

**IN THE GREY AREA: HOW A PLAYWRIGHT'S IDENTITY  
TRANSLATES INTO TIMELESS CHARACTERS:  
A COMPARISON OF MILLER, WILLIAMS AND HANSBERRY**

**THESIS**

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## CHAPTER I

### "THE PLAY'S THE THING"

When I think of drama, I immediately think of Shakespeare. I suffered through Julius Caesar as an eighth grader, neither understanding nor caring about what I was reading. I memorized the characters and their important lines and passed the required test. I lived quite happily without both Shakespeare and drama until my junior year in college. I took a theater arts course in which one of the requirements was to review a live performance. It was then that I saw my first play--a college production of Much Ado About Nothing, written by none other than William Shakespeare. For two and a half hours I sat completely mesmerized as four hundred-year-old characters sprang to life in front of my eyes. Beatrice and Benedick, Hero and Claudio, and Dogberry were no longer fictional characters; they were living, breathing, feeling people. I left the performance feeling emotionally drained and satisfied that all had ended well for my new friends. I had also come to realize that plays are meant to be seen.

In The Bedford Introduction to Drama, Lee A. Jacobus describes the effect a live performance of a play has on its audience:

Drama is an experience in which we participate on

many levels simultaneously. On one level, we may believe that what we see is really happening; on another level, we know it is only make-believe. On one level we may be amused, but on another level we realize that serious statements about our society are being made. (1)

Jacobus goes on to explain, "When we speak about participating in drama, we mean that as a member of the audience we become a part of the action that unfolds" (4). But as I began seeing more plays performed, I found that sometimes I did not "become a part of the action" and therefore dismissed the "serious statements about our society" which the playwright was making. It was during a performance of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman that I realized why some plays affected me and some did not. I had read Death of a Salesman and found it to be a very powerful indictment against capitalism and the pursuit of the illusory American dream. But as I watched the play, I was struck by how stereotyped the characters were. These characters were flashbacks to the 1950s, too antiquated for a contemporary audience to perceive as real. Because I could not relate to the characters as real beings, I missed the impact of Miller's message.

So how was Shakespeare able to create characters with whom, like myself, audiences for centuries to come would identify as realistic and relevant while these Miller characters did not survive a generation? I believe the answer lies in the playwright's identity. If writers write

what they know, then they write from their own identities and experiences. Regarding Shakespeare, scholars have searched for centuries for concrete evidence as to the true identity of "William Shakespeare." Speculation abounds as to whether "William" was a real person or merely a pseudonym, a commoner or a member of the aristocracy, one person or a group of people, a man or perhaps a woman. Although we will probably never learn the truth regarding Shakespeare's identity, we do know a lot about contemporary playwrights and the influence their own backgrounds have had in their creation of characters. Three such contemporary playwrights are Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Lorraine Hansberry whose plays, specifically, Death of a Salesman, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Raisin in the Sun have enjoyed immense popularity for the past forty-odd years. Written between 1948 and 1957, each of these three plays deals with families and dreams, success and happiness, lies and truth. Although the themes are similar, the characters created by Miller, Williams and Hansberry are quite different. For contemporary audiences, Miller, who himself strongly identified with the stereotypes of a generation ago, created characters who are too stereotypically dated. However, the characters in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Raisin in the Sun remain as real and relevant, or even more so, today as when they were first introduced because Williams and Hansberry, who did not identify with the stereotypes of their generation, were able to create more complex characters. Therefore I would argue that because of

Tennessee Williams' identity as a homosexual and Lorraine Hansberry's as an African-American, lesbian woman, Williams and Hansberry are the more visionary playwrights.

Taking each play separately, I will discuss how the characters do or do not fit gender and race stereotypes of post-World War II America and how these characters reflect the playwright's identity and perception of character. Then I will explore the influence of these gender and race stereotypes on character changes made, if any, in the first motion picture versions of the plays, each of which was filmed within three years of its theatrical debut. Finally, I will re-examine the characters, as well as the playwrights, in light of contemporary gender and race stereotypes and consider the most recent filmed versions of each of the plays.



## CHAPTER II

### "HE'S LIKED, BUT HE'S NOT WELL LIKED"

Death of a Salesman premiered at the Morosco Theater in New York on February 10, 1949. In his theater review for The New York Times, Brooks Atkinson praised Miller's play as a "rich and memorable drama.... For Mr. Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre" (27:2). And Atkinson was right. Miller does deal with "ordinary" Americans. Willy Loman is an average married man raising a family, pursuing the American dream and dealing with average problems. Moreover, the Loman family is a typical post-World War II family--authoritarian father, full-time mother, two to three children. According to historian Dr. Mary Brennan, our stereotyped images of Man and Woman are forced upon us by the dominant society--that is the white, [heterosexual] male society. "After the war, the image of Woman returned to the nineteenth century image of the Cult of True Womanhood, the image of Woman as pure, pious, domestic and submissive." Women who had worked during the war were forced to vacate their jobs in order for the returning servicemen to find work and were encouraged to return to the home as loving, supportive and fertile wives and mothers. In their 1956 guide, Women's Two Roles: Home

and Work, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein write about social attitudes concerning women seeking outside employment:

In spite of the marked social change, the idea still prevails that it is normal for women to be supported by their husbands under all circumstances. Many men, particularly in the middle classes, whose wives have jobs feel a sense of guilt for allowing them to do so and are apologetic about it. To some extent, to this day a married woman who has a career other than that of housewife is "fallen from grace" and deserving of sympathy. (88)

Family life was encouraged and idealized as in the immensely popular 1950s television series Father Knows Best. One can certainly understand how, with so much encouragement by society, Arthur Miller bought into this idealized image of family.

In Miller the Playwright, Dennis Welland notes that "Miller's plays are in important ways intensely personal...in a sense autobiographical..." (17). And in the introduction to Death of a Salesman in his anthology of modern drama, Lee Jacobus describes the influence Miller's life has had on his development of characters: "His work covered a wide range of material, much of it growing out of his childhood memories of a tightly knit and somewhat eccentric family that provided him with a large gallery of characters" (997). Further, in Contemporary Authors, Anne Janette Johnson writes of Miller: "Although none of Miller's

theatre work is specifically autobiographical, it has been strongly influenced by his particular life experiences" (276). Born in 1915, Miller was raised by his upper middle class businessman father and housewife mother in New York City. Raised with an older brother and a younger sister, he lived a comfortable life until the Depression forced his family into a struggling existence in a tiny house in Brooklyn. Miller worked hard to save enough money to put himself through college at the University of Michigan where he began writing plays, according to Johnson, as a means of "winning a prestigious (and lucrative) Avery Hopwood Award" (276). He graduated in 1938, married in 1940, fathered a daughter and a son, and continued to write. By 1947, Miller had successfully broken into theater with All My Sons, a wartime drama dealing with a father, his two sons and the many other "sons" whose deaths he has knowingly caused. Two years later, he produced Death of a Salesman which won him the Drama Critics Circle Award, the Antoinette Perry Award, the Donaldson Award and, perhaps most importantly, the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

As his first two successful plays suggest, family is an important setting for Miller. Johnson says: "The nuclear family offers a favorite context for Miller's dramas" (276). She goes on to explain the make-up of this "nuclear" family. "Many of Miller's fictitious families revolve around a dominant though not necessarily admirable father, a devoted but beleaguered mother, and two sons who quietly compete for parental approval" (276). Miller's version of family is

exactly the stereotypical post-war family: father as head, mother as helpmate and children as adorers. In his autobiography Timebends: A Life, Miller provides some insight into why he creates conflicted families made up of a father, mother and two sons. Of his emerging relationship with his brother, three years older, he writes: "My brother, Kermit, lived only on the periphery of my life until I was five.... Now that I would be joining him in school he became my ideal, which required that I love him" (10). He further writes of the initial identification each brother developed with one of the parents which seemed to initiate a competition between the brothers. "Kermit...paired with our father as a force for order and goodness..., while my dark mother and I were linked...in our unspoken conspiracy against the restraints and prohibitions of reality" (11). Miller describes his baby sister in terms of her effect on his relationship with his older brother: "Joan...introduced a new element of competition between Kermit and me, for it quickly developed that two boys could not hold the same baby at the same time, and there were constant outbreaks of fighting between us..." (47). The relationship between brothers and the relationship between father and son were of primary importance to Miller in forming his own identity as well as in later creating characters for his plays in which he could rework his own relationships and explore variations of these relationships.

Family has an infinitely stronger hold on Miller for another reason. Miller believes familial relationships to

be primal, emotional attachments. In an address first given at Harvard University in 1956 and later developed into an essay entitled "The Family in Modern Drama," Miller explains the influence of family upon the playwright as well as upon the theater audience:

The man or woman who sits down to write a play, or who enters a theater to watch one, brings with him in each case a common life experience which is not suspended merely because he has turned writer or become part of an audience. We--all of us--have a role anteceding all others: we are first sons, daughters, sisters, brothers. No play can possibly alter this given role.

The concepts of Father, Mother, and so on were received by us unawares before the time we were conscious of ourselves as selves. (81)

According to Miller, these "concepts" are part of our identity and of greater importance than other relationships, such as "Friend, Teacher, Employee, Boss, Colleague, Supervisor..." since these "and the many other social relations came to us long after we gained consciousness of ourselves" (81). The difference between the social and the familial is that the former is an "objective" concept and the latter is a "subjective" concept. "In any case, what we feel is always more 'real' to us than what we know," says Miller (81). For Miller, identity is based upon and of greatest importance within the context of the family. And his family identity was formed in the context of Father as

businessman, Mother as homemaker, Son as father-in-training. Therefore, writing from his perspective as a white, heterosexual male, Miller created characters who fit very neatly into society's gender stereotypes of the post-war era.

