

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“Making Straight Strange in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*”

April 2015

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This final report addresses the results of a professional research project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

“Making Straight Strange in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*,” by Deborah Wilson, Professor of English

In Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the desire overtly summoned in the title is not just any and all desire, but primarily culturally aberrant desire. That streetcar may rattle “up one old narrow street and down another,” but in this narrative it most often derails, leaving behind linearity and restraint, hurled finally far afield. Blanch DuBois refers to her familial tradition of “epic fornications” that eventually results in the loss of their home, Belle Reve. In a Williams play, regular old everyday fornications won’t do; they must be epic. Blanche has experienced her own epic versions prior to the play—those nights when soldiers call her name, those nights at the Flamingo Hotel, those nights with her student that finally exile her to New Orleans. But the audience sees her approach the young boy collecting money for the newspaper, as she asks him to come closer so she can kiss him “just once, softly and sweetly on [his] mouth,” before deciding she must keep her hands off boys.

When I teach this play, students tend to read this scene as representing the most aberrant desire in the play. I then remind them that Stanley violently rapes Blanche later in the play, a scene that surely displaces Blanche's moment with the boy, a moment that leads nowhere. My students' reaction sent me back to examine the range of aberrant desire in the play. Since this is an abstract, I will merely list a few in addition to the two scenes referred to above: the abusive desire exhibited in the two heterosexual marriages in the play, Mitch's rather Freudian attachment to his mother, and Blanche's young gay husband, whose suicide haunts Blanche and the play. What most intrigued me in my students' responses to the various desires in the play and our discussions of them is the almost total erasure of gay sexuality. The play seems to screen that desire, to protect it from judgment and condemnation by several maneuvers: we do not see Allan with the older man (Blanche does); her voiced disgust triggers his suicide (and makes her, rather than his own desire, the apparent cause of his death). That she is haunted by the moment of his death and her role in it seems, to some, a just punishment. The final scene, when Blanche, completely broken after the rape, is lead away to a fate perhaps worse than Allan's death, once again not only screens his aberrant gay desire, but displaces it, its guilt, and its punishment onto a woman whose expression of ANY desire results in her destruction.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the South Central Modern Language Association conference in Austin, TX, and presented my paper there. I flew out of Little Rock on October 18 and returned on October 22, 2014.

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is modern American. I am the primary teacher of Modern American Literature, a required course for all our majors. I also am the professor of southern literature in our department, and I have been teaching this play for the last several times I have taught that course. Not only did I manage to receive positive feedback on my paper, I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am working on a publishable-length essay of which this paper is a part. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.