested in the “mulatto-looking” youth in the next room, but “[h]e has a lover—And I have crabs”), Williams turns his troubles into a sympathetic drama about a middle-aged woman’s struggle for dignity amidst the insecurity of an itinerant life.

Williams’s recognition of the economic vulnerability of the vagabond life was more than a reflection of his own lean years, however, and in creating these touching portraits of the dispossessed he demonstrates his customary compassion for the outcast. After witnessing many destitute transients on the highways during the trip from New Orleans to California with his friend Jim Parrott, he expressed his empathy for them in a letter to his mother dated March 1, 1939. “You see them everywhere,” he told Edwina, “[f]ine, able-bodied young men, who are unable to make a living anywhere” and who “simply wander from place to place” (Leverich 292). He considered his exposure to these wandering souls “a valuable experience as it gives you a clear, unforgettable picture of the tragic dilemma in which many Americans are now finding themselves due to the economic mess we are in” (292). In his boardinghouse plays and elsewhere, Williams exposes his characters’ poverty while suggesting that their economic woes are both fueled by and contribute to accompanying social and psychological impediments. Furthermore, their temporary living situations fail to provide them much-needed security: for while hotel and rooming house residents may gain freedom from family obligations and from material indebtedness, they often barter for that freedom with increased vulnerability when physical or mental frailties call attention to their insolvency (or, to put it the other way, when their destitution alerts others to their weaknesses).

In *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, for example, both Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore and the Writer, who comes to her defense against the threats and accusations of the landlady, face eviction for non-payment of their rent. But Mrs. Wire uses their economic misfortune as an excuse to attack their moral choices. First she calls them “dead beats,” but her name-calling does not stop there, nor is its ultimate emphasis on their refusal to settle their accounts. Rather, her denunciation takes on a self-righteous tone when she declares her disgust with “all you Quarter rats, half-breeds, drunkards, degenerates, who try to get by on promises, lies, delusions!” (27 *Wagons* 69). When she accuses Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore of inviting men into her room at night, she explains to her that as long as her tenants are able to pay, “I’m blind, I’m deaf, I’m dumb!”; it’s the “first thing a landlady in the

French Quarter learns" (68). But if the money stops, "I recover my hearing and also my sight and also the use of my voice" (68). Sexual promiscuity in boarding-houses was considered their greatest evil, and many social critics worried about the lack of neighborly supervision in these residences. As Groth explains, "Each time a landlady said, 'What my tenants do is their own business as long as they pay their rent on time,' she had substituted commerce for traditional social controls" (Groth 216).

Since the Writer and the Lady have failed to meet their financial obligations, their efforts to "compensate for the cruel deficiencies of reality" by imagining themselves as better than they are must be duly noted by the practical Mrs. Wire (70). By focusing the action of the play on the exposure of discrepancies between illusion and reality, Williams addresses what is for him a familiar dramatic theme but what is also a common situation in hotel homes of his time. In a 1951 study of Los Angeles rooming house residents, Cohen found that a disparity between aspirations and reality often characterizes this lifestyle, and that among residents over forty it is often resolved either through the self-delusion that aspirations are being achieved or by the search for some antidote to despair (319). But Mrs. Harwicke-Moore's illusion of owning a Brazilian plantation and the Writer's fantasy of a "780-page masterpiece" cannot be sustained against the force of Mrs. Wire's accusations of prostitution and alcoholism. This landlady's rented rooms offer no haven; they become a site of danger in which the flimsily constructed identities of these fugitives from reality are brutally exposed. Cohen also describes the rooming-house existence as marked by "crises constantly recurring amidst the vacuity of the present and the uncertainty of the future" (316); at the play's opening, Mrs. Harwicke-Moore is "*seated passively on the edge of the bed as though she could think of nothing better to do*" (27 *Wagons* 65).