The post-World War II image of Man can be found when analyzing the male characters in Death of a Salesman. These characters are perceived as strong or weak depending upon the certain stereotypical male characteristics they possess. The stereotypical strong man is by nature a sexually active, heterosexual creature. Willy Loman is married with two sons. He encourages his sons to enjoy women, implying that women are always available for a man's pleasure and, therefore, there is no need to consider a woman's feelings or even treat her like a human being. During Biff's high school years, Willy advises Biff, "Just wanna be careful with those girls, Biff, that's all. Don't make any promises. No promises of any kind" (27). And further, Willy expresses his pride in Biff's sexual appeal. He jokes to Biff, "...there'll be plenty of girls for a boy like you.... That so? The girls pay for you?... Boy, you must really be makin' a hit" (28). Biff and Happy reminisce about their promiscuous youth. As Happy jokes, "About five hundred women would like to know what was said in this room" (20). After they discuss Happy's first sexual encounter with a neighbor girl whom Biff has secured for him--"Boy, there was a pig!", Happy expresses his appreciation to Biff: "You taught me everything I know about women" (21). Happy

brags about being able to get any woman he wants for himself or for Biff: "I get that any time I want, Biff" (25). And later, "Do you want her? She's on call" (102). However, these constant sexual encounters can become as Happy explains "like bowling or something. I just keep knockin' them over and it doesn't mean anything" (25). Yet if a man loses all interest in bedding women, then he is cause for great concern. Happy questions Biff, "What happened, Biff? Where's the old humor, the old confidence?... What's the matter?" (21). Having children, especially sons, confirms a man's virility. Willy brags to Charley how Ben "had seven sons" (45). Even the bookish Bernard is seen as more of a man as Willy congratulates him for having sons: "Two boys! What do you know!" (92). Along with the idea that men have such an appetite for sexual promiscuity is the idea that monogamy even within a marriage is difficult for a man. Willy has had at least one affair with a buyer's secretary. He explains his affair to his son: "Now look, Biff, when you grow up you'll understand about these things. You mustn't-- you mustn't overemphasize a thing like this" (120). Willy goes on to confirm that he has merely used her as an object for his own pleasure and has little regard for the woman as a human being: "She's nothing to me, Biff" (120).

The stereotypical strong man also enjoys power, authority and control over others, especially women and children. Regarding his control over his wife, Willy is constantly silencing Linda. During a family conversation, Willy yells at her each time she makes a comment: "Don't

interrupt.... Stop interrupting!... Will you stop!... Will you let me talk?... Don't take his side all the time, goddammit!... Will you let me finish?" (62-67). Biff finally takes offense at Willy's abusive, albeit rightful in the eyes of the stereotypical strong man, control of Linda. He tells Willy, "Stop yelling at her!" (65). Biff has already begun to appear weak regarding his sexual appetite, so his defense of Linda adds to this perceived weakness. Biff has also been subject to Willy's control. Used to controlling his son's behavior, when Biff becomes upset after discovering his father's affair, Willy demands, "Now stop crying and do as I say. I gave you an order. Biff, I gave you an order!" (120). When Biff fails to respond to verbal commands, Willy resorts to physical threats to regain control: "Biff, come back here or I'll beat you! Come back here! I'll whip you!" (121).

In many cases, this control is perceived as admiration. Willy is the authority figure in his immediate family, and he has complete control over his wife and two sons. Linda explains Willy's total control over his boys, "Few men are idolized by their children the way you are" (37). And of Biff especially, Linda tells Willy, "You know how he admires you" (15). To show his admiration for his father, Biff tells Willy of his plan to go against his coach's instructions and run for a touchdown during the big game: "And remember, pal, when I take off my helmet, that touchdown is for you" (84). Happy seeks his father's approval on many occasions. Knowing his father's high



regard for physical attractiveness, Happy announces to his father on two occasions, "I'm losing weight, you notice, Pop?" (29 & 33). Additionally, during an argument between Biff and Willy, Happy tries to get his father's attention by telling him, "I'm getting married, Pop, don't forget it. I'm changing everything. I'm gonna run that department before the year is up" (133-134).

This power over others can also be perceived as respect. Willy brags to his boys: "I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own" (31). In high school, Biff enjoyed control over his friends because he was a top athlete. Linda brags about Biff: "The way they obey him!" (34). Even Willy reminisces about this power Biff enjoyed-- "My God! Remember how they used to follow him around in high school? When he smiled at one of them their faces lit up. When he walked down the street..." (16). When Linda chastises the boys for not obeying their father, she demands that they show their respect for Willy: "So attention must be paid.... Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (56). Willy asserts his control even in death. He believes that his suicide will demand respect from his son. He daydreams "that funeral will be massive!... [Biff] will be thunder-struck..." (126). Willy relishes the idea that Biff will "worship me for it!" (135).

The stereotypical strong man always maintains control over his emotions, the loss of which is considered weak. Willy scoffs at Biff's desire to work outdoors just so he

will be able to whistle. "You never grew up. Bernard does not whistle in the elevator, I assure you" (61). Willy chastises himself for losing control of his emotions during a conversation with his boss Howard in which he is fired from his job of thirty-four years: "Pull myself together! What the hell did I say to him? My God, I was yelling at him! How could I!" (82). In fact, Howard, who is just able to control his own anger, advises Willy--"Pull yourself together" (82). Howard finally leaves the room so as to avoid witnessing Willy's emotional crisis: "Sit down, take five minutes, and pull yourself together, and then go home, will ya?" (84). Willy also becomes agitated during a conversation with Bernard about why Biff failed to complete high school. Bernard tells him, "Take it easy, kid" (93). Women are also wary of witnessing a man's loss of emotional control. Miss Forsythe explains to Happy her uneasiness about going out with Biff, "Say, I don't like that temper of his!" (115). Biff's inability to control his emotions culminates, ironically, with a flashback to Willy's chastisement of him after he has discovered his father's affair. Willy scolds Biff, "How dare you cry!" (120).

Fighting, however, is considered an appropriate way for the stereotypical strong man to show or vent his emotions. After Biff has found his father with another woman, he returns home upset. Bernard tries to talk with him; but as he explains to Willy, "We had a fist fight. It lasted at least half an hour. Just the two of us, punching each other down the cellar, and crying right through it" (94).

The stereotypical strong man is responsible for his own financial success. The self-made man is held in high regard. Willy idolizes his older brother Ben as "a genius" and "success incarnate" (41). The story of Ben's rise from rags to riches is repeated often throughout the play. Whenever Willy thinks or talks of Ben he recalls his phenomenal success story. Willy proudly remembers Ben bragging, "William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich" (52, also 41 & 48). Another of Willy's idols is a salesman named Dave Singleman who would travel to "twenty or thirty different cities" where he could "pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living" (81). Willy prides himself on his own business successes. As he explains to Linda, "I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England" (14). And, when requesting that he be allowed to stop travelling for the company, he explains to his boss, "God knows, Howard, I never asked a favor of any man" (80). Willy deems Charley's offer of a job as an insult, since the self-made man is self-reliant (43, 96). And of the money Charley gives him weekly, Willy reiterates, "I'm keeping an account of everything, remember. I'll pay every penny back.... I'm keeping strict accounts" (94, 98). Because he has not yet established himself in business, thirty-four-year-old Biff is perceived as weak. As Linda explains, Biff becomes "crestfallen" after Willy has "criticized him" (15). Willy is a bit bewildered since all he did was "simply asked

him if he was making any money" (15). Any questioning of a man's ability to support himself is taken as a criticism. Linda chastises Biff for not settling into a job: "Biff, a man is not a bird, to come and go with the springtime" (54). Willy's opinion of Bernard improves when he hears that Bernard is well-established as a lawyer. "I'm--I'm overjoyed to see how you made the grade, Bernard, overjoyed" (92). Charley brags to Willy about his son's business success: "How do you like this kid? Gonna argue a case in front of the Supreme Court" (95). And Charley explains to Linda a man's thirst for financial success: "No man only needs a little salary" (137).

The stereotypical strong man is responsible for supporting his family. Because of this financial responsibility, Willy continually asks Linda, "What do we owe?" (35). Linda describes Willy's selflessness as family breadwinner to her sons--"The man...never worked a day but for your benefit" (57). Therefore, when Willy loses his salary, he hides this fact from Linda, who in turn verbalizes Willy's shame to Biff and Happy: "Why shouldn't he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it's his pay?" (57). When Howard forces Willy to take time off work with no pay, Willy becomes extremely upset at the consequences: "But I gotta earn money, Howard" (83). Howard then asks Willy, "Where are your sons? Why don't your sons give you a hand?... This is no time for false pride, Willy. You go to your sons and you tell them that you're tired"

(83). Willy, however, is unable to conceive of himself as anything less than the sole supporter of his family. He consoles himself with the idea that his only option for providing for his family is through his life insurance policy. Along with the idea that families require men for financial support comes the idea that families inspire men to achieve business success. Biff sees himself "like a boy. I'm not married, I'm not in business, I just--I'm like a boy" (23). Happy also expresses the idea that marriage would force him to become more responsible.

The stereotypical strong man is a hard worker. When Willy gets angry at Biff, he tells Linda, "The trouble is he's lazy, goddammit!" (16). After he has calmed down a bit, Willy recants and remarks to Linda that Biff is "such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff--he's not lazy" (16). Biff describes his father to Miss Forsythe and Letta as a "hardworking, unappreciated prince" (114).

The stereotypical strong man is physically strong and, when necessary, aggressive. Men should be relied upon for any physical labor required within the home. Willy chastises his sons: "Since when do you let your mother carry wash up the stairs?" (34). Willy expresses pride in the fact that both of his sons are "built like Adonises" and how Biff in particular resembles "a young god. Hercules..." (33, 68). Willy brags to Ben that he is raising his sons to be "rugged" (49). Ben encourages Biff to box with him in order to show off his physical abilities. He further praises his nephews as "Outstanding, manly chaps!" (52). Bernard is

picked on by Willy for "lookin' so anemic" (32). Behind his back, Willy jokes about Bernard to his boys--"What an anemic!" (33). Willy encourages his sons' participation in sports. He buys the boys a punching bag since "it's the finest thing for the timing" (29). Willy expresses pride in Biff's athletic ability, "You're comin' home this afternoon captain of the All-Scholastic Championship Team of the City of New York" (88). Rather than ignoring an unkind remark or addressing it with a verbal confrontation, Willy resorts to aggression when he overhears another salesman joke about his weight. He defends his response by saying to Linda, " I heard him say something about--walrus. And I--I cracked him right across the face. I won't take that. I simply will not take that" (37).

