

Heteronormativity, Penalization, and Explicitness:  
**A Representation of Homosexuality in American Drama and its Adaptations**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes the presence of homosexuality in American drama written in the 1930s-1960s by using twentieth-century sexology theories and ideas of heteronormativity, penalization, and explicitness. The following works and their adaptations will be discussed: *The Children's Hour* (1934) by Lillian Hellman, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) by Tennessee Williams, and *The Boys in the Band* (1968) by Mart Crowley. This thesis argues that the works reflect as well as criticize and react to sexology ideas and theories in the way in which homosexuality was perceived in twentieth-century American society.

Key words: homosexuality, heteronormativity, penalization, explicitness

## Introduction

The issue of homosexuality was a long and difficult history in the United States. Especially in the first half of the twentieth century, general thoughts about homosexuality were predominantly negative. Homosexuality was long debased, criminalized, and regarded as a mental disorder (Reis 4). With the emergence of the 'sexual revolution' in the 1960s, behavior and attitudes concerning homosexuality slowly started to become more tolerant and liberal. This thesis will examine three groundbreaking works in the history of American drama that were written in the 1930s-1960s. Although it was dangerous to do so, early twentieth-century American drama before the 'sexual revolution' did represent homosexuality. During that time, Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) and Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) were published. Hellman's play explores lesbianism and illuminates the struggles that her female contemporaries had to face in the early twentieth century (Titus 215). Williams' play is considered to be the first major American play that directly confronts the taboo subject of homosexuality (Shackelford 105). In the midst of the 'sexual revolution,' Mart Crowley produced his play *The Boys in the Band* (1968). It was the first play to openly and sympathetically show homosexuals in their own environment. This thesis will analyze the presence of homosexuality in the original plays and their adaptations and will examine whether this can be seen as a response to ideas about homosexuality in terms of heteronormativity, penalization, and explicitness. Despite the fact that race is intertwined with sexuality, due to time and space limits, the issue of race will not be discussed in this thesis.

The opposition against homosexuality reflects the degree to which heteronormativity dominated the field in American society. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexual behaviors and identities are the normal and natural state: heterosexuality is a given instead of one of many possibilities. In twentieth-century America, heterosexuality was widely perceived as the default sexuality, as the only norm. Other orientations were seen as 'different,' 'deviant' or 'unnatural.' Thus, it ignores or works against those who do not fit into this binary category (Mitchell 199). Because homosexuals deviated from the so-called norm, they were seen as a threat to normative society. Not only in real life were homosexuals punished for being 'different.' In literature, homosexual characters were often depicted as violent or murderous and either killed people or killed themselves. They were not allowed happy endings. Homosexual characters usually died or met another unfortunate ending, such as being terminally ill or living an isolated life: "Gay characters were often tragic foils meant to highlight the need for achieving the straight (and white) normality of the heterosexual

family. Usually these queer characters were punished with violence, depression, exile, and death – often suicide – because of their non-normative desires” (Bibler 127). During most of the twentieth century, American society stigmatized and persecuted individuals who admitted to being homosexual, which is why “the prudent course of action for homosexual men and women was to hide their sexual orientation” (Coleman 290). This was also visible in American culture. Because of the general behavior and attitude towards homosexuality in American society during the first half of the twentieth century, it was dangerous and socially unacceptable to produce anything that included explicit gay themes or characters. As such, artists had to work ambiguous and use euphemisms, for example, and usually, homosexuality was depicted in a negative light. As the gay community became more present and the nature of homosexuality was reconsidered, American culture became less rigid and more permissive.

The first chapter will give insight into the American attitudes toward homosexuality before and after the ‘sexual revolution’ in order to get a better understanding of the context and time when the American plays were written and the way homosexuality was perceived in American society. This following three chapters will examine the homosexual aspects that are present in the plays and whether this can be seen as a response to the ideas of and attitudes towards homosexuality of the time in which it was written in terms of heteronormativity, penalization, and explicitness. In her article ‘Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*,’ Mary Titus, Ph.D. and specialist in American literature, argues that Hellman not only reflects the discourse on homosexuality in *The Children's Hour*, but that her work is also influenced by her own personal understanding of the subject. Williams scholar John S. Bak located Williams's *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in its Cold War context in his article “‘Sneakin' and Spyin’ from Broadway to the Beltway: Cold War Masculinity, Brick, and Homosexual Existentialism’ and states that character Brick represents and symbolizes a national identity crisis. In his article ‘The Audience of *The Boys in the Band*,’ Dr. Joe Carrithers mainly discusses the 1970 film version of Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* with a particular focus on the ‘gaze’ of the (heterosexual) audience and argues that the homosexual stereotypes work to the advantage of the heterosexual norm. This thesis argues that twentieth-century behavior and attitudes toward homosexuality have been influential on American drama. The representation of homosexuality in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* and their adaptations reacts to twentieth-century sexology theories in terms of heteronormativity, penalization, and explicitness.

## 1. Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century America

This thesis analyzes the homosexual aspects and the then prevailing ideas concerning homosexuality in terms of heteronormativity, penalization, and explicitness that are present in three American plays that were written in the 1930s-1960s. To be able to look at the context of the plays, this chapter will give a brief overview of the most important events and views concerning homosexuality in the twentieth century. In the first part, the twentieth century leading up to the 'sexual revolution' will be discussed, followed by a description of the second half of the twentieth century, beginning with the 1960s.

### 1.1. Homosexuality in the United States: from 1900 to 1960s

#### 1.1.1. A Brief History of Sodomy Laws

Homosexuality has a long and difficult history in the United States. From its early colonial period, American law defined sodomy, buggery, or 'the crime against nature' as a capital offense. In the nineteenth century, it changed to a serious felony to eventually "an act equated with homosexuality" in the twentieth century (Miller 196). In 1969, Kansas was the first state to specifically revise its sodomy law so that it only applied to activity between people of the same sex. In the years that followed, seven other states followed suit.

Sodomy laws affected homosexuals in several ways. First, the ability of gay people to raise children was limited. Some state courts denied homosexual parents the custody of their own children, as "custody with [these] parents might result in stigmatization or harassment, harm the children's moral well-being, or adversely affect their sexual orientation" ("Custody Denials to Parents in Same-Sex Relationships: An Equal Protection Analysis" 617). Sodomy laws were also used to justify restrictions on visitation or to deny other parental rights, such as adopting or becoming foster parents (Ricketts 67). Secondly, it also created employment issues for both lesbians and gay men, such as job discrimination, unequal pay, and unemployment. The laws were used to justify firing homosexuals or denying them jobs solely because of their sexual orientation. It was not until 1999, during the presidency of Bill Clinton, that discrimination based on sexual orientation in the federal government was prohibited. Lastly, sodomy laws were used in civil rights debate and public debate "to justify denying gay people equal treatment and to discredit LGBT voices" ("Why Sodomy Laws Matter").