Although the play ends with a postponement of the inevitable eviction, Mrs. Wire's last words echo with the threat of impending homelessness: "Tomorrow morning! Money or out you go! Both of you. Both together" (71). "Both" and "both together" emphasize the union of the two misfits that has emerged from the encounter with Mrs. Wire: the roomers have bonded together against the lack of compassion she has shown, and their loneliness is briefly mitigated by this connection. While Williams's experiences living in boardinghouses provided him insight into the loneliness of the life, they also revealed to him the beauty of even such tenuous connections. After the first two days of his initial stay in New Orleans in 1939, he rejoiced in his journal entry because someone "has just moved in the room next door—even a stranger across a wall is comforting to me in this state" (Leverich 276).

Brief encounters in a rented room prove little comfort to Mistuh Charlie, the ancient shoe salesman of *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches* (1942). Like the Lady and the Writer, this "last of the Delta drummers" has fallen victim to economic misfortune and social isolation. He does not share the specific predicaments that bind the roomers to each other in *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*: unlike

them, he is neither alcoholic nor destitute. Although once a heavy drinker, he has quit because of a “Stomach! Perforated!” (27 *Wagons* 78). A 46-year sales career has allowed him economic stability, and around his neck he wears 15 solid gold watches representing 15 years of sales awards. Now, however, his livelihood is threatened by the demise of his physical health and by changes in the wholesale shoe industry. Although he carries with him samples of the new spring line, he is bewildered by modern manufacturing and distribution patterns:

Why, I remember a time when. . . a store was a place where people sold merchandise and to sell merchandise the retail-dealer had to obtain it from the wholesale manufacturer, Bob! Where they get merchandise now I do not pretend to know. But it don't look like they buy it from wholesale dealers! Out of the air—I guess it materializes! Or maybe stores don't *sell* stuff any more! Maybe I'm living in a world of illusion! I recognize that possibility, too! (82)

More has changed than the shoe industry, however; just as Charlie is isolated economically by his adherence to an obsolete marketing system, so does he suffer from a loss of the social world in which he saw himself as a central figure. He claims that his hotel home was once “like a *throne*-room” in which he would receive his subjects, “the men of the road who knew me, to whom I stood for things commanding respect!” (85). Gone are the days when he would come to town “like a conquering hero,” when, he maintains, they “all but laid red carpets at my feet!” (85). Now he must acknowledge that times have changed and he is no longer recognized as the hero, nor does he recognize the place to which he has always come in triumph. Every time he comes into town, “there's less of the old and more of the new,” and the porter tells him there are no “ole-timers” registered (76). Out of desperation and to avoid “playin' solitaire” (76), Charlie summons to his room a young salesman from the next generation who has “never known the ‘great days of the road’” (77). Hoping for an enthusiastic audience of one, Charlie extends his hospitality with drinks and cigars. But Bob Harper pays more attention to the stories in the comic books he carries (none, as the older man maintains, “half as fantastic as life itself”) than to the true stories Charlie tells of colorful characters who lived (and died) on the road. While the boredom of the young for the subject of the “good old days” is all too familiar, the play's setting lends a particular poignancy to this generational exchange.

Charlie's remembrances of past grandeur meet with Harper's meager attempts to conceal his disinterest: he only grins at a joke that should have produced a “*more profound response*” (78); he responds “*with total disinterest*” to Charlie's story about a customer he has lost to death (81); he reads his comic book and reacts with “*affected amazement*” when Charlie opens his coat to reveal his collection of solid gold watches (82). Neither jokes, anecdotes, nor achievements generate Harper's interest in his host; he calls Charlie an “ole war-horse” (77) and

an “old-timer” who belongs “to the past” (84). As Harper’s indifference turns to impertinence, Charlie shows him the door. The exchange shows not only the wide gap between old and young, it illustrates the loneliness of the hotel home. In a study of elderly residents of a city hotel, Joyce Stephens found that hotel tenants “live in physical proximity but for the most part maintain a considerable emotional and social distance from each other” (25). Without family or a permanent residence, Charlie proves more vulnerable to the changing times than he would if he possessed more traditional community ties. “The world I used to know,” he laments, “the world we belonged to, us old-time war-horses!—is slipping and sliding away from under our shoes” (81).