The stereotypical strong man is skillful with his hands and tools. Willy has remodeled most of his home. He tries to show off his craftsmanship during one of his brother's visits. After instructing his sons to "get some sand," Willy brags to Ben, "We're gonna rebuild the entire front stoop right now! Watch this, Ben!" (50). At Willy's funeral, Biff recalls "...on Sundays, making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch; when he built the extra bathroom; and put up the garage..." (138). Linda joins in, "He was so wonderful with his hands" (138). Willy chastises Charley: "A man who can't handle tools is not a man. You're disgusting" (44). And Charley marvels at Willy's handiness: "Yeah, that's a piece of work. To put up a ceiling is a mystery to me" (44). Biff prefers the

outdoors and working with his hands, which is what he thinks both he and his father should be doing: "We should be mixing cement on some open plain, or--or carpenters. A carpenter is allowed to whistle!" (61). Indeed Willy dreams with Linda, "You wait, kid, before it's all over we're gonna get a little place out in the country, and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens..." (72). Willy's handiwork is also evident in his desire to not only build and rebuild but to grow things. Used to having a small garden in his backyard, Willy becomes quite agitated toward the end of the play when he begins to worry that he has neglected to plant his garden: "I've got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground" (122).

Just as the male characters are judged by the stereotypical male traits that they possess or lack, the female characters in Death of a Salesman are judged in a similarly dichotomous fashion. Philosophy professor Dr. Audrey McKinney defines this dichotomy as "good girls versus bad girls." She explains that "until fairly recently, these categories have been mutually exclusive." Women who could be categorized as "good girls" are virginal or monogamously married, do not work outside of the home, dress modestly, act lady-like, are submissive to and supportive of their husbands, devote themselves to raising their children, don't have vices and live morally upstanding lives. Women who do not possess all of these traits are automatically "bad girls."

Of the five female characters in the play, only Linda is seen in a positive light. In his theater review, Atkinson described her as "the wife and mother--plain of speech but indomitable in spirit" and praises her "loyalty and understanding" (27:2). She exemplifies the idealized wife and mother of the post-war and 1950s era. The stereotypical good woman is domestic and runs her home smoothly and frugally. Linda keeps strict accounts of what is owed and what is made. When discussing Willy's commission, Linda retrieves some paper from her apron pocket, saying, "Wait a minute, I've got a pencil" and proceeds to figure the commission against their debts (35). She is aware, down to the penny, of all household expenses and is able at any moment to figure with "odds and ends" exactly how much the family needs to get by on (36). She avoids being wasteful at all costs; mending her worn stockings, for example, instead of replacing them: "They're so expensive" (39).

The stereotypical good woman is submissive. Linda dutifully accepts Willy's constant silencing of her. At one point, Biff takes offense of Willy's abusive control of Linda. He complains to his mother, "He always, always wiped the floor with you. Never had an ounce of respect for you" (55). Linda defends her husband by saying, "He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being..." (56). She goes on to make excuses for Willy's behavior: "The man is exhausted" (56).

The stereotypical good woman is supportive of her



husband. Willy describes his wife as being "my foundation and my support" (18). Linda is continually concerned with her husband's health. She encourages Willy to take some time off from the pressures of work: "Well, you'll just have to take a rest, Willy, you can't continue this way" (13). Later she encourages Willy, "Just try to relax, dear" (18). She cares for his physical wants as well. When Willy simply asks if there is any cheese in the house, Linda, who has already gone to bed, immediately responds, "I'll make you a sandwich" (15). She is her husband's biggest fan, cheering him up he is down: "But you're doing wonderful, dear. You're making seventy to a hundred dollars a week" (37). Linda is so supportive of Willy that his life has become hers, leaving her without an identity of her own. She is left totally alone, without feeling or direction, after Willy kills himself. At the funeral, Linda speaks to Willy's grave: "Forgive me, dear. I can't cry.... I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home," including herself (139).

The stereotypical good woman is the peacekeeper within her home. Linda is responsible for mediating possible problems between Willy and the boys. She admonishes the boys against mentioning certain things which might agitate their father; in the same vein, she suggests to Willy not to mention certain things which might belittle the boys. But her husband always comes first. Her only power is over her children's behavior when Willy is not present. She cautions Biff against alienating his father, "He's the dearest man in

the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue" (55). Later, when the boys return home after abandoning Willy at a restaurant, Linda makes clear her allegiance to Willy. She yells at Biff, "Pick up this stuff, I'm not your maid any more. Pick it up, you bum, you!" (124).

Perhaps most importantly, the stereotypical good woman is chaste. When the boys discuss the type of girl they wish to settle down with, Biff describes her as "somebody with substance" (25). Happy adds that besides character, she must possess "resistance! Like Mom, y'know?", not like the girl he successfully propositioned that evening who "is engaged to be married in five weeks" (25). Moreover, never once does Linda express her own physical needs. They simply do not exist.

With the exception of Charley's secretary, all of the other women mentioned in the play are definitive "bad girls." They are easy women, sexually promiscuous. The woman with whom Willy has an affair trades sex for stockings because "I love a lot of stockings" (39). This woman also becomes angry when Willy tries to hustle out of the room when Biff comes looking for him. "You had two boxes of size nine sheers for me, and I want them!" (119). Miss Forsythe and Letta are easily obtained by Happy and first labeled "chippies" by the waiter and later described by Linda as "lousy rotten whores" (124). Charley's secretary Jenny appears a conscientious worker but is so emotionally upset by Willy's antics that she must seek Bernard's assistance.

And her morality comes into question when Willy asks her, "Workin'? Or still honest?" (90).

Because Miller's characters adhere to the strict stereotypes of post-war society--strong versus weak men and good versus bad women, Death of a Salesman enjoyed much success during the many years that these stereotypes were accepted. The play was first filmed as a motion picture by Columbia studios in 1951. It appears that neither character nor dialogue changes were made in adapting the play to screen. Although the film is not available on video cassette, I was able to speak with actor Kevin McCarthy who portrayed Biff in the 1949 to 1950 London stage production of Death of a Salesman and in the 1951 film. McCarthy first praised Miller's genius at creating such "meaty" characters as Willy and Biff, "either an actor's dream role." He described the play as being "a struggle in which three sons [Biff, Happy and Willy as well, since his father left when he was a baby] wrestle with the idea of what it is to be a man...versus an individual." He went on to explain that the post-war period in which the film is set was one in which "men knew what it was to be a man and women knew what it was to be a woman." And more specifically, in commenting on any changes made from stage to film, McCarthy stated that the flow of the acts changed a bit and the props were more extensive, but "the tone, the characters, the meaning all remained the same, nothing added, nothing left out." In The Motion Picture Guide, Jay Nash and Stanley Ross describe the original movie: "The somber Miller stage play lost none of

its classic meaning in the film version with March as the end-of-the-line Willy Loman" (604). They describe Willy and his two sons in terms of their business success or failure. Poor Willy is a failure since he loses his job in a "career that has become the past" (604). Happy is "an average success" but lacks "spirit" (604). Poor, "disillusioned" Biff lacks all ambition (604). Linda appears a more positive character as she is praised as "a long-suffering wife" who has "struggled to maintain a good life for all" (604). But in the end, Nash and Ross see Linda as "this disconsolate woman, abandoned in death, [who] will live in it, waiting for her own end" (604). In spite of the fact that the movie was not as successful financially as the play, too "gloomy and bleak" according to Columbia studio head Harry Cohn, Nash and Ross praise Death of a Salesman as "one of the great literary classics on film" (604).

Gloominess and bleakness aside, in 1994 the gender stereotypes of this literary classic are far too limiting and archaic, especially for women. The relationship between men and women has changed dramatically. Men and women can share a friendly working relationship or a friendship without having a sexual relationship. Marriage is considered more of a partnership than a dictatorship. Because of the current economic situation, most women must work to help support, or in many cases totally support, themselves and their families. According to Cynthia Taeuber in the Statistical Handbook on Women in America, the percentage of women in the labor force has risen steadily

from 36.9 percent in 1956 to 57.4 percent in 1989 (70). Staying at home to raise a family is not an option for most mothers. Furthermore, in the Statistical Record of Women Worldwide, Linda Schmittroth reports a steady increase in the percentage of families in which both the mother and father work outside the home--from 43.4 percent in 1975 to sixty-three percent in 1988 (102). Therefore, most two-parent families are also two-income families. Largely because working has become an economic necessity for most women, women who work outside of the home are no longer immediately suspected of being loose or immoral. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, Betty Friedan and her Feminine Mystique and the Women's Liberation Movement, women demand identities and careers of their own apart from or in addition to being wives and/or mothers. In his 1983 critical examination of Death of a Salesman, Welland laments the limited identity of Linda:

Linda is the one character in this play who ought to have been developed more fully because of her importance in the two scenes that do not take place inside Willy's head [her chastisement of Biff and Happy in both Acts I & II]. As it is, she is too much "The Mother" and not enough an individualised Linda Loman. (51)

That makes Linda as well as the other female characters unrealistic for contemporary audiences. One could argue that Death of a Salesman focuses on the inner struggles of

Willy, Biff and Happy, implying that these male characters are struggling against the limitations of the male stereotype while the female characters and the minor male characters serve as stereotyped foes with whom the main male characters struggle. But because these strict gender stereotypes are passé, these characters which Arthur Miller, relying on his own identity as a white, heterosexual male who identified with the post-war gender stereotypes, created in Death of a Salesman are outdated for contemporary women and men.

### CHAPTER III

#### "IT WAS A PURE AN' TRUE THING"

Unlike Miller, Tennessee Williams did not conform to strict male/female stereotypes. According to W. Kenneth Holditch in Contemporary Authors, "Williams saw himself as a shy, sensitive, gifted man trapped in a world where 'mendacity' replaced communication, brute violence replaced love, and loneliness was, all too often, the standard human condition" (464). Like Miller's, Williams' identity and perception of character were formed during his childhood in an environment which was quite different from the strong nuclear family in which Miller was raised. Holditch points out the significance of this: "More clearly than with most authors, the facts of Williams' life reveal the origins of the material he crafted into his best works" (464). Holditch goes on to assert that his "background, his homosexuality, and his relationships, painful and joyous, with members of his family were the strongest personal factors shaping Williams's dramas" (464).

Born Thomas Lanier Williams in 1911, Williams spent his early years in rural Mississippi with his mother, sister Rose, maternal grandmother, and maternal grandfather who was an Episcopal rector. Holditch describes Williams as a "sickly child" who was "pampered by doting elders" (464).

His secure childhood was shattered in 1918 when his traveling salesman father suddenly moved the family to St. Louis. Holditch explains the unpleasant effect this move had on Williams: "The contrast between leisurely small-town past and northern big-city present, between protective grandparents and the hard-drinking, gambling father with little patience for the sensitive son he saw as a 'sissy,' seriously affected both children" (464). Rose withdrew into her mind while Williams sought refuge in his writing--essays, stories, poems and plays. He wrote about "absentee fathers, enduring--if aggravating--mothers, and dependent relatives" as well as "the memory of Rose...in some character, situation, symbol or motif" (Holditch 464).