Especially before the 1970s, sodomy laws seemed to be the ‘norm’ across the United States. Because it was generally agreed upon that homosexual acts and behaviors were morally wrong, sodomy laws were thus mostly targeted at homosexuals. Towards the end of the twentieth century, as homosexuality became gradually liberalized in the United States, sodomy laws were eliminated in most states. On January 1, 1962, Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexuality by eliminating its state’s sodomy laws after enacting the Laws of Illinois 1961 in July 1962 (Painter). However, it was not until 2003, with the *Lawrence v. Texas* Supreme Court decision that sodomy laws became fully invalidated (Myers 6). At that time, the laws were still enforced in Texas and thirteen other states, including Kansas.

### 1.1.2. The Beginning of the LGBT Movement

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, there were several groups that fought to advance the rights of homosexuals. However, much of lesbian and gay history is silenced, partly because they had to operate in secret to avoid persecution, and so little is known about these groups (Norton). Henry Gerber was the first known person that advocated for homosexual rights. Although born in Germany, Gerber is known for being the forefather of the American gay movement. In 1924, he founded the Society for Human Rights (SHR) in Chicago, the nation’s first known and recognized gay rights organization. Although the gay press really began to emerge in the 1940s, which will be discussed later on in this chapter, Gerber was a precursor of the gay press with his production of the newsletter *Friendship and Freedom* “that would serve as a forum of discussion among gay men” (Newton 7). Only two issues were published. However, the United States of the 1920s was not as progressive about sexuality, and homosexuality in specific, as Germany was at the time, Gerber’s country of birth (Kuhn 13). During his arrest, all copies of the newsletter were destroyed by the police (Streitmatter 366). Shortly after, the SHR was quickly suppressed (Kepner 28). It seemed as if the United States was not yet ready for a formal organization that promoted gay and lesbian rights (Newton 8).

Although his organization did not last long, Gerber did plant the seeds of gay pride and the idea of fighting for gay rights (Kepner 33). However, it lasted nearly thirty years before a successful gay rights organization was to appear in the United States. The Mattachine Society, originally named the Mattachine Foundation, was founded in 1950 and was probably the second of the earliest and influential gay movement groups, with Gerber’s SHR

preceding, although it is possible that there have been other secret or semi-secret organizations of gay men before the founding of the SHR and the Mattachine Society. The organization was founded by Harry Hay, who is considered one of the great pioneers of the gay and lesbian rights movement (Newton 8). The Mattachine Society largely operated in secret: “Given the status of homosexuality in society at the time, secrecy was a matter of primary concern, and many members used one or more pseudonyms at meetings” (Newton 9). After continuing internal disagreements, the national organization disbanded in regional groups in 1961 (Newton 11). In 1952, one of the Mattachine discussions was about the creation of a newsletter for the organization, but the national Society could not agree, which led to an amicable split. Both the newsletter and the new organization were called ONE (Newton 10). The organization stood out, as it was the first time among major homosexual organizations that women were also admitted (Newton 10).

The third organization that formed the heart of the early gay and lesbian rights movement was the Daughters of Bilitis, also called the DOB or the Daughters (Newton 12). Some historians argue that the American gay rights movement of the first half of the twentieth century consisted of those three primary organizations (Loftin 19). The DOB was partly created in response to the male dominance of the Mattachine Society and ONE. The DOB was created by women in 1955 and was the first lesbian rights organization (Loftin 220). As such, it focused more on issues particularly appealing to women, thus issues concerning family, relationships, and child rearing, but members were also interested in more general issues such as loneliness and isolation (Loftin 221). In the second part of this chapter, the American gay rights movement will be discussed in more detail, starting with the 1960s, as that marks the beginning of the ‘sexual revolution,’ known as a time of major social upheaval in many social areas. In the 1960s, new activist groups emerged that had a younger and more militant tone. They turned the homophile movement into a more radical movement, known as the Gay Liberation Movement (Loftin 221). The period before the sexual revolution during which the organization of gay rights began, is often referred to as the homophile movement (Matzner 1). Later, with the emergence of the gay liberation movement, the use of the word disappeared and is now known as a dated term for homosexuality (Pettis 1).

### 1.1.3. Homosexuality in American Drama

As the discussion of homosexuality became more open in the twentieth century, literature, television programs, and films with gay themes and characters began to appear more in the



domain of mainstream culture (Brill). This thesis focuses on the representation of homosexuality in the literary form of drama. Due to time and space limits, other forms of culture will not be discussed in this thesis. American theater bloomed in the nineteenth century, but became even more sophisticated in the twentieth century. In eighteenth and nineteenth century-America, homosexuality was not seen or discussed overtly in plays (Fisher 398). As with all other types of cultural forms, it was socially unacceptable to be an openly gay playwright or to produce a play that included explicit gay themes or characters (King 333). By the late nineteenth century, American dramatists started to depict gay characters in their plays, but these were usually hidden by descriptions, as any hint of homosexuality was too scandalous, on stage as well as to the outside world. Although it is arguable which play truly marks the beginning of gay drama in the twentieth century, *The Drag* (1927) by Mae West may be the first American play to feature overt depictions of homosexuality (King 333). It generated so much controversy because of its open portrayal of homosexuality and cross-dressing that it was closed during its premiere even before being performed on Broadway as originally planned.

The times made it difficult for dramatists to express homosexual characters or themes in their works. For some time, the representation of homosexuality in cultural forms was even outlawed, because the government feared that it would either lead to “the corruption of youth or others” or that homosexuals would be attracted to it, “thus creating a visible presence” because of this growing audience (Clum 74). Few artists did dare to write or produce works with gay or lesbian themes, but they had to approach the subject with caution, as did Lillian Hellman and Tennessee Williams, whose plays will be analyzed in this thesis. Hellman’s play *The Children’s Hour* (1934) focuses on the story of two women that are accused of being in a sexual relationship. Hellman’s play remains as one of the most successful gay-themed plays. Williams was one of the first playwrights to use his own experience for writing his plays (Gordy 183). Before, most plays were the work of heterosexual playwrights “whose plots usually depended upon suspected rather than actual homosexual orientations” (Gordy 183). With his 1955 play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams’ depiction of homosexuality began to evolve (King 336). These works are worthy of study as they offer an understanding of contemporary attitudes toward homosexuality in American society. Furthermore, they are examples of “contemporary prejudices and both their author’s and society’s inhibitions” (Slide 1).