Because he has aligned himself with other unattached men of his own age and “all of us ole-timers, Bob, are disappearin’ *fast*” (80), Charlie finds himself at the end of life without loved ones or even friends to mourn his passing. His life would seem to provide evidence for the progressive reformers of the first half of the twentieth century who argued that a “normal standard of living” was unavailable to residents of hotels and boardinghouses (Groth 204). According to these reformers, hotel homes contributed to an antifamily phenomena by encouraging the individual to remain unattached, a situation that most Americans until quite recently considered to be temporary or abnormal (212). In addition to its undermining of family life, hotel living advocated drinking and other “improper recreation.” Charlie’s fond memories of “the way it used to be” bring to light just the sort of activities that reformers feared: he describes the washstand in his room with the “wash-bowl an’ pitcher removed and the table-top *loaded* with *liquor*” (85). His hospitality invoked a constant stream of visitors, “[i]n and out from the time I arrived till the time I left, the men of the road who knew me. . . . Poker—continuous! Shouting, laughing—hilarity!” (85). Although Charlie remembers the camaraderie of the old days, it is clear that his connections with others have always been fleeting: the men go “in and out,” and what he describes are not friendships but brief encounters consisting of “[s]houting, laughing—hilarity.” He may remember the room as a “*throne-room*” with his samples “laid out over there on green velvet cloth,” but the stage directions indicate that the room “*has looked the same, with some deterioration, for thirty or forty years*”: mustard-colored walls, dull green blinds, a white iron bed, a colored lithograph of blind-folded Hope with her broken lyre (75).

Even Charlie’s code of behavior, “the old sterling qualities that distinguished one man from another,” emphasizes the solitary nature of his life: “[i]nitiative—self-reliance—independence of character” (83). Only the Negro porter, a man of his own generation who agrees that the “graveyard is crowded with folks we knew” (85) is left after young Harper’s departure. Without social support to see him through the bad times as well as the party days, Mistuh Charlie is left to greet the nighttime of his life with only the lowliest of hotel employees to witness his passing.

More than any other play in the collection, *The Strangest Kind of Romance* probes the loneliness and the instability of the vagabond life; in doing so, it dramatizes with chilling accuracy the sociologist’s assessment of rooming house life as an existence that mirrors with “almost microscopic intensity some of the predominant features of modern urban society—its rootlessness and ruthlessness, its economic poverty amid plenty, and the imbalance between the aspiration and achievement of its inhabitants” (Cohen 326). In what Williams calls a “Lyric Play in Four Scenes,” the Little Man arrives to rent a room just as his “remarkably dilapidated suitcase comes apart” (27 *Wagons* 135). Although the Landlady assures him that “[y]ou’ve stood up under the strain a lot better than it has” and “[y]ou ain’t held together by such old worn-out ropes,” the Little Man answers to both assertions, “I don’t know” (136). The Landlady is well aware of the perils of the transient’s life, for she acknowledges the fate of the previous tenant, a Russian immigrant, who occupied the room “before he took sick” (137). Even though the man headed West after developing tuberculosis and receiving “an indemnity of some kind,” his death notice was sent to the Landlady, who received it because there “[w]asn’t nobody else to be informed” (137).

Several other elements of the opening scene indicate further the “rootlessness and ruthlessness” of the rooming house life and foreshadow the Little Man’s fate. One window of the room admits a view of the manufacturing plant that is “*the heart of the city*”; while it provides work for those who live in its shadow, it has proved unhealthy for the strong-bodied Russian and has turned the Landlady’s husband into a chronic invalid (135). Although she knows first-hand what happens to its laborers, and even though the Little Man is “*more delicate and nervous in appearance than laborers usually are*,” the Landlady suggests that the Little man seek work at the plant. In a later scene, the Landlady’s father-in-law describes for the Little Man the callous nature of the bosses who run the plant and support “economic poverty amid plenty”:

Suppose the demand for what they make slacked off. There’s two things they could do. They could cut down on the price and so put the product within the purchasing power of more consumers . . . But, no! There’s another thing they could do. They could cut down on the number of things they make—create a scarcity! See? And boost the price still higher! And so maintain the rich man’s margin of profit! (148-149)

Doing “what they’ve always done,” he argues, will result in layoffs, and workers “will fall into the hands of the social agencies. Independence goes—then pride—then hope” (149). The play thus links the residential insecurity of the rented room with the economic insecurity of the transient laborer. Groth reports that job layoffs were a major cause of rooming house mobility (105).