Beginning in 1931, Williams attended the University of Missouri, Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Iowa where he finally received his degree in 1938. Already becoming successful at creating plays, Williams created a new identity for himself--"Tennessee Williams the playwright, who shared the same body as the proper young gentleman named Thomas with whom Tennessee would always be to some degree at odds" (Holditch 464). In his Memoirs, Williams explains that he came to call himself "Tennessee" by "indulg[ing] myself in the Southern weakness for climbing a family tree":

I was becoming a decided hybrid, different from the family line of frontiersmen-heroes of east Tennessee.

My father's lineage had been an illustrious



one.... He was directly descended from  
Tennessee's first senator,...hero of King's  
Mountain; from the brother...of Tennessee's first  
Governor...; and from...the first Chancellor of  
the Western Territory (as Tennessee was called  
before it became a state). (12)

Tennessee Williams' first successful play, The Glass Menagerie, opened in 1944, premiered on Broadway in 1945 and won him several prestigious drama awards. He went on to produce several plays before his highly successful A Streetcar Named Desire in 1947. A few plays later, Williams produced Cat on a Hot Tin Roof in 1955, which won him his third New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize, as well as the London Evening Standard Award.

Williams' appeal, according to Holditch, "lay in his characterization" (467). Holditch identifies "compassion" as being "the key word in all tributes to Williams's characterization" (467). Williams, a keen observer of people, learned very early the complexities of identity and later translated this knowledge into realistic and complex characters; Holditch describes this ability as "the playwright's recognition of and insistence on portraying the ambiguity of human activities and relationships" (467). Williams first noted this ambiguity in himself. In his biography of Tennessee Williams, Donald Spoto relates the first of several catastrophes that left an indelible mark on Williams:

...Tom fell prey to a round of illnesses that kept him out of first grade. Most frightening was a bout of diphtheria that was followed by a severe kidney infection. He was confined to bed for so long that his muscles were weakened, and by the time he seemed well enough to go out he was unable to walk more than a few steps. (12)

In his Memoirs, Williams describes the effect diphtheria and its complications had on him: "...[It] changed my nature as drastically as it did my physical health. Prior to it, I had been a little boy with a robust, aggressive, almost bullying nature. During the illness, I learned to play, alone, games of my own invention" (11). When Williams finally returned to school, Spoto relates that "he soon suffered verbal and physical abuse from the other children because of a squeamishness and delicacy that had surrounded him at home" and because of his slow, Southern speech (16). Williams' mother forbade her son "to engage in any sport because of his diphtheria-weakened heart," so Williams became an outcast at school (Spoto 17). As an adolescent, Williams was so profoundly shy that "[i]t was...almost entirely impossible for me to speak aloud in [the] classroom.... I would produce a voice that was hardly intelligible, my throat would be so tight with panic" (Memoirs 23). And yet, he went on to create the very public, flamboyant "Tennessee" personality for himself. To Williams, his true nature was to be both physical and intellectual, aggressive and passive, ostentatious and shy.

Williams' understanding of the ambiguities in human nature can also be noted in his relationship with his father. Cornelius Williams was a drinking, gambling man married to a genteel rector's daughter. After the move to St. Louis, Cornelius stopped traveling to spend more time with his family. But in Remember Me to Tom, Williams' mother, Edwina Dakin Williams, explains her husband's distaste for his children: "He took no joy in the children, seeming to consider them just a nuisance, as though he wished they had never been born" (35). Indeed, Spoto describes the horrible effect of this nuclear family situation: "Cornelius was not only volatile and unpredictable and frightening to Rose and Tom, he was also positively intimidating" (20). However, Cornelius did come to enjoy his younger son, Dakin, who was born after the move to St. Louis. Citing a letter written by Edwina Williams, Spoto reveals how this new relationship brought further torment to Williams. Edwina writes that Cornelius "and Dakin would listen for hours to the ball game on the radio. Because... Tom preferred to read, or write, or go to the movies rather than play baseball, his father contemptuously called him 'Miss Nancy'" (20). It comes as no surprise that Spoto adds, "Of this time in his life, Thomas Lanier Williams said later about his father, 'I hated him'" (20). What is surprising is how Williams describes his father in his Memoirs:

A catalogue of the unattractive aspects of his personality would be fairly extensive, but

towering above them were, I think, two great virtues which I hope are hereditary: total honesty and total truth, as he saw it, in his dealings with others. (13)

Thus, the ever-compassionate Williams based many characters, including his favorite character--Big Daddy in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof--on Cornelius Williams. Spoto, who describes Big Daddy as a "combination of raw vulgarity and curious appeal," writes of an encounter between the playwright and Burl Ives, the actor portraying Big Daddy: "'Tennessee told me,' Ives recalled years later, 'that he had written this part after his own father, and that on opening night he sat in the fourteenth row and saw Cornelius Williams'" (220). In his Memoirs, Williams tries to express why Cat on a Hot Tin Roof remains his favorite play: "I believe that in Cat I reached beyond myself, in the second act, to a kind of crude eloquence of expression in Big Daddy that I have managed to give no other character of my creation" (168).

Because he did not fit his father's, and society's, image of Man, Williams was forced to develop an ability to understand the ambiguities of human nature. Because he was able to understand these ambiguities, Williams was able to create what Foster Hirsch, in his critical analysis of Williams and his plays, describes as "characters who are unlike anyone most of us are ever likely to meet and yet they are almost all convincing and recognizable," like the characters he created in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (5). Unlike the characters in Death of a Salesman, Williams' characters

possess interesting mixtures of post-war male and female traits--strength and weakness, goodness and badness. Brooks Atkinson reviewed the premiere of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof on March 24, 1955, at the Morosco Theater as "a stunning drama." He goes on to write, "'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' is the work of a mature observer of men and women and a gifted craftsman." The characters Williams created are ordinary people, "not saints and heroes" (18:2).

Brick is perhaps the main character in the play. On the surface he appears very manly, conforming to the post-war image of the stereotypical strong male. He is married. He is, or has been, sexually active and is very sexually appealing. Maggie describes Brick as "you--superior creature!--you godlike being!" (57). Before his best friend Skipper's death, Brick enjoyed a healthy sexual appetite. Maggie reminisces to her husband about his sexual prowess:

You were a wonderful lover.... Such a wonderful person to go to bed with, and I think mostly because you were really indifferent to it.... Never had any anxiety about it, did it naturally, easily, slowly, with absolute confidence and perfect calm, more like opening a door for a lady or seating her at a table than giving expression to any longing for her. Your indifference made you wonderful at lovemaking.... (30)

He is a heterosexual. Brick tells Big Daddy of an incident while he was at college in which "a pledge to our fraternity...did a, attempted to do a, unnatural thing"

(121). The response of Brick and his fraternity was that of any normal, and therefore homophobic, stereotypical strong post-war male: "We not only dropped him like a hot rock!--We told him to git off the campus, and he did, he got!--All the way to...North Africa, last I heard!" (121). He enjoys power and control over others, especially when they elicit admiration. Maggie reminds Brick how everyone, herself included, idolized Brick as a football hero and did anything they could to please him and to be near him: "You see, you son of a bitch, you asked too much of people, of me, of him [Skipper], of all the unlucky poor damned sons of bitches that happen to love you, and there was a whole pack of them, yes, there was a pack of them besides me and Skipper, you asked too goddam much of people that loved you..." (56-57). He remains in control of his emotions but acknowledges that he would resort to physical violence to retain control of the situation. When Maggie tries to get Brick to talk about his relationship with Skipper, Brick responds, "Don't you know I could kill you with this crutch?" (59). He has retreated into alcoholism as his way of coping with the death of his dear friend--heavy drinking being a very acceptable way for the stereotypical strong male to deal with grief.

Consequently, as Maggie points out, Brick has gone too far with his grief: "Quittin' work, devoting yourself to the occupation of drinkin'!--Breakin' your ankle last night on the high school athletic field: doin' what? Jumpin' hurdles? At two or three in the morning? (21-22). He has

crossed the line and now willingly reveals some traits associated with the stereotypical weak man. He no longer supports either himself or his family. He has lost his physical and athletic strength--"I'm gettin' softer, Maggie" (29). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, his sexuality comes into question. He refuses to sleep with his wife. Maggie describes this sudden cessation in their sexual relationship when she questions Brick as to its cause: "You know, our sex life didn't just peter out in the usual way, it was cut off short, long before the natural time for it to..." (50). Further, in addition to his sexual appetite, his sexual orientation is questioned regarding his relationship with Skipper. Maggie reminisces about a double-date involving herself and a girlfriend with Brick and Skipper during college: "...it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if it was necessary to chaperon you!" (59). She goes on to describe the relationship between Brick and Skipper as abnormally intense: "You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes!--and death was the only icebox where you could keep it..." (59). While Maggie believes "that it was only Skipper that harbored even any unconscious desire for anything not perfectly pure," Brick's brother and sister-in-law think that Brick is homosexual (59-60). When Big Daddy questions Brick about his excessive drinking and his refusal to sleep with his wife, he says, "I'm suggesting nothing.... But Gooper an' Mae suggested that there was something not right exactly in

your...[n]ot, well, exactly normal in your friendship with [Skipper]" (116).

The question of Brick's sexual orientation continues to be the subject of much debate. As Lee Jacobus writes in his introduction to the play in his modern drama anthology, "Williams had already become fully aware of his own homosexuality, although he revealed that personal element only obliquely in works such as Cat on a Hot Tin Roof until he 'came out' during a television interview with David Frost in 1970" (939). Psychologists could argue that Williams unconsciously created a character who, confronting his own homosexuality, must either deny his sexual orientation or drink himself to death, either way conforming to society's stereotype of acceptable male, an analysis with which Mark Lilly would agree. In the introduction of his critical analysis of Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century, Lilly writes that certain themes appear in works written by gay men, whether or not they are aware of their homosexuality. These themes include "the theme of self-contempt: gay characters (in...Williams, for example) who accept society's evaluation of their own worth without question, and whose regrettable fate is therefore to be seen as in some sense self-inflicted" [as with Brick's drinking] (xi). Yet, Williams himself maintains that Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is not about homosexuality and that Brick is not homosexual. In an article for the July 1955 issue of Theatre Arts Monthly, Arthur Waters includes Williams' answer to the question of Brick's sexuality:



Brick is definitely not homosexual.... Brick's self-pity and recourse to the bottle are not the result of a guilty conscience.... It is his bitterness at Skipper's tragedy that has caused Brick to turn against his wife and find solace in drink, rather than any personal involvement....