## 1.2. Homosexuality in the United States: from 1960s to 2000

Since the sixties, it is argued by many scholars and historians that the United States experienced a so-called 'sexual revolution,' which led to more tolerance and liberalization (Boldina 25). According to sociologists, sexual patterns "underwent significant change in the 1960s, and it is this shift away from 'monogamous' sexuality that is usually signified by the term 'sexual revolution'" (Escoffier xii). The revolution that emerged in the sixties did not only involve a change in the attitude about sex, but also a significant change in sexual conduct, in the way people thought about sexuality and gender roles (Escoffier xiii). Thus, the term 'sexual revolution' "refers to the widespread changes in men's and women's roles and a greater public acceptance of sexuality as a normal part of social development" (Andersen 302). These changes went hand in hand with the gay and lesbian movement that boomed during this sexual revolution. These movements "have put the sexual revolution at the center of public attention by, [amongst other things], challenging gender role stereotyping and sexual oppression, profoundly changing [the] understanding of gay and lesbian sexuality" (Andersen 302). According to historians, the term 'sexual revolution' was discovered and adopted by the mass media around 1963-1964 and is nowadays typically applied by academic and popular users (Smith 415). Homosexuals were partly inspired by the black movement of the sixties to create their own civil rights movement (Escoffier xxviii). Moreover, it inspired LGBT activists to become more radical. Towards the end of the decade, a radical lesbian and gay movement emerged, later known as the Gay Liberation Movement.

### 1.2.1 Gay Liberation Movement (1969-1974)

It is often said that the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 marks the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement, although it is important to recognize that there have been considerable individual and group acts for many years before (Beemyn 118). The Stonewall riots are also considered to be the first instance in American history when homosexuals fought back against the government system. At the time of the Stonewall riots, the situation for homosexuals was not too bright. In fact, homosexuals found themselves "in the worst legal position they had been in" (Carter 14). To briefly sum it up, it was illegal in all states except Illinois for homosexuals to have sex. There were no laws that protected homosexuals from being denied housing or being fired from their jobs, for example, and there were no openly lesbian or gay politicians that participated in politics in the United States (Carter 1). All sanctions against

homosexuals made it difficult for them to meet their own kind. In addition, the police patrolled public spaces where homosexuals could mingle (Carter 16). Gay bars offered a gathering place for people to meet partners or to simply interact with like-minded people. On June 28, 1969, several New York City policemen raided the gay bar The Stonewall Inn “in search of those believed to be violating laws against ‘homosexuality’ in public and private businesses that were active at the time” (Worthen 164). This police raid was different, as it triggered a riot that lasted several nights. It was the first time that homosexuals refused to submit to the will of the police and fought back.

Apart from the Stonewall riots being the first sustained uprising by gay people, the Stonewall riots also “resulted in the birth of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and later of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA)” (Carter 2). With the creation of the GLF and the GAA, the gay liberation movement really began, “which transformed the previous homosexual political movement, [known as the homophile movement], into a larger and more militant mass movement” (Carter 538). The period was characterized “by the rapid development of an identifiable gay and lesbian community throughout the country and was one of reaction, increased visibility, redefinition of gender roles, the rise of the gay press, and sexual promiscuity, redefinition of gender roles, the rise of the gay press, and sexual promiscuity” (Tully 32). Encouraged and inspired by the Stonewall riots, more (smaller) local groups came to existence and more gay people began to out themselves (Carter 1104).

The launch of the gay liberation movement became synonymous with gay pride (Pezzella 23). The first gay pride march was held in June 1970 on the first anniversary of Stonewall (Carter 1105). Because of the symbolic and historic importance of the riots, the riots are annually commemorated with Gay Pride celebrations (Carter 538). The emergence of the vocal and confrontational Gay Liberation movement introduced the concept of ‘gay pride’ in the United States (Knauer 13). In the years that followed, marches took place in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston, but also large cities outside the United States, such as London, Paris, and Berlin (Erfer 251).

### 1.2.2. Homosexuality in American Culture: Post-Stonewall

In the 1970s, as gay people were encouraged by the empowerment they had felt following the riots, they became more radical and active, which led to, amongst other things, their involvement in the boards of groups such as the American Psychiatric Association (APA), annual Gay Pride marches, and the development of organizations devoted solely to the gay

community (Tully 32). The latter increased the visibility of the gay and lesbian culture (Tully 33). One of the largest successes of gay and lesbian activism is the elimination of the diagnosis of homosexuality as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Pezzella 23). In 1973, the APA declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder. Thus, the issue of homosexuality moved from being thought of as “a sin or a criminal activity for which one could atone or be punished through being considered a mental illness” in the first half of the twentieth century to finally, but slowly, a more liberal and tolerant attitude towards the end of the century (Tully 27).

Advocates of ‘gay pride’ began to encourage greater openness in plays and other productions about gay life (Brockett 248). As such, ‘gay theater,’ plays specifically written by or performed by homosexuals or depicting any aspect of homosexual life, really came into fruition in the late 1960s-early 1970s as a result of the increasing freedom derived from the gay liberation movement (Gordy 182). Plays dealing with homosexuality before the sexual revolution usually considered homosexuality as shameful, destructive or as an illness: “Most gay-themed plays from the 1950s and early 1960s still focused on the shameful aspects of homosexuality and abysmal attempts to fit into heterosexual society, with homosexuality either having to be disavowed or disposed through suicide” (Gordy 183).

In the 1970s, gay theater companies started to emerge in major cities throughout the United States: “These [theaters] played an important role in promoting a sense of identity and addressing the concerns and interests of those within the gay [community]” (Brockett 248). The rise of these theaters, together with the sexual revolution, led to an increase of overt, somewhat more favorable, and seemingly more honest portrayals of homosexuality (Gordy 183). However, prior to the Stonewall riots, there was already Mart Crowley’s play *The Boys in the Band* (1968), which is the third and final play that will be analyzed in this thesis. Even before this groundbreaking play, there had been several cultural products that depicted homosexuality. *The Boys in the Band* was the first play on Broadway specifically about gay men and it is often said that it marked a turning point in the acceptability of plays about homosexuality (Brockett 248). Following the Stonewall riots, the gay subculture became more visible in American society and it was at this point that homosexuality paved the way to become a recurring subject in American drama, too. Gay playwrights tended to place their homosexual characters in the center and focused on all aspects of the gay experience, whereas straight playwrights put their homosexual characters more to the background. In 1978, the national Gay Theatre Alliance was formed to help promote and develop gay theater.