Perhaps the most telling mark of the fleeting life lived within these walls, however, is the walls themselves: they are “*covered with inscriptions, the signa-*

tures of former occupants of it, men who have stayed and passed along to other such places, the itinerant, unmarried working-men of a nation” (135). The Landlady, when discussing the men who left their mark, calls them “[b]irds of passage . . . Restlessness—changes” (139). When she promises to someday scrub the walls clean, the Old Man tells her, “You mustn’t do that, daughter. . . . These signatures are their little claims of remembrance. Their modest bids for immortality, daughter. Don’t brush them away. Even a sparrow—leaves an empty nest for a souvenir” (140). The now-dead Russian is represented there, not by his name (the Landlady explains that he couldn’t write) but by his picture, “*a childish cartoon of a big man*” (139). Next to his picture is a picture of the cat he left behind, who has climbed in the window and is quickly adopted by the Little Man. The latter seems to have found a respite from the wanderings that have worn out both him and his suitcase. The Old Man tells him, “Be comforted here. For the little while you stay. And write your name on the wall! You won’t be forgotten” (140). When he is left alone at the end of the scene, the Little Man takes his stub of pencil and draws “his own lean figure” beneath the Russian’s self-portrait.

But the action of the play belies this optimism, for when the Little Man cannot keep up the pace at the factory, he is laid off from his job; on the way home, he says, “something happened. They took me to the Catholic Sisters of Mercy. I had no idea how many weeks I was there. Observation—mental” (154). When he returns to the room, it has been rented to another tenant, who has signed his name on the wall and has drawn a “*great X mark*” through the portraits of the Russian, the cat, and the Little Man (153). The Little Man is perplexed that the Landlady would evict him without a second thought, but she makes it clear that despite the companionship they have provided to each other, theirs was a business arrangement: “I got to be practical, don’t I? . . . I told you there was nothing soft in my nature. That I was a character perfectly fair and decent—but not sentimental” (155). The rented room provides no more than temporary lodging and short-lived relationships.

But if the boardinghouse is examined as a site of cultural representation, the hotel home in Williams’s plays suggests existential as well as economic and social instability. As realism and naturalism encouraged a new view of place as “a factor of knowledge and a code of representation,” the modern theater responded to this new view of space by developing a “stage practice based on the principle of spatial intelligibility, on the idea that where an action unfolds goes a long way toward explaining it” (Chadhuri 6). To understand the representation of the rented room setting, it is important to recognize its deviation from what Chadhuri argues is modern drama’s most privileged and most contested setting, the family home (6).⁵ Furthermore, she argues, the dynamics of exile have been constructed by the home as a site of representation: “The home as house (and, behind it, the home as homeland) is the site of claim to affiliation whose incontestability has been established by a thick web of economic, juridical, and scientific discourses—which also con-

struct the meaning of exile” (12). For Williams, the threat of exile is not a nationalistic concern, but a human one.

In Williams’s plays, the boardinghouse room figures as a complex site of spatial signs: as a room in what was once a home, it has been converted from a private (owned) space into a public (rented) space. The boardinghouse room uses the cast-off furnishings of the family home: the sagging bed, the ancient armoire. It is a haven and yet it is not a haven; it is a private space and yet it is not a private space. Groth reports that some hotel and rooming house residents felt “‘*very much in the public eye, . . . living in public, eating in public, and all but sleeping in public*’” (216). Ironically, however, the lifestyle was considered one of isolation and loneliness. In fact, as a space that maintains some of the features and furnishings of a home, but that has been converted from a private family space into a quasi-public territory, the boardinghouse room exists as a borderland, a marginalized site, a ghostly, temporary sphere.

In *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, Williams explores the existential dilemma of the borderland resident in terms of shifting identity. Physical mobility, social invisibility and economic uncertainty have undermined the Little Man’s solidity: he disputes the Landlady’s claim that he has held together better than his suitcase. Not only has he fallen apart, he has disappeared:

LITTLE MAN: You’re wrong if you think I’m—a person. I’m not—no person! At all . . .