(73)

Further, the idea that Williams always included "the memory of Rose" in some way in each of his plays suggests that the friendship between Brick and Skipper could mirror the friendship between Williams and Rose. In his Memoirs, Williams writes about their "unusually close relations":

My sister and I had a close relationship, quite unsullied by any carnal knowledge. As a matter of fact, we were rather shy of each other, physically.... And yet our love was, and is, the deepest in our lives and was, perhaps, very pertinent to our withdrawal from extrafamilial attachments. (119-120)

Whether Brick is heterosexual or consciously or unconsciously homosexual remains unclear and of secondary importance to his relationship with Skipper. What is clear and of primary importance is this close friendship between Brick and Skipper. Brick says: "Skipper and me had a clean, true thing between us!--had a clean friendship, practically all our lives.... It was too rare to be normal, any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal" (122-123). The stereotypical post-war friendship between men

generally involved participating in or watching a sporting event or discussing topics such as business, politics or sports. Only relationships between a man and a woman or between two women offered a close emotional attachment. Therefore, by forming such a close emotional friendship with Skipper, Brick has crossed the boundary line between stereotypical male traits and stereotypical female traits. Knowing this, Brick pleads, "Why can't exceptional friendship, real, real, deep, deep friendship! between two men be respected as something clean and decent without being thought of as...Fairies" (122). He goes on to blame his friend's death on society's strict view of inter-male relationships: "He, poor Skipper, went to bed with Maggie to prove it [his homosexuality] wasn't true, and when it didn't work out, he thought it was true!" (125). Brick's fault in their friendship is clear; he was unable to place his friendship with Skipper above his own homophobia. As Big Daddy points out to Brick, he has failed in not giving the emotional support that the friendship demanded: "You!--dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!--before you'd face truth with him!... His truth, okay! But you wouldn't face it with him!" (127).

Brick exhibits other stereotypical female traits as well. But because he is a stereotypical strong male, these female traits cause him to be more of a contemporary egalitarian male rather than simply effeminate. He seeks out emotionally comforting communication with his father. As he complains to Big Daddy, "Communication is--awful hard

between people an'--somehow between you and me, it just don't--happen" (92). But he remains with his father: "We're finally going to have that real true talk.... It's too late to stop it, now, we got to carry it through and cover every subject" (123). In addition, he both seeks out and offers emotional support during their intimate conversation. He is not afraid to lose control of his emotions as at one point when he "hurls his glass across the room shouting" (119). At times, he also yields control to his wife, assuming a submissive role. When she complains about never having sex with him, he accepts his inability to satisfy her and encourages her to "[t]ake a lover!" (40). He is supportive of his wife when she falsely announces that she is pregnant. Maggie thanks Brick for his support: "It was gallant of you to save my face!" (171). He further assumes a submissive role when Maggie presents him with her plan to make the lie true. She asks, "What do you say?" He acknowledges, "I don't say anything. I guess there's nothing to say" (173). By the end of the play, Brick, a stereotypical strong/weak man/good woman, seems to have overcome his grief not by remaining in control of his emotions and other people, but by openly and emotionally confronting his feelings with his wife and his father.

Big Daddy also crosses stereotype boundaries. He is a stereotypical strong male--strong, controlling and sexually alive. Maggie describes her reason for liking Big Daddy--"Because Big Daddy is what he is, and he makes no bones about it" (54). He has a strong sexual appetite and

constantly talks about sex. When he questions Brick about his broken ankle, Big Daddy jokes, "Was it jumping or humping that you were doing out there?" (75). After learning that he is not dying of cancer, Big Daddy tells Brick of his plans for the future: "Pleasure!--pleasure with women!" (94). "I'm going to pick me a choice one, I don't care how much she costs,.... I'll strip her naked and choke her with diamonds and smother her with minks and hump her from hell to breakfast" (98-99). Big Daddy also believes fertility, especially in the form of male progeny, to be a testament of a man's virility. Big Mama explains Big Daddy's wish: "Oh, Brick, son of Big Daddy.... Y'know what would be his fondest dream come true? If before he passed on, if Big Daddy has to pass on...you give him a child of yours, a grandson as much like his son as his son is like Big Daddy..." (162). Big Daddy is a financial success, a self-made man who owns "twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile" (88). He boasts of his financial accomplishments:

I quit school at ten years old and went to work like a nigger in the fields. And I rose to be overseer of the Straw and Ochello plantation. And old Straw died and I was Ochello's partner and the place got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger!

I did all that myself with no goddam help.... (79)

He exercises control over his wife and children. Big Mama complains to Big Daddy about the crude and insensitive language he is using while in the presence of women and

children and Reverend Tooker: "I will not allow you to talk that way, not even on your birthday..." (77). Big Daddy asserts his control: "I'll talk like I want to on my birthday, Ida, or any other goddam day of the year and anybody here that don't like it knows what they can do!" (77). He sums up his authority--"I'm the boss here" (105). Big Daddy is cruel when it comes to controlling his wife, continually making rude comments to her: "Your loud voice everywhere, your fat old body butting in here and there!" (78). Big Daddy controls his emotions, even when in great pain. During a conversation with Brick, Big Daddy is momentarily overcome with pain; but he passes it off: "Whew!--ha ha!--I took in too much smoke, it made me a little lightheaded..." (87). He tells Brick how the stereotypical strong male controls his pain: "A pig squeals. A man keeps a tight mouth about it..." (93).

However, Big Daddy does not control his emotions when it comes to Brick. He is very emotional instead of rational regarding his younger son. Gooper, his firstborn son, is a successful lawyer, husband and father of five with another on the way. Brick is an unemployed, moping alcoholic. But Big Daddy tells Brick, "You I do like for some reason, did always have some kind of real feeling for--affection--respect--yes, always..." (111). He expresses his concern for Brick: "I didn't have no idea that a son of mine was turning into a drunkard under my nose" (101). He immediately takes control of the situation: "At least I'm talking to you. And you set there and listen until I tell

you the conversation is over!... You're my son and I'm going to straighten you out..." (102). He continues to assert his control: "Stay here, you son of a bitch!--till I say go!" (103). And he resorts to physical control when he "jerks [the] crutch from under Brick" (105). At first, Big Daddy avoids an emotional confrontation with Brick by blaming Brick's disinterest in sex on his wife. He advises his son, "If you don't like Maggie, get rid of Maggie!" (85). But when he realizes that in order to help his son he must offer emotional support, Big Daddy is not afraid to cross gender boundaries. He tells Brick about his youth during which "...I bummed, I bummed this country till I was...Slept in hobo jungles and railroad Y's and flophouses in all cities before I [settled down]" (117). Big Daddy not only offers his son emotional support, he also offers acceptance of individuality:

...I have just now returned from the other side of the moon, death's country, son, and I'm not easy to shock by anything here.... Always, anyhow, lived with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton!--is tolerance!--I grown it. (122)

In the character of Big Daddy, Williams shows just how easy it can be for people to look beyond rigid stereotypes by accepting people as individuals.

Another character who fails to conform to rigid stereotypes is Maggie. She is the stereotypical good woman-

-a loving, devoted, monogamous wife. She is supportive of her husband regarding his inheritance: "I'll tell you what they're up to, boy of mine!--They're up to cutting you out of your father's estate..." (20). She further shows her support by vowing to Brick that she would never allow his brother and sister-in-law to force Brick into an alcohol rehabilitation institute: "Yep, over my dead body they'll ship you there..." (21). She defends her husband to Gooper and Mae: "I never trusted a man that didn't drink" (137). And again, when Gooper and Mae malign Brick, Maggie tells them, "Well, I wish you would just stop talking about my husband.... I've never seen such malice toward a brother" (155). Because of her concern for her husband's physical wants (or lack of), she believes that she is the cause: "That I've gone through this--hideous!--transformation, become--hard! Frantic!...--cruel!!" (27). Because of her devotion to her husband, she sees her own desires as secondary. She confesses to Brick, "Living with someone you love can be lonelier--than living entirely alone!--if the one that y' love doesn't love you..." (28). Yet, when Brick asks her, "Would you like to live alone, Maggie?", she quickly and adamantly replies, "No!--God!--I wouldn't!" (28). Moreover, Maggie is maternal, going to great lengths in her quest for a child. As she explains to Brick, she has consulted a gynecologist as to her fertility: "I've been completely examined, and there is no reason why we can't have a child whenever we want one. And this is my time by the calendar to conceive" (63). Because Maggie is

constantly reproving her nieces and nephews, Big Mama accuses her of lacking maternal instincts: "Shoot, Maggie, you just don't like children" (44). Maggie is quick to deny the allegation: "I do SO like children! Adore them--well brought up!" (44).

On the other hand, she is also the stereotypical bad woman--a very sexually alive woman. She sees herself as a sexually alluring woman and is proud of her appeal. She jokes to Brick, "...I sometimes suspect that Big Daddy harbors a little unconscious 'lech' fo' me... Way he always drops his eyes down my body when I'm talkin' to him, drops his eyes to my boobs an' licks his old chops! Ha ha!" (23). She talks about sex a great deal. She reminisces about the intimacy she had enjoyed with her husband: "You married me early that summer we graduated out of Ole Miss, and we were happy, weren't we, we were blissful, yes, hit heaven together ev'ry time that we loved!" (60). Consequently, she makes it clear to Brick that she has a sexual appetite: "You know, if I thought you would never, never, never make love to me again--I would go downstairs to the kitchen and pick out the longest and sharpest knife I could find and stick it straight into my heart, I swear that I would!" (30-31). She also confesses to Brick her questionable infidelity: "Skipper and I made love, if love you could call it, because it made both of us feel a little bit closer to you" (56). Further, regarding sex, this "bad" woman is also a "good" woman in that her reason for attempting the affair with Skipper was to get him to "STOP LOVIN' MY HUSBAND" (60).



Aside from the Skipper event, Maggie is faithful to her husband. She declines to have an affair by telling Brick, "I can't see a man but you!" (40).