Following the Stonewall riots, the gay and lesbian community also began to take on an increasingly proactive stand in defining its own character and nature, specifically in dominant media (Fejes 397). Prior to the 1960s, the mainstream media rarely explicitly mentioned homosexuality. If they did, it was often defined as a perversion, sickness or crime (Fejes 396). Although there did appear more portrayals of homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s, as the power of the Production Code waned, and thus it increased its awareness and presence, it was still rarely presented in a positive or even neutral light (Fejes 398). In fact, Hollywood depicted gay life negatively: “Most often, gay characters in movies killed other people or killed themselves” (Rimmerman 17). In most works that contained gay characters, they were not allowed happy endings. In the few instances that it did result in some kind of relationship, at least one of them still had to die at the end. In the twenty-first century, this phenomenon in fiction that requires that gay or lesbian characters die or meet another unfortunate ending, such as becoming insane, became known as the ‘bury your gays’ trope or ‘dead lesbian syndrome,’ although it does not only apply to lesbians (Framke). The problem with gay characters being killed off is that they are either killed off simply because they are gay or they are killed off in a story that is full of mostly straight characters. Fictional gay characters were often depicted as violent or murderous, thus playing on the public’s general fear of gay people “and discomfort with behaviors that violate gender norms” (Stevenson). Furthermore, it was not accepted to show any kind of romance between men or women, but showing scenes of explicit violent gay male rape and suicide for example was no problem (Stevenson). The real problem is that these negative gay portrayals shape the attitude of the public.

Towards the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, the depiction of homosexuality in American culture had finally underwent change. The gay community had become more visible in major urban areas, the gay rights movement continued to grow, and the nature of homosexuality was reconsidered. LGBT activists began to demand changes and “began to pressure Hollywood [and network television] to end its consistently negative [and inadequate] portrayals of gays and lesbians,” which led to growing visibility in films, plays, and other cultural products (Fejes 398). Since the early 1990s, the American public acceptance and tolerance of gays and lesbians and homosexual relations has grown significantly (Keleher 1308). The number of cultural products that portrayed gay characters, gay themes or references to homosexuality began to grow (Becker 104).

## 2. *The Children's Hour*

### 2.1. The Playwright, the Plot, and the Reception

Lillian Florence Hellman was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on June 20, 1905 into a Jewish family. Hellman is known for being a successful American playwright on Broadway as well as her political activism. She is also seen as the first important female dramatist of the American South (Watson 133). Fellow writer Dashiell Hammett encouraged her to write a drama. He suggested that she should work within an established framework and recommended her to read *Bad Companions* by William Roughead, a Scottish law historian whose book documents interesting trials. Six drafts later, Hellman's first play emerged as *The Children's Hour* (Griffin 4). The play was based on an essay of Roughead, titled "Closed Doors; or, The Great Drumsheagh Case," which concerned the real case of two female teachers of a girls' school in Scotland, who were condemned by their community when a student accused them of having a homosexual relationship. The scandal led to the school's closing, but one of the headmistresses sued for libel. This true story about a libel suit inspired Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (Kornstein 222).

*The Children's Hour* premiered on Broadway on November 24, 1934 and was an instant hit. In July 1936, the drama closed after 691 performances, which was at the time the longest single-venue theater run (Griffin 4). The play centers upon two young women, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright, who have opened an all-girls boarding school. They run and teach the school. One of the pupils, Mary Tilford, is disobedient and at one point runs away. She asks her grandmother, Amelia Tilford, to allow her not to return, but Amelia refuses. To avoid being sent back, Mary convinces her grandmother that the two headmistresses are having a lesbian affair. Furthermore, she blackmails her friend Rosalie into corroborating the story. Soon, most pupils are being pulled out of the school. Martha and Karen go to Mrs. Tilford to confront her and Mary and eventually take them to court. Seven months later, Martha and Karen have lost the case. At one point, Martha comes to the sudden realization that she might indeed have feelings for Karen. She feels that she ruined Karen's life and that things will not go back to normal. In earlier moments, Martha keeps recalling the fact that Karen is going to marry physician Joseph Cardin, who is called Joe throughout the play, whereas Martha does not feel connected to anyone besides Karen. When her fiancé starts to question Karen's sexual preferences, Karen tells him that they have to part because of all they have been through. When Martha eventually admits her feelings for Karen, she responds dismissively and ends the conversation to Martha's regret. A few minutes later, Martha shoots and kills herself.

Shortly after, Mrs. Tilford arrives to tell Mary's lies have been uncovered and that there will be a public apology and a damage suit. Karen explains her that it is too late. The accusation has not only destroyed the women's careers, but also their relationships and lives.

The opening of *The Children's Hour* in 1934 was immensely popular. Initially, the play was banned in Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, and Washington, as homosexuality was a taboo subject in 1934 (Sova 49). This shows the plight of the queer at the time, as homosexuality was not wanted anywhere. Boston authorities said that the play was not acceptable according to the community standards (Sova 49). However, Hellman claimed she never meant to focus on homosexuality: "This is really not a play about lesbianism, but a lie. The bigger the lie the better, as always" (Hellman 25). However, the reason for the treatment of lesbianism in the play can be found in her best-known autobiographical piece "Julia." In her writings about the relationship with her childhood friend, Hellman acknowledges the "sexual yearnings of one girl for another" even though she and Julia "never kissed each other" (Hellman 114). Although Hellman kept denying that the play is about lesbianism, western society did not want to display a work that possibly allowed the presence of homosexual sympathy. Instead, the effects of lying was supposed to be the predominant theme in the work, but audiences reacted more strongly towards the underlying lesbianism and as such, homosexuality was seen as an engaging topic of the play. Furthermore, because of its controversial subject, it failed to earn the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1935, although it was in serious consideration for it. Supporters of *The Children's Hour* accused the Pulitzer committee of rejecting the play for its subject matter, but the committee claimed that the play was ineligible for the award, because it was based on a real court trial and thus was not an original drama. The following year, the New York Drama Critics Circle began awarding their own awards to notable dramas (Sova 50).

Nevertheless, the play gained critical and public success (Griffin 27). Most critical judgments were favorable. Reviewer Ide Gruber wrote in the *Golden Book Magazine* that the play was a "powerful and gripping" adult drama that was "well-written and well-acted" (Gruber 28). Drama critic Percy Hammond wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that the tragedy in *The Children's Hour* will make the audiences' "eyes start from their sockets as its agitating tale [unfolds]" (Hammond 16). There were also some complaints that were mostly focused on the third act, the last part of the play. Brooks Atkinson for *The New York Times* said that the ending should have occurred before the suicide of Martha. Just like Atkinson, critic Stark Young also felt that it was "too melodramatic in its final array of coincidences and too heavy in its moralizing," following Martha's suicide ("*The Children's Hour*").