LANDLADY: What are you, then, little man?

LITTLE MAN: (*sighing and shrugging*) A kind of a—ghost of a—man . . . (145)

His words trail off for a moment but then he tries to explain further:

The body is only—a shell. It may be alive—when what’s inside—is too afraid to come out! It stays locked up and alone! Single! Private! That’s how it is—with me. You’re not talking to me—but just what you *think* is me! (146)

When the Little Man explains to the Landlady that, “I’m not like you, a solid, touchable being,” he is suggesting that his years as a wanderer have indeed “undone” him; he has come apart under the same strain that has brought about the ruin of his dilapidated suitcase. Finally, then, Williams transforms the social anonymity and the economic uncertainty of the lodger into a crisis of identity and a question of material existence, as the Little Man describes himself in ghost-like terms and emphasizes his residency in an illusory realm. However, the play’s conclusion disavows the seriousness of the Little Man’s existential struggle. Even though

confinement for “[o]bservation—mental” and eviction would seem to emphasize his homelessness and convey the threat of exile, in the end the Little Man finds his cat and departs amid a swell of “triumphant” music, with the Landlady and her new roomer looking on in approval (158).⁶

One final play included in the second edition of *27 Wagons* (1953) provides another example of the isolated existence of the hotel home and its path to a ghostly transcendence, in this case not entirely unwelcome. *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen . . .* (1950) is set in a furnished room in Manhattan, where two characters identified only as “Man” and “Woman” act out a scene of reconciliation that seems to have been repeated so many times that “*there is nothing left but acceptance of something hopelessly inalterable between them*” (211). Their alienation from each other is so complete as to almost preclude the possibility of dramatic conflict, and indeed the scene is little more than a series of monologues: the Man calls his long speech “the litany of my sorrows” (214). Not surprisingly, economic woes contribute their share to the misery he suffers, as he worries that he cashed his unemployment check in the middle of a drunken binge. But his greater sorrow seems generated by the sense that he feels “lost in this—city. . . [p]assed around like a dirty *postcard* among people” (214). While the Man returns from his spree broke and soiled and “sore all over,” however, he is hopeful that he can be renewed by the Woman’s attentions. He implores them to “find each other and maybe we won’t be lost,” but the Woman’s response indicates that she is already too far removed from him; the fantasy she narrates offers yet another example of the way in which Williams conceived the hotel home environment as a ghostly, non-temporal sphere (214).

The Woman’s idea is to go away to a little hotel on the coast and “register under a made-up name” (215); financial security will be provided mysteriously by a “check in the mail every week that I can count on” (216). Although the Man has considered the anonymity of city life as a contributing factor in his despair, in her fantasy the Woman finds comfort in it. Indeed, it will rejuvenate her, for the absence of friends and acquaintances will allow her a quiet life that will remove the lines from her face and reduce the inflammation around her eyes. Slowly, however, her story reveals the extent to which this life in a little hotel on the coast will obliterate her: she will sit in movie theatres with “all the darkness around me and figures sitting motionless on each side not conscious of me”; she will feel closer to “[i]maginary people” and “dead writers” and will listen to their voices “explaining the mysteries to me” (217). She will grow “light and thin. . . [a]lmost transparent” (217); one day she will recognize “sort of dimly” that she has lived “without any—social connections, responsibilities, anxieties or disturbances of any kind—for just about fifty years” (218).

The absence of connections will in fact remove her from the world, for she says: “I won’t have any idea of what’s going on in the world. I will not be conscious of time passing at all” (217). Although she seems to welcome the freedom that such a life will offer, she is describing a life without substance or identity. Her

identity has been erased by her anonymity, and although this imagined life will bring the end of pain, it will also bring the end of her existence: she will, she says, grow “thinner and thinner and thinner and thinner . . . Till finally I won’t have any body at all, and the wind picks me up in its cool white arms forever, and takes me away” (218). Because the Woman’s life in the hotel home allows her to live unnoticed by others, ultimately it allows her an existential escape: literally and metaphorically “on the coast,” she becomes a borderland being who can painlessly shift into a ghostly realm and disappear.