In addition to crossing the line separating good girls from bad girls, Maggie crosses another boundary--the line separating female from male traits. Maggie is not the stereotypically submissive wife. She is a very determined woman and refuses, at times, to yield control to her husband and other men (Gooper in particular). She tells Brick that she will not allow either herself or her husband to be disinherited: "Mae an' Gooper are plannin' to freeze us out of Big Daddy's estate because you drink and I'm childless. But we can defeat that plan. We're going to defeat that plan!" (54). Even more strong-mindedly, Maggie had earlier vowed to Brick, "...I am determined to win!" (31). She assumes financial control in her marriage: "It takes money to take care of a drinker and that's the office that I've been elected to lately" (54). She also takes an aggressive stance in forcing Brick to open up to her about his grief over Skipper's death: "Oh, excuse me, forgive me, but laws of silence don't work!" (32). She controls her emotions by not allowing herself to seek sexual fulfillment outside of her marriage even though she acknowledges her sexual appetite. She promises Brick, "...I'm not going to give you any excuse to divorce me for being unfaithful or anything else..." (51). She is determined to have a child with her husband and begins to devise a plan to take control of the situation: "That's a problem that I will have to work out"

(63).

However, as a stereotypical good/bad woman-strong man, Maggie does not simply try to control her husband, she tries to create a more egalitarian relationship with him and thus create a more physically and emotionally fulfilling marriage for both. She does not lose her own identity by becoming a wife; she asserts her own wants and needs. When Big Mama questions Maggie about her childlessness, blaming Brick's drinking on her, Maggie replies, "Why don't you ask if he makes me happy in bed?" (48). By the end of the play, the husband/wife relationship between Brick and Maggie has become this egalitarian relationship in that control is assumed by which ever partner is able at the moment for the good of the marriage. Maggie explains this relationship:

Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn't want to be overpowered by you.

But now, since you've taken to liquor--you know what?--I guess it's bad, but now I'm stronger than you and I can love you more truly!.... Oh, you weak people, you weak, beautiful people!--who give up with such grace. What you want is someone to...take hold of you.--Gently, gently with love hand your life back to you, like somethin' gold you let go of. I do love you, Brick, I do! (172-173)

It is Maggie who is the stronger partner at this point in their marriage; therefore, she takes control of the situation and reveals her plan to become pregnant to benefit

their marriage. She tells Brick, "And so tonight we're going to make the lie true, and when that's done, I'll bring the liquor back here and we'll get drunk together, here, tonight..." (173). Perhaps Big Daddy sums up Maggie's character best when, knowing that she is not pregnant, he says, "Uh-huh, this girl has life in her body, that's no lie!" (168). Because of her self-assertiveness and sexuality, Maggie is certainly alive for contemporary audiences.

Moreover, Williams' genius as a visionary playwright can be further witnessed in the two filmed versions of the play. The very successful first version of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof was filmed in 1958 starring Paul Newman, Elizabeth Taylor and Burl Ives. Reviewers Jay Nash and Stanley Ross report in The Motion Picture Guide that "[a]ll references to homosexuality were removed" in accordance with the "Production Code" (379). "The Motion Picture Production Code," which was adopted in December of 1956, forbade all types of promiscuity, adultery and homosexuality, whether blatant or implied:

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. No film shall infer that casual or promiscuous sex relationships are the accepted or common thing.

Adultery and illicit sex, sometimes necessary plot material, shall not be explicitly treated, nor shall they be justified or made to seem right and permissible....

Sex perversion or any inference of it is  
forbidden. (quoted in Schumach 282)

However, Nash and Ross observe that "Newman was able to infuse the character...with enough between the lines emotions to get the message across" thus avoiding a simple appearance "as a wimp, rather than as a man struggling with his own sexual identity" (379). The film does adhere more to strict gender stereotypes, especially by ending the film with Brick being in control of the situation by deciding to impregnate his wife. And Maggie is less overtly seductive; but as Nash and Ross point out, "Taylor's passion was always seething under her cool skin and it was most believable" (379). Even when forced to conform to strict gender stereotypes, the actors portraying Williams' characters cannot suppress the characters' true selves and conform, like the vast majority of women and men who do not fit these rigid post-war stereotypes. Not surprisingly, the characters were restored to their true selves, the non-stereotypical selves which Williams first created, in the 1984 film version of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

In his Memoirs, Williams confesses Cat on a Hot Tin Roof to be his favorite play and discusses the value of a well-written play:

Plays are written and then, if they are lucky,  
they are performed, and if their luck still holds,  
which is not too frequently the case, their  
performance is so successful that both audience  
and critics at the first night are aware that they

are being offered a dramatic work which is both honest and entertaining and also somehow capable of engaging their aesthetic appreciation. (168)

Because Williams himself did not conform to the rigid post-war gender stereotypes, he was able to create honest characters who are not limited by conformity. His men can be emotional and unsure of their sexual identities or controlling and violent. His women can be strong, assertive and sexually active or submissive and lacking individuality. His characters are like his audiences over the past forty-odd years--individuals who do not fit neatly into gender stereotypes.

## CHAPTER IV

### "WE ARE VERY PLAIN PEOPLE"

Like Miller, Lorraine Hansberry was raised in a strong, nuclear family. Unlike Miller, she was black; her nuclear family could not shield her from the continuous racial hatred and violence so prevalent in the decades preceding the 1964 Civil Rights Acts. Like Williams, Hansberry did not belong to the dominant white, heterosexual, male society. But her distinction was much greater than Williams'; Lorraine Hansberry was an African-American, lesbian woman. Because of this identity, like Williams, she developed the ability to understand the complexities of human character and motivations for unkind actions. In the prologue of To Be Young, Gifted and Black: An Informal Autobiography of Lorraine Hansberry, collected posthumously by Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry describes her life experiences growing up in the post-war era:

I was born on the Southside of Chicago. I was born black and a female. I was born in a depression after one world war, and came into my adolescence during another. While I was still in my teens the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings....

I have lost friends and relatives through

cancer, lynching and war. I have been personally the victim of physical attack which was the offspring of racial and political hysteria. I have worked with the handicapped and seen the ravages of congenital diseases.... I see daily on the streets of New York, street gangs and prostitutes and beggars; I know people afflicted with drug addiction and alcoholism and mental illness; I have...on a thousand occasions seen indescribable displays of man's very real inhumanity to man.... (41)

Yet, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the atrocities she had witnessed, Hansberry felt that human beings are also capable of indescribable displays of kindness. In the same prologue, she expresses her philosophy of life: "I wish to live because life has within it that which is good, that which is beautiful, and that which is love. Therefore, since I have known all of these things, I have found them to be reason enough and--I wish to live" (40).

Born in 1930, Hansberry was raised in a comfortable middle-class environment by her businessman father and her housewife mother, a former schoolteacher. She was the youngest of four children, seven years younger than her nearest sibling. Hansberry describes in her autobiography the effect birth order had in creating her identity: "The last born is an object toy" for the older siblings. "They do not mind diapering you the first two years, but by the time you are five you are a pest that has to be attended

to...." The youngest becomes "a nuisance who is not particular fun any more. Consequently, you swiftly learn to play alone..." (48-49). In her critical biography of Lorraine Hansberry, Anne Cheney describes the positive effect playing alone would have on Hansberry: "Even as a kindergarten student, Lorraine had become an outsider who listened and observed carefully--traits that would later benefit her as a writer" (2-3). Moreover, the Hansberry home was far from the quiet, secure setting of the Miller home. In Hansberry's Drama: Commitment Amid Complexity, Steven R. Carter describes the richness of Hansberry's home-life:

Throughout her childhood on the South Side of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, her family was immersed in black politics, culture, and economics. The family living room was a mecca of conviviality and discussion for makers and shakers, doers and dreamers from all walks of black life and of all shades of opinions. (8)

Carter goes on to write that Hansberry's father, Carl, "took an active role in the NAACP.... In 1938, when Lorraine was eight, her father risked jail to challenge Chicago's real estate covenants...by moving the family into an all-white neighborhood..." (8-9). Carl Hansberry "fought all the way to the Supreme Court" and was victorious in legally removing "restrictive covenants;" yet even with the legal victory, "housing discrimination continued unabated in Chicago" (9). Carter points out that her father's "hollow" victory "became



a lesson in pride and resistance to the young Lorraine" (9). Hansberry's mother provided another example of "pride and resistance." In her autobiography, Hansberry describes her mother as an active leader in the black community as well as an intelligent individual. She writes of her mother's strength: "...I also remember my desperate and courageous mother, patrolling our house all night with a loaded German luger, doggedly guarding her four children, while my father fought the respectable part of the battle in the Washington court" (51).

From these beginnings, a financially secure childhood filled with activism by both parents and violence from the outside world, Hansberry gained strength and what she describes in her autobiography as "certain vague absolutes":

...that we were better than no one...; that we were the products of the proudest and most mistreated of the races of man; that there was nothing enormously difficult about life; that one succeeded as a matter of course....

And, above all, there were two things which were never to be betrayed: the family and the race. (48)

With these in mind, Hansberry entered the University of Wisconsin in 1948 where she studied for two years, attending the University of Guadalajara her first summer break and Roosevelt University the second. Unlike both Miller and Williams, Hansberry never completed her undergraduate studies. After hearing Frank Lloyd Wright attack the

"nature of education saying that we put in so many fine plums and get out so many fine prunes," Hansberry ended her academic career in 1950 "to pursue an education of another kind" (To Be Young, Gifted and Black 93). She moved to New York where, as Carter explains, "[h]er own involvement in [the] racial struggle became full-time" (9). She worked for the radical black newspaper Freedom, participated in protests and demonstrations, married fellow protester Robert Nemiroff and began writing plays. In 1959, her first play, A Raisin in the Sun, played successfully in several cities before it was allowed a debut on Broadway where it became the first play by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway. Hansberry received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, beating out such giants as Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill and Archibald MacLeish. As Carter points out, twenty-nine-year-old Hansberry was the "youngest American, first woman, first black to win the award" (ix).