Furthermore, Joseph Wood Krutch wrote in *The Nation* that the last act was “so strained (...) that the effect is almost completely destroyed” (Krutch 657). As soon as the play was produced, Will Hays, head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, placed the play on the banned list for filmmakers. According to Hays, the play violated sections of the Production Code Administration, which required that “the sanctity of the institution of marriage and home shall be upheld” and stated further that “sexual perversion or any inference of it is forbidden” (Sova 50).

## 2.2. Heteronormativity, Penalization, and Explicitness

Homosexuality refers to the romantic or sexual attraction or sexual behavior between members of the same sex. The most common terms for homosexual people are gay for males and lesbian for females, although gay is also used to refer to both homosexual males and females. It is interesting to see if homosexuality is portrayed differently in *The Children's Hour*, as the play is written by a female playwright. Could that be why Lillian Hellman choose to use supposed lesbians as her lead players? In her article ‘Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*,’ Mary Titus, Ph.D. and specialist in American literature, argues that Hellman’s play not only provides insight into her complex response to sexual ideology, but her choice of material also may have reflected her own lesbian desire.

Titus has examined Hellman’s personal relationship to lesbianism. She states that one can already learn of Hellman’s own complex public and private responses to social pressures by looking at *The Children's Hour*: “Its text seeks simultaneously to confirm and to condemn public opinion, while the diffusion of desire through the characters and the violence against the one self-admitted lesbian character in the play point to Hellman's contradictory private response to the changing sexual ideology” (Titus 216). In early twentieth century, cultural shifts in the ideology surrounding women’s sexuality had occurred, which transformed the New Women into ‘invert’ (Titus 215, 216). This led to Hellman and other women professionals in particular experiencing “powerful social pressure not to make choices that could potentially separate them from the heterosexual path of marriage and childbearing. Frequently this pressure came in the form of accusations of sexual deviance” (Titus 215, 216). Sexologists argued that women who strived for independence and equality while at the same time rejected heterosexuality were accused of lesbianism. According to them, they belonged to an “‘intermediate sex,’ socially condemned, alienated, and a threat to established social order” (Titus 227). Although female relationships were at the time not referred to as being



‘lesbian’ of nature because the term was not yet in currency, “by the 1920s, charges of lesbianism had become a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers, and educators. (...) Plays appeared depicting the dangers of lesbianism in women’s schools and colleges” (Smith-Rosenberg 281). In Hellman’s play, the supposed lesbians Martha and Karen are teachers at their own all-girls boarding school having an emotional and professional relationship.

In the nineteenth century, close female relationships were “‘socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage’ and not even remotely associated with latent lesbianism” (Tunc 37). In the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the women’s movement gained more attention, these female attachments were further encouraged (Cuenca 117). The women’s movement fought, among other things, for women’s suffrage, the right to higher education, and equal pay. Female friendships were a means for women to find comfort and support prior to marriage. As the feminist movement, that wanted to overthrow the old sex roles, grew in strength in the twentieth century, feminism itself also became equated with sexual inversion (Faderman 45). With the advent of sexology, ‘romantic friendships’ became the target of mainstream (male) discourses (Cuenca 117). Such relationships were accused of making women unfit for marriage and family life: “The lesbian—the sexual invert—came to symbolize the dangers brought about by feminism and romantic friendships” (Cuenca 117). Thus, the way society viewed female relationships began to change, as “all such intimate homosocial relationships suddenly came under suspicion as being potentially ‘abnormal,’ i.e., lesbian” (Tunc 37). Many women were suspected of anomaly and accused of acting in ways inappropriate to their gender (Faderman 45, 46). This explains the fear of the lesbian in the beginning of the twentieth century. Feminism and lesbianism became more converged and the mere ‘romantic friendships’ between women that were once considered to be just that were then seen as lesbianism (Cuenca 118). So, in the beginning of the twentieth century, lesbianism and homosexuality in general were seen as a threat to patriarchal values (Cuenca 116). In *The Children’s Hour*, Martha and Karen’s friendship is also romantic of nature and as such, it represents a threat. While in the late nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth century the relationship between Martha and Karen would have been considered ‘normal,’ by the 1930s, two women embracing could suggest a lesbian relationship (Tunc 38).

Hellman based her play on the nineteenth-century Scottish lawsuit ‘The Great Drumsheagh Case,’ but the fact that she made alterations of her source material indicate that gender was foremost in her mind (Titus 217). Besides borrowing liberally from the lawsuit’s characters and details, Hellman made two significant changes which reinforces the presence

of heteronormativity and penalization; most importantly, Martha's confession of homosexuality and the violent end by suicide (Titus 217). In the actual lawsuit, the two teachers of an all-girls boarding schools were accused of 'deviant sexual behavior,' but did not acknowledge having a lesbian relationship. They won the case and there was also no suicide. In Hellman's play, the actual trial is not described. Martha and Karen lose the trial and the 'unconscious lesbian' is 'killed.' As such, it can be argued that Hellman wrote "a profoundly conservative text" in which "she wanted to confirm contemporary sexual ideology overtly" (Titus 223). From this perspective, it can be argued that Hellman assented to heteronormativity: "To kill the lesbian, thus, symbolizes the fight against social chaos brought about by the subversive and 'abnormal' sexual behavior" (Cuenca 116). Secondly, Hellman added doctor Joseph Cardin, Karen's fiancé, to further stress heteronormativity as the norm and reinforce Karen's heterosexuality. According to Titus, in doing so, Hellman wanted to establish clear sexual identities, as the desires remain unclear in William Roughead's recounting of the case, "in part because he finds lesbianism impossible to imagine" (Titus 217). By adding Joe to the text, Hellman further presents sexual difference as disruptive of 'normal' society, of an "established, clearly defined, heterosexual, middle-class order, what [Hellman] describes as the 'Normals'" (Titus 223). Furthermore, Titus states that Hellman's eagerness to clarify the sexual orientation of her characters coincided with her entrance into the male-dominated cultural world: "As an independent woman artist, she must have confronted the revision of women's sexuality, which encouraged public perception of independent and ambitious women as unnatural, potentially if not actually lesbian" (Titus 217).