A vagabond himself, Williams was familiar with the terms of rooming house life: its rejection of the conventional social structure signified by the family home and the embrace of a borderland existence wanting in solidity. In memorializing his own experiences in boardinghouses and chronicling the social and economic conditions he witnessed during years of wandering, Williams pushes these dramatic explorations toward a contemplation of existence. Loneliness and isolation lead to an annihilation that his characters face with fear, ambiguity or even eagerness: threatened or freed by the social and economic instability and the fluid identity characterized by the hotel, the rooming house and the boardinghouse, his characters embody the modern exilic dilemma. The short early works collected in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays* suggest that identity in the exilic sphere of the hotel home is as ephemeral as its precarious economic and social conditions.

Notes

¹ Tischler’s argument turns on the connections she makes between Williams’s writings of this time and his appreciation for the figure of the vagabond poet as embodied by Vachel Lindsay. Williams had read the biography of Lindsay written by Edgar Lee Masters and had become intrigued by Master’s account of the attempts Lindsay made, during years of wandering, to support himself with his poetry directly by exchanging it for room and board.

² One other play in this collection is set in a boardinghouse (or rather on the porch of a boardinghouse): *Auto-Da-Fé*. But it differs from the plays I have selected to discuss in one important regard: its characters are not the boarders, they are the owners of the boardinghouse. Because my discussion is focused on the boarders and the ways that their temporary living quarters lend a certain lack of substantiation to their lives, I have not included a reading of this play, nor of *This Property is Condemned* (which is set outside an abandoned boardinghouse). But I do intend to take up a discussion of these two plays at another time.

³ As Groth’s study of residential hotels shows, there were many variations on residential hotel living that ranged from luxurious to lowly. From about 1830 to 1950, many wealthy families chose to give up housekeeping for the convenience and service (not to mention the prestige) of extravagant hotel living. On the

next level down, mid-priced hotels provided less opulent accommodations to single parents, newlyweds and traveling business people. Those who could not afford either of these options were most likely living in hotel homes out of need rather than choice, and depending on their personal and economic situations, would live in a boardinghouse, a rooming house or a cheap lodging house. The major distinction among these categories is that the boardinghouse would provide meals to its tenants, while the other two would provide sleeping quarters only and meals would be taken elsewhere. The typical rooming house had originally been a boardinghouse, but eliminating food service greatly simplified the landlady's life and she could increase her profits by renting out what had once been the dining room and decreasing her staff.

⁴ The character of Mrs. Wire is drawn from the landlady that presided over the rooms at 722 Toulouse St., where Williams stayed during his first New Orleans residency in 1939; Mrs. Wire appears in several of his works from this period. Williams used the house and the landlady as inspiration for *Vieux Carré* and for the short story "The Angel in the Alcove." He described the real Mrs. Louise Wire as "'the archetype of the suspicious land-lady'" and "'a woman of paranoid suspicion'" (quoted in Leverich 428).

⁵ See Philip Fisher, who uses the term "privileged settings" to denote the idealized sites of an era: "Every history has, in addition to its actual sites, a small list of privileged settings. These are not at all the places where key events have taken place. Instead, they are ideal and simplified vanishing points toward which lines of sight and projects of every kind converge. From these vanishing points, the many approximate or bungled actual states of affairs draw order and position. Whatever actually appears within a society can be interpreted as some variant, some anticipation or displacement or ruin, of one of these privileged settings" (9).

⁶ In "The Malediction," the short story on which the play is based, Williams stays true to the dimming of material existence: the Little Man in the story, named Lucio, recognizes a need in his body to "loosen its agonized tension, to fall, to let go, to be swept on like a river" (*Collected Stories* 165). When Lucio locates his beloved cat, he takes her to the river, "an easy direction. The whole town slanted that way" (169). Although the cat resists the dual drowning for a moment, the two "went away with the river. Away from the town, away and away from the town, as the smoke, the wind from the chimneys—Completely away" (169-170).

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