Like Williams' characters, the characters Hansberry created in A Raisin in the Sun did not conform to the rigid post-war gender stereotypes. She has strong female characters as well as weak male characters. She has headstrong characters who are at times docile as well as long-suffering characters who suddenly erupt. But unlike Williams, Hansberry had to deal with two sets of stereotypes--the first being that which the dominant, white society has for African-Americans and the second being that which African-Americans have for themselves. Again, Dr. Audrey McKinney explains these stereotypes: "From the early

days of slavery until perhaps the 1960s, in white society, it was okay for black women to be strong and black men to be weak. That's the way we wanted them to be--strong, domestic women and weak, obedient men." She goes on to explain that in the African-American "sub"-culture, "they have had much the same gender stereotypes that we do--dominant men and submissive women." In Rites and Responsibilities: The Drama of Black American Women, Helene Keyssar explains the difficulty which Hansberry faced in addressing these paradoxical stereotypes: "For the black woman playwright there is...a complicated double consciousness in which she sees the world as an American woman and a black woman " (226). And upon close analysis, one finds the characters Hansberry created in A Raisin in the Sun to be a variety of realistic, individualistic characters who attack both sets of post-war stereotypes.

In her autobiography, Hansberry explains her motivation for writing plays:

I suppose I think that the highest gift that man has is art, and I am audacious enough to think of myself as an artist--that there is both joy and beauty and illumination and communion between people to be achieved through the dissection of personality. That's what I want to do. I want to reach a little closer to the world, which is to say to people, and see if we can share some illuminations together about each other. (34)

And she certainly has accomplished just that through her

characterization. Her characters go beyond race and gender stereotypes as universal characters. Theater critic Gerald Weales praised Hansberry for coming "as close as possible to what she intended--a play about Negroes which is not simply a Negro play" (183). Again, Brooks Atkinson reviewed the March 11, 1959, premiere of A Raisin in the Sun at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in New York, labeling the play "honest" and "illuminating," dealing with "human beings who want, on the one hand, to preserve their family pride and, on the other hand, to break out of the poverty that seems to be their fate" (27:1). He did not see the play as simply one about African-Americans or racial oppression or women dominating men. The play deals with all of these issues, but it does so with a variety of complex characters.

The main female characters are Mama or Lena, her daughter Beneatha and her daughter-in-law Ruth. Mama is the matriarch of the family, a strong woman. She conforms to the post-war white stereotype for African-American women in that she has power over others which she asserts often. When Beneatha denounces the existence of God, Mama forces her to repeat, "In my mother's house there is still God" (51). Mama then states, "There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am at the head of this family" (51). More importantly, Mama's power extends to her grown son, Walter Lee. When Walter Lee gets upset and yells at Ruth, Mama intercedes, "I don't 'low no yellin' in this house, Walter Lee, and you know it" (70). She further asserts her authority: "Ain't nobody said you

wasn't grown. But you still in my house and my presence. And as long as you are--you'll talk to your wife civil. Now sit down" (71). And, much in the same vein as Biff's reaction to Willy, Walter Lee bitterly admits to Mama, "You the head of this family. You run our lives like you want to" (94-95). Mama's power also includes financial control. Recently widowed, she is to receive a very large sum of money from her husband's life insurance policy which Walter Lee would like to use to start his own business. Although she is not yet sure what she will do with the money, she refuses to even consider his scheme. She tells Ruth her plans for part of the money:

Some of it got to be put away for Beneatha and her schoolin'--and ain't nothing going to touch that part of it. Nothing.... Been thinking that we maybe could meet the notes on a two-story somewhere, with a yard where Travis could play in the summertime, if we use part of the insurance for a down payment and everybody kind of pitch in.

(44)

However, Mama also conforms to post-war African-American gender stereotypes. Her realm is the home where she has authority over the children. Ruth praises Mama's ability to keep her children in line: "You just got strong-willed children and it takes a strong woman like you to keep 'em in hand" (52). This authority also extends to her daughter-in-law and grandson living in her home. When Ruth tries to chastise Mama for always picking up after Travis,

Mama corrects her: "Well--he's a little boy. Ain't supposed to know 'bout housekeeping" (40). Concerned that Ruth has not fixed a proper breakfast for Travis, Mama expresses her concern in an authoritative manner: "What you fix for his breakfast this morning?... I just noticed all last week he had cold cereal..." (40). To a daydreaming Travis, Mama questions, "Did you get all them chores done already?" (54). Likewise, Mama is concerned with the health and well-being of her family. She expresses her concern to Ruth who is physically exhausted, offering to help with her chores: "You looks right peaked. You aiming to iron all them things ? Leave some for me.... Girl, you better start eating and looking after yourself better" (40-41). When Ruth tells Mama that she is pregnant and breaks down crying, Mama physically comforts her by massaging her shoulders, explaining to Beneatha, "Women gets right depressed sometimes when they get her way" (60). Additionally, although widowed, Mama is still the submissive, supportive wife to her dead husband. She assumed control of the family only after Big Walter's death. Moreover, the dream of owning a home is really a continuation of Big Walter's dream to "buy a little place out in Morgan Park" (44). When telling Travis about their home, Mama credits her late husband for the purchase: "Now when you say your prayers tonight, you thank God and your grandfather--'cause it was him who give you the house--in his way" (91).

By conforming to, and therefore conflicting with, both sets of stereotypes, Mama challenges all notions of gender

and/or race stereotypes. Like Williams' Big Daddy, Mama accepts her children as individuals and supports them in their choices, however difficult this may be. When Beneatha questions whether she will get married at all, Mama--the ever dutiful wife--responds with an incredulous "If!" (50). Nevertheless, she financially and emotionally supports Beneatha's decision to become a doctor, a very time-consuming, involved career. In addition, she stands behind Beneatha's decision to pursue a relationship with the exotic foreigner Asagai by inviting him to visit Beneatha often on the pretense of alleviating any home-sickness he may feel: "I spec you better come 'round here from time to time to get yourself some decent home-cooked meals" (65). When Beneatha confesses to her mother that she does not want to continue seeing the wealthy George Murchison, Mama supports her decision by sympathizing, "Well-I guess you better not waste your time with no fools" (98). Beneatha acknowledges her mother's unique support: "Thank you.... For understanding me this time" (98). Regarding her son's dream of owning a liquor store, Mama must look beyond her own Christian ethic which forbids contributing to a vice. She explains her position to Ruth: "Well--whether they drinks it or not ain't none of my business. But whether I go into business selling it to 'em is, and I don't want that on my ledger this late in life" (42). Yet when she realizes the effect her control over Walter Lee has had on him, she is not afraid to admit fault: "I say I been wrong, son. That I been doing to you what the rest of the world been doing to you" (106). She

gives him the remainder of the insurance money "for you to look after. For you to decide" (107). She understands his need as a man as well as a husband and father to be a financial success and support his family: "I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be" (107). Because she is such a complex, realistic character, Mama appeals positively to both post-war stereotypes--the strong matriarch of the white stereotype and the loving, respectful wife of the African-American stereotype. Because she is a competent, caring woman, wife, mother and grandmother, she appeals to contemporary audiences as well.

Beneatha and Ruth also appeal to contemporary audiences for many of the same reasons; they are individuals who question the established stereotypes. Beneatha is by far the most entertaining character in the play; yet she does not conform to either stereotype. She is young and yet not naive, at times very serious and at others very silly. She is the least inhibited of the characters by doing whatever she feels will enrich herself. She explains to Ruth and Mama her reason for her sudden interest in taking guitar lessons, much the same as past interests in acting and horse-back riding: "I just want to, that's all.... I don't flit! I--I experiment with different forms of expression. ... People have to express themselves one way or another" (47-48). Beneatha's friend and suitor, Asagai, explains her real reasons for her various interests. He reminds Beneatha, whom he has nicknamed "One for Whom Bread--Food--



Is Not Enough," of her response during their first meeting as to her intense interest in Africa: "You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity!" (65, 62). According to Anne Cheney, "Hansberry laughingly said [in an interview] that 'Beneatha is me, eight years ago' (when she was twenty-one)" (60). Like Hansberry the playwright, Beneatha is certain about the fact that she will have a career other than marriage: "Listen, I'm going to be a doctor. I'm not worried about who I'm going to marry yet--if I ever get married" (50). She questions marriage because of the role of submissive, supportive wife which it requires: "Oh--I like George all right, Mama. I mean I like him enough to go out with him and stuff, but.... Oh, I just mean I couldn't ever really be serious about George. He's--he's so shallow" (48). She explains to Asagai her needs as an individual in a relationship: "[T]here is more than one kind of feeling which can exist between a man and a woman--or, at least, there should be" (63). Beneatha so intensely questions the concept of marriage, and female/male relationships in general, that one begins to wonder what influence Hansberry's own sexual identity had on Beneatha's character, a character with whom she so closely identified. At the time she was writing A Raisin in the Sun, Hansberry was happily married to Robert Nemiroff, a writer, fellow protester and her dearest friend. In an interview with Steven Carter, Nemiroff comments on his ex-wife's sexual identity. Her homosexuality, says Nemiroff, "was not a peripheral or casual part of her life but contributed

significantly on many levels to the sensitivity and complexity of her view of human beings and the world" (Carter 6). It is comes as no surprise that Hansberry was able to create a female character whose primary focus is on her career and interests rather than simply on men. The complex Beneatha is both a traditional woman and an independent, intelligent non-traditional woman, neither afraid of going off to Nigeria and becoming a doctor nor of marrying Asagai and asserting her identity as an equal.

Whereas Beneatha eschews the domestic, Ruth is more the traditional wife and mother, working as a domestic which appeals to the white stereotype of an acceptable working African-American woman. Ruth tries not to upset the status quo. She is a faithful housekeeper who refuses to skip work when she is ill because her white employer would "be calling up the agency and screaming at them.... Oh, she just have a fit" (42). On the other hand, Ruth appeals to the African-American stereotype in that she is a caring, supportive wife and mother. She defends her ability to care for her son when Mama asks whether she has cooked Travis a proper breakfast. Ruth responds energetically, "I feed my son, Lena.... I gave him hot oats--is that all right!" (40-41). When her husband is upset, Ruth offers him all she has. He questions her, "Why you always trying to give me something to eat?" (88). She replies, "What else can I give you, Walter Lee Younger?" (88). Her support extends to her mother-in-law as well. When Mama begins reminiscing about her late husband, Ruth listens sympathetically and tries to

comfort her: "He sure was a fine man, all right. I always liked Mr. Younger.... He sure was a good man, Mr. Younger" (45-46).