According to Dr. Yvon Appleby, senior lecturer in social science, lesbian women and gay men both experience similar and sometimes common conditions of heterosexual oppression, such as 'invisibility,' marginalization, fear, isolation, and harassment. However, Appleby further states that their experience of this is not entirely identical, simply because they have a significantly different gender identity: "Lesbian women are women, and as such, are subject to the regulation and control of their gender and their sexuality within the male defined and controlled system of heterosexuality. Heterosexual regulation and control of gender and sexual identity, and the connections between them, shape lesbian experience" (Appleby 68). In this light, especially young lesbian women are vulnerable "because of their place within the life cycle and their overall dependence on others" (Appleby 77). Thus, the connection between gender and sexual identity for lesbian women is differently constructed and experienced as opposed to gay men. For her research, Appleby looked at lesbian and gay

studies and accounts and came to the conclusion that lesbian women are both “directly and indirectly discriminated against within a heterosexual system because of their lesbian identity” (Appleby 69). Women are vulnerable within the normative heterosexual system: if women do not fit the “prescriptive stereotype of normative heterosexual femininity,” they will be assumed to be lesbians and will therefore attract harassment (Appleby 82). There is a close and interconnected relationship between gender and sexual identity which, in turn, “shows the pervasive nature and the connection, between sexism and the imposition of normative heterosexuality” (Appleby 82).

In Hellman’s play *The Children’s Hour*, the liaison of Martha and Karen is in some ways a romantic friendship. As such, it represents a threat to the moral values of that time, which meant that a family consisted of a father, a mother and their children and that the male held primary power and dominance over them. This romantic aspect is coming from character Martha. The first little hint of affection can be found in the first act, during their talk about firing Lily Mortar, Martha’s aunt, who is helping them with the school. At one point, Hellman describes that Martha “affectionately pats [Karen’s] head” (Hellman 15). Then the conversation switches to the subject of Karen’s marriage to Joe. Martha expresses the fear of losing Karen, once she is married to Joe: “Then we won’t be taking our vacation together?” (Hellman 15). When Karen responds that they will go with the three of them, it is clear that Martha is disappointed, as she was planning on going on a vacation just with Karen, like old times. Furthermore, Martha is convinced Karen is eventually going to quit her job and leave her all alone, which angers Karen, who feels as if Martha wants her to give up her marriage. The conversation ends abruptly, when Joe comes in.

In another moment, when Martha is talking to Mrs. Mortar, telling her to leave, it gets out of hand. Mrs. Mortar accuses Martha of always acting angrily towards her whenever Joe is around: “It seems like you just can’t stand the idea of them being together. God knows what you’ll do when they get married. You’re jealous of him, that’s what it is” (Hellman 19, 20). This sudden accusation shocks Martha, who says she is fond of Joe, but Mrs. Mortar continues to throw Martha’s feelings for Karen out in the open: “You’re fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it’s unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be” (Hellman 20). In fact, Mrs. Mortar is the character who most clearly “expresses the homophobic construction of female homosocial institutions and practices” in the play (Corber 53). She goes on about her niece’s ‘unnatural’ feelings, as she traces it to her childhood: “You were always like that even as a child. If you had a little girl friend, you always got mad when she liked anybody else” (Hellman 20). Thus, according to Mrs. Mortar, Martha’s love for Karen constitute an identity

rather than a momentary stage (Corber 54). With the term ‘unnatural,’ Mrs. Mortar refers to lesbianism or homosexuality. Throughout most of the twentieth century, and especially at the time the play was written and performed, homosexuality was generally viewed by the American population as ‘sinful,’ ‘abnormal’ or ‘unnatural’ (Hatheway 11). The arguments ‘in favor of’ homosexuality were considered ‘wrong,’ ‘sick’ or, again, ‘unnatural’ (Bawer 105). Furthermore, the majority of Americans found same-sex attraction inimical to the American national ideology (Hatheway 11). Homosexuality was not the normal lifestyle, the appropriate lifestyle, which is why Mrs. Mortar calls Martha’s suspected love for Karen ‘unnatural,’ as it is not the way it ought to be (Bawer 104). Mrs. Mortar continues to echo the “homophobic construction of women’s romantic friendships,” as her words suggest that Martha should live life according to the traditional values, which means marriage and motherhood. In a cruel way, she states: “Well, you’d better get a beau of your own now” (Hellman 20). This firm opposition against homosexuality reflects the degree to which heteronormativity dominated the field. In addition, Titus states that all the relationships between women in the play surrounds the ambiguity that denoted sexual difference in the 1920s, not only Martha: “This almost entirely female society is full of jealousy and manipulation; the characters compete for love and find accusations of excessive attachment easy to make and easy to believe” (Titus 220). Mrs. Mortar, for example, has the feeling as if she has to compete with Karen to get the attentions of Martha, her niece. She is jealous of the affectionate friendship between the two and so she accuses Martha of resenting Karen’s marriage with Joe. In turn, Mary, who overheard this accusation, claims that Martha and Karen have a lesbian relationship, thus names and heightens what is already in the air (Titus 220). In the play, there are only two male characters: doctor Joseph Cardin and the grocery boy, who only very briefly features in the play. Mr. Mortar does not exist as far as the play is concerned (Titus 220).

In the next act, Joe has come to Mrs. Tilford’s house to check up on Mary, unaware of the lies she has just told her grandmother and so Mrs. Tilford tells him she has something very hard to say: “You must not marry Karen, because there’s something wrong with [her], something horrible” (Hellman 46). In that same moment, Martha and Karen have also entered Mrs. Tilford’s house, but she does not want them in her home because she is worried that she might catch lesbianism, a fear shared by Mrs. Burton (Kahan 189). Mrs. Burton, the mother of Helen, one of the students, said she wanted Helen’s things packed while she waits outside as she “didn’t want to enter a place like ours,” as told by Martha (Hellman 47). Mrs. Tilford believed her granddaughter before confronting Martha and Karen about it. She did not give them any chance to refute it (Corber 56). She also does not want to give Martha and Karen an

explanation for the accusation: “For Amelia Tilford, ignorance is truly bliss; she would rather remain oblivious to the truth than discover something ‘distasteful’ and potentially damaging to the social order she strives so desperately to protect” (Tunc 47, 48).