Unlike Linda Loman, Ruth does not ignore her own physical comfort. She tells Beneatha what she intends to do the moment they arrive at their new home: "Honey--I'm going to run me a tub of water up to here.... And I'm going to get in it--and I am going to sit...and sit...and sit in that hot water and the first person who knocks to tell me to hurry up and come out..." (111). She expresses her emotional and physical needs to her husband: "There ain't so much between us, Walter...Not when you come to me and try to talk to me. Try to be with me...a little even" (88). She is not afraid to assert her own opinions as to what she thinks and feels is right for her family, herself included. Because her relationship with her husband has become strained, Ruth considers ending her current pregnancy. Mama explains Ruth's choice to Walter Lee: "When the world gets ugly enough--a woman will do anything for her family. The part that's already living" (75). When Walter Lee loses the insurance money and the family's dream of moving into a new home, Ruth stands her ground and refuses to accept defeat. She pleads with Mama, "Lena--I'll work...I'll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago...I'll strap my baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to..." (140). Ruth is a faithful domestic, a caring mother, a supportive wife and a competent woman who will not allow

herself to lose her own identity within her marriage by demanding a more egalitarian marriage.

Hansberry's male characters also express a variety of traits. Walter Lee is the African-American man struggling to make something for his family in a white society. He conforms to the post-war white stereotype for African-American males in that he is a faithful chauffeur to his white employer. He explains his job to Mama: "I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, 'Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive sir?'" (73). Furthermore, he is a weak man in that he lives in his mother's home and allows her to control his life. Like Brick, Walter Lee finds comfort in liquor. He skips work for three days so that he can drive out to the country or walk around the city before retiring to the Green Hat where "[y]ou can just sit there and drink and listen to them three men play and you realize that don't nothing matter worth a damn, but just being there" (106).

On the other hand, Walter Lee conforms to the post-war African-American stereotype of the strong male. He is married with a son, of whom he is very proud. He boasts to his wife, "That's my boy" (31). He accepts financial responsibility for his family. He admits to Ruth his unhappiness at not having been able to provide his family with an adequate home: "I'm thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room" (34). He aspires to become financially

successful in order to indulge his wife and child with luxuries. With only four quarters in his pocket, Walter Lee smiles at Travis as he hands him the fifty cents he needs for school, saying, "Here, son.... In fact, here's another fifty cents...Buy yourself some fruit today--or take a cab to school or something!" (31). He confesses to his family, "I want to hang some real pearls 'round my wife's neck.... I tell you I am a man--and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world!" (143). He values the achievements of the self-made man. He praises George's father, a successful and wealthy businessman, "Your old man is all right, man.... I mean he thinks big" (84). He tries to take control of his future by becoming a self-made man with his investment in the liquor store. Unless he acts soon, as he explains to Mama, he fears his future will be grim: "Sometimes its like I can see the future stretched out in front of me--just plain as day...a big, looming blank space--full of nothing" (73).

Like Willy Loman, Walter Lee asserts his control over others, especially his wife. He sees control as something the successful man aggressively takes. He chides George about the value of a college education: "[Are] they teaching you how to be a man? How to take over and run the world?" (84-85). When he returns drunk and begins to harass George, Beneatha's date, Ruth tries to make excuses for her husband's behavior. Walter Lee yells at her, "Excuse me for what?" (83). He further attempts to humiliate her by mimicking, "Oh, Walter! Oh, Walter!" (83). He controls his

wife's appearance, again through humiliation. When Ruth admires Beneatha's afro hairstyle, Walter Lee warns her, "Oh no! You leave yours alone, baby. You might turn out to have a pin-shaped head or something!" (86). He blames Ruth, as well as African-American women in general, for his failure to achieve financial success:

A man needs for a woman to back him up....

That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world...Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something....

We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds! (32-35)

He also tries to control his sister through humiliation. Fearing that he will be unsuccessful at convincing his mother to give him the insurance money, he tells Beneatha to abandon her dream of becoming a doctor and "go be a nurse like other women--or just get married and be quiet..." (38).

Yet Walter Lee is also a caring, supportive, loyal husband. He notices the physical toll a hard life is taking on his wife. He sympathizes with Ruth, "You tired, ain't you? Tired of everything. Me, the boy, the way we live--this beat-up hole--everything" (32). Because he cares so much for his wife, he wants to help make her life easier. Walter Lee is also not afraid to ask for his wife's help. After giving all of his money to Travis, Walter Lee concedes, "I need some money for carfare" (39). He is not afraid to show his emotions. Ruth confides to Beneatha that

she and Walter Lee went to the movie and "held hands"; and after leaving the movie theater, she reminisces, "we was still holding hands, me and Walter" (111-112). Unlike Willy Loman, in spite of his marital difficulties, Walter Lee does not seek sexual satisfaction outside of marriage. He answers Mama's inquiry with a question of his own: "Why do women always think there's a woman somewhere when a man gets restless" (73). Eventually, like Ruth, Walter Lee comes to realize that his family's happiness is more important than his own independent financial achievements. When confronted by Mr. Lindner of the all-white Clybourne Park "Welcoming Committee" who tries to buy back their new home at a huge profit, Walter Lee refuses:

...I have worked as a chauffeur most of my life-- and my wife here, she does domestic work in people's kitchens. So does my mother. I mean--we are plain people.... Well--what I mean is that we come from people who had a lot of pride. I mean-- we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor--and we are very proud.... This is my son, and he makes the sixth generation of our family in this country. And we have all thought about your offer.... And we have decided to move into our house.... (147-148)

In Walter Lee, Hansberry has created a character with whom many of us can identify. We don't like to admit how selfish we can be at times; but we do like to believe that in a

crisis our true selves will shine through--just as Walter Lee's does.

Beneatha's two suitors, George Murchison and Joseph Asagai, are simpler characters than Walter Lee. Both conform to the post-war white stereotype in that they do not try to upset the status quo. They are both intellectuals who believe the way to achieve success is through education. Yet, they differ drastically in their notions of success. For George, success equals money. He explains his reason for getting an education: "It's simple. You read books--to learn facts--to get grades--to pass the course--to get a degree. That's all--it has nothing to do with thoughts" (97). On the other hand, Asagai sees success as measured by how much he is able to help his community live healthier, happier lives. He explains his purpose to Beneatha:

In my village at home it is the exceptional man who can even read a newspaper...or who ever sees a book at all. I will go home and much of what I will have to say will seem strange to the people of my village. But I will teach and work and things will happen, slowly and swiftly. At times it will seem that nothing changes at all...and then again the sudden dramatic events which make history leap into the future. And then quiet again. (135)

Both men pose no threat to their communities which appeals to the post-war white audience. George has the appeal as the successful, assimilated African-American, while Asagai



is a foreigner who plans to return to his country.

Both men also conform to the post-war African-American stereotype of the strong male in their regard for women. As George explains to Beneatha, women are objects for pleasure:

You're a nice-looking girl...all over. That's all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere--they're going to go for what they see. Be glad for that.... As for myself, I want a nice--simple--sophisticated girl...not a poet--O.K.? (96)

Asagai also believes in physical, sexual attraction. But he believes this attraction to be mutual, suggesting that the female/male relationship is more egalitarian. Attempting to alleviate Beneatha's fear that an egalitarian relationship takes more time to develop than they have spent, Asagai tells her, "Between a man and a woman there need be only one kind of feeling. I have that for you...Now even...right this moment" (63). Further, Asagai does not attempt to control Beneatha, even seeing the necessity for her to have an identity and desires of her own. After her brother has lost her medical school tuition and Asagai has asked her to return to Africa with him, Beneatha feels overwhelmed. She tells Asagai, "You're getting me all mixed up" (137).

Without trying to control or manipulate her, he leaves her to think, telling her, "Just sit awhile and think...Never be afraid to sit awhile and think" (137). Whereas George conforms to the post-war African-American gender stereotype of the domineering male, Asagai does not. For the

contemporary audience, Asagai possesses the selfless qualities that many of us aspire to in hopes of making our relationships, our community, and the world more harmonious.

A Raisin in the Sun was first filmed as a motion picture in 1961. Hansberry wrote the screenplay; thus the filmed version differs very little from the play. In their review of the film, Nash and Ross describe the movie version as "Hansberry's lovely adaptation of her 1959 Broadway hit" (2563). They go on to praise the intenseness of the characters, labeling the film "a good example of humanity in a lower-class family that just happens to be black" (2563). Anne Cheney agrees on the strength of Hansberry's characters in delivering its enduring and universal message:

...A Raisin in the Sun is a quiet celebration of the black family, the importance of African roots, the equality of women, the vulnerability of marriage, the true value of money, the survival of the individual, and the nature of man's dreams.

...Raisin at first seems a plea for racial tolerance or a fable of man's overcoming an insensitive society, but the simple eloquence of the characters elevates the play into a universal representation of all people's hopes, fears, and dreams. (55)

Just as Hansberry had intended, her characters do not conform to any rigid post-war stereotypes. Instead, they speak to contemporary audiences as real beings with whom we can identify.

## CHAPTER V

### "ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE"

Death of a Salesman, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Raisin in the Sun have all remained immensely popular since their theatrical debuts. They continue to be performed in high schools and universities as well as by various theater groups and are required reading in many high schools and universities. They remain such an important part of our culture that each play was filmed again as a motion picture in the 1980s. While the 1985 filmed version of Death of a Salesman relied on several sets in addition to the Loman home, which is the sole set in the staged versions, the 1984 filmed version of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and the 1988 filmed version of A Raisin in the Sun resemble the staged versions, which take place in Brick and Maggie's bedroom and the tiny Younger apartment, respectively. By using such confined sets, the audience's focus is on the characters, their dialogue and their actions, which is as close as a movie can get to a live performance of a play. Regarding Death of a Salesman, this focus on the characters magnifies their conformity to post-war gender stereotypes, allowing the characters to become historical figures who simply do not exist for contemporary audiences. Indeed, the film opens with a close-up of a dusty, old car on which the license

plate reads "New York, 1949." On the other hand, the female and male characters in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Raisin in the Sun are dealing with issues of gender and racial equality, sexual identity and individuality--issues with which contemporary audiences are perhaps more concerned, as were Tennessee Williams and Lorraine Hansberry.

It is not my intent to dismiss Death of a Salesman as a dated play, denying any relevance it may have for contemporary audiences. All three plays deal with families and dreams, success and happiness, lies and truth in a way that may never become dated. What I do contend is that in order to create more universal and eternal characters, a playwright cannot herself or himself be a part of the rigid gender/racial stereotypes controlled by society. The successful playwright lives on the borders, in the grey areas, and speaks for generations to the vast majority of us who also do not fit in...like Tennessee Williams and Lorraine Hansberry and "William Shakespeare."

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## **VITA**

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