Mrs. Tilford had informed the parents of the other girls out of fear that Martha and Karen will infect the children with lesbianism (Kahan 187). The parents immediately pulled their children out of the school, as they are frightened that their children are being taught by lesbians. Many of the characters show no mercy. Instead, they are quick to believe the worst about the innocent victims, to believe false rumors about others. As teachers, Martha and Karen become particularly dangerous, as they are responsible for the mental and moral well-being of teenage girls. They are models to the young pupils as they have a direct influence upon them (Cuenca 118, 121). Especially since at the time, many Americans believed that “homosocial environments such as all- girls schools [were], almost overnight, ‘veritable hotbeds of lesbianism’” and that “lesbianism was a contagious mental disease, i.e., a product of nurture, not nature (Tunc 38, 40). This could also be one of the reasons why the adults in the play believe Mary’s fabricated accusations (Tunc 38). Martha immediately addresses the impact this false accusation will have on their lives: “It’s our lives you’re fooling with. Our lives. That’s serious business for us” (Hellman 48). However, Mrs. Tilford is convinced Martha is in love with Karen and is especially concerned about the fact that there are children involved: “You’ve been playing with a lot of children’s lives, and that’s why I stopped you” (Hellman 48). The students of Martha and Karen are around the age of fourteen, thus in their teens. One of the defining features of childhood and teenage years is that it is a time when a child’s sexuality is not yet fully ‘defined.’ Rather it is a time of sexual openness. As such, the students have not been fully ‘colonized’ by heteronormativity, which is why Mrs. Tilford does not want the students to learn anything about homosexuality, because it may affect their take on sexuality in the ‘wrong’ way (Cavanagh 175). According to Sheila Cavanagh, associate professor of sociology, this opposition against a supposed female teacher sexual relationship was not so much about child protectionism, but rather about worries about “the status of heteronormativity in the profession and the public at large” (Cavanagh 10).

Furthermore, Mrs. Tilford believes Mary because she could not possibly know about ‘such (unnatural) things’ unless she had witnessed them herself (Corber 56). Early on, the students secretly pass around a forbidden copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* from bedroom to bedroom, a French romantic novel by Théophile Gautier about men and women falling in love with women disguised as men, only to find out their true sexual identity. Hellman implies that Mary’s knowledge of sexual relations comes from this forbidden book, as the

book contains the concept of lesbianism. According to Titus, it is this shifting possession of the forbidden text along with “the shifting bedrooms (...) [that] “reflect contemporary descriptions of ‘sex-segregated schools’ as veritable hotbeds of homosexuality” (Titus 221). She then uses literary critic Floyd Dell’s book *Love in the Machine Age* to further argue this: “[He] decried the ‘homo-sexualizing influence’ of a ‘sex-segregated adolescence” (Titus 221). According to Dell, homosexuality occurred where patriarchal practices kept males and females apart, such as “the unwholesome fashionable practice of sex-segregated schools [that] brings young people into a homosexual atmosphere” (qtd. in Simmons 146). Dell also argued that “the supposed sexlessness of female institutions masked the deviant nature of some women’s relationships” (Simmons 146). The play is set in an all-girls school, but Hellman takes it a step further, as she suggests that “to know about lesbian desire is to recognize it as part of oneself,” which is the case with Martha (Titus 221). Because in the end, Martha confesses to Karen that she has “loved [her] the way she said” (Hellman 71). It is Mary’s accusation that articulated Martha’s desire and it is because of that accusation that it dawned on Martha that she was indeed in love with Karen.

Mrs. Tilford continuously tries to end the conversation by demanding them to leave and so Martha and Karen take her and Mary to court. They lose the case. Society trusts on a single statement made by a little girl only to “reinforce its opinions based on hegemonic notions” concerning homosexuality (Dhaenens 86). The judge accused them of having ‘sinful sexual knowledge of one another’ (Hellman 63). Martha is angry at her aunt for not showing up in court for the defense’s case, as a great part of that was based on remarks made by Mrs. Mortar, but she had a moral obligation to the theater. However, the real reason why Mrs. Mortar was absent is because she did not want to have anything to do with the accusation of homosexuality: “It couldn’t have done any good for all of us to get mixed up in that unpleasant notoriety” (Hellman 63). Because homosexuality was not accepted in American society at the time, even the slightest association with it would be enough to negatively affect one’s image. Now that the trial is over, she has returned and is willing to help, away from the public eye.

Towards the end of the play, Joe comes by to talk about their plans to get married and to leave the place, with Martha joining them. However, Karen is now questioning almost everything he says because of what has happened. Once again, this shows the impact of the accusation of homosexuality, as Karen is unsure if what Joe is saying is still true, for example when they talk about having a baby: “You used to want one right away. You always said that

was the way you wanted it. There's some reason for your changing," says Karen (Hellman 66). She feels Joe might mean something else than what he says, because he is ashamed and sad because of the allegations against Karen and the fact that he is involved with her. When Karen calls him out, at first, he said he never questioned her, but quickly, he does want to know if she and Martha have ever been lovers. Although Joe believes Karen that nothing happened between her and Martha, Karen later tells Martha that he thought they had been lovers. Karen tells Joe they cannot be together anymore. Her life is ruined because of the accusations and she does not want to ruin Joe's life too. People will look down on him, because he is associated with a supposed lesbian, which is unacceptable to society. Furthermore, the reader gets the impression that Joe voluntarily quit his job for Karen, whereas someone could be fired because of guilt by association.

In act three, the impact of the false accusation on the lives of Martha and Karen becomes clear, as they are sitting in the abandoned school, just passing time: "We've been sitting here for eight days asking each other the time. (...) It's been days since we've been out of this house" (Hellman 59). Karen suggests they take a walk, but the possibility of being seen by people holds her back. They also cannot go shopping, as people will not help them because of their supposed lesbianism. The only connection they have to the outside world, apart from their family, is the grocery boy, who does not know how to act around the two women. He giggles, moves around, and stares at them. Karen cannot stand it any longer and so Martha says: "I've got eight fingers, see? I'm a freak," indicating that society does not see them as equals (Hellman 60). Martha is mocking the stereotypical imagery (Dhaenens 87). Because they supposedly love each other, they are different from society, which makes them outcasts. They do not meet with the morals established by society.

The subject of homosexuality, of lesbianism, is not addressed explicitly in *The Children's Hour*. Plays with gay and lesbian characters or any mention of homosexuality are rare. As such, they reflect the degree to which heteronormativity dominates the field (Van de Water 82). Martha and Karen do not adhere to the heteronormative understanding of a couple as a pairing of a man and a woman, as they are both female. Furthermore, both appear feminine, whereas it is required by social prescriptions that in a homosexual relationship, one person is more masculine and the other more feminine, so that they still adhere to the heteronormative construction of a 'couple' (Moroni 51). Although they are not an explicit homosexual couple, there are several instances that do hint at homosexuality, as pointed out. As such, Martha and Karen subvert heteronormativity. However, both do adhere to the gender constructions ascribed to females, which can be seen in their outer appearance and the fact

that they wear feminine clothing and react highly emotional, for example. This shows the pervasiveness of heteronormative ideology, as even within a somewhat homonormative situation, heteronormativity still remains present (Moroni 52).

When *The Children's Hour* premiered in 1934, homosexuality was not well accepted in society and certainly not on the stage. Prior to Hellman's play, a lesbian themed play from the 1920s, *The Captive*, was forced to close because of its subject matter. As such, Hellman had to take precautions (Hellman 167). She altered the dialogue and plot to fit the culture of the conservative 1930s. Most of these changes were in regard to the regulations of that time: "Hellman ultimately took references to 'lesbian' out of *The Children's Hour* script. (...) It is likely that Hellman was trying to work around 'decency issues' of her day" (Shedd 139). The play does not feature words that refer specifically to homosexuality or lesbianism in general. Instead, Hellman used bleak euphemisms, such as 'abnormal,' 'unnatural,' and 'funny feelings.' The use of such coded euphemisms "testified to the popularization and consolidation of these psychoanalytic categories used to demarcate lesbianism' in the American psyche" (Tunc 38). Thus, the characters never use direct and accurate words for queer. An example of this can be found in the scene where Karen and Joe try to force Mary to tell the truth after spilling the lie about the sexual affair between Martha and Karen. However, Mrs. Tilford does not want the words associated with homosexuality to be spoken, as she says bitterly to Joe: "You are trying to make her name it, aren't you?" (Hellman 54). Throughout the play, Mrs. Tilford is the representation of the traditionalist views that Hellman had to 'surrender' to. Also, the fact that Mary whispered into her grandmother's ear the content of Martha and Karen's supposed sexual encounters implies that homosexuality is "a dirty secret which cannot be spoken out loud or discussed in an open and civilized fashion" (Tunc 47).

Mary Titus also examined Hellman's notes for *The Children's Hour* and noted that Hellman also repeatedly used the word 'abnormal.' In the case of Martha, the word is connected to qualities of "incompleteness, ambiguity, and marginality" (Titus 219). According to Titus, this frequent use of 'abnormal' points to the ways in which Hellman's work on the play "most evidently interacted with contemporary sexual ideology" (Titus 219). In an early draft, Hellman describes Martha as an 'unconscious lesbian,' as 'unrealized,' and as 'half one thing, half another' (Titus 220). Titus states that by using these terms, Hellman recalled the discourse of the sexologists around the turn of the century: "According to prominent theorists of female sexual deviance, such as Havelock Ellis, the 'invert' was a mixture of masculine and feminine" (Titus 220). Ellis argued that although physically, lesbians appear in no way different from heterosexuals, lesbians possess "a more or less



distinct trace of masculinity” and thus a lesbian is a “mannish woman,” or as Hellman puts it, half one thing, half another, as seen in the character of Martha (Ellis 133).

It is not until the last few pages of the play that Martha openly addresses homosexuality, although the actual word is still not mentioned: “There’ll never be any place for us to go. We’re bad people” (Hellman 70). The power of the word lesbianism lies in suggestion and innuendo (Tunc 46). Karen insists that “other people aren’t destroyed” by the label of lesbianism, but Martha refuses to identify with women who are identified as homosexual: “They are the people who believe in it, who want it, who’ve chosen it” (Hellman 70). Instead, she says that it is natural for two women to be close to each other and to love each other like a friend. She refers to the fact that it was common at the time to have a close female relationship, but even more so, “Martha’s participation in female homosocial institutions has enabled her to experience her feelings for Karen as ‘normal’” (Corber 54). Martha is not familiar with the contemporary discourse of female sexuality, of homosexuality (Corber 54). However, she soon confesses to Karen that she does love her “the way they said” (Hellman 71). Thus, Mary’s accusation has transformed the meaning of those feelings (Corber 55). Martha knew all along that there was something different about her, but it was only after the accusation and the trial that she could put a finger on it. As the play emphasizes on the consequences of Mary’s lies and the false accusations for Martha and Karen, it reinforces the critique of the “homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian,” of the homosexual, as “Martha’s confession of her love for Karen foregrounds the discursive construction of sexuality” (Corber 56). Despite being ever engaged in lesbian activity, her lesbian identity is ‘produced’ or ‘formed’ as a result of the lies, rumors, and gossip that spread through the community: “There’s something in you, and you don’t know it and you don’t do anything about it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies-and there you are, seeing it for the first time” (Hellman 72).

Hellman’s play looks more closely at the consequences than at the causes. Mary does not return in the play and so the reader or audience is not provided with the satisfaction of witnessing her punishment (Cuenca 120). Because she is never punished for her actions, it underscores “the importance of the social reaction to the lie” (Tunc 50). In the third act, the audience comes to realize that Martha and Karen are living in a state of suspended animation before Martha makes a confession and commits suicide afterwards (Spencer 49). However, it is Martha’s confession that “shifts the focus of the play from the scandal brought on by a lie to the physiological consequences of that lie and thus to questions of sexual identity” (Spencer 50). According to associate professor Carol Strongin Tufts, the covert message of

the play is that “for a woman even to think about loving another woman in ‘that way’ (...) is a perilous and fearful crime, punishable in this play by death” (Tufts 65). After all, Martha has only thought about it; she has not done anything in the play. Hellman equates lesbianism with sin as it does not adhere to the heteronormative norm which is most apparent in Martha’s final speech before she kills herself. Martha condemns herself for the intensity of her own love and assumes full blame for what has happened to Karen, “as though Karen were her victim, rather than the two of them being victims of (...) society. (...) But what Hellman does not have Karen tell Martha is that there is no cause to condemn herself, that it is not her love that has brought about the ‘bad trouble in their lives;’ it is the eagerness of adults to accept so quickly a child’s accusation in a world that brands the love of one woman for another a sin” (Tufts 73, 74). With Martha mentioning the need to “invent a new language,” Hellman wants to convey to the audience that in 1930s’ America, “to be a lesbian is to be closed off from any future and to be beyond the boundaries of language itself,” which is also why the word ‘lesbian’ is too horrible for Mary to speak out loud (Tufts 74). Thus, even their language is tainted, so to return to normality, Martha and Karen “would have to invent a new language” (Hellman 72).

Hellman represents lesbianism as fearful by viewing the teachers as monsters, as the mothers pull their children from school. Martha and Karen are being shunned, as they later have no visitors, and even Karen’s fiancé hesitates to kiss her, presumably out of fear of contamination (Titus 222). In the last part, the play moves from private desire to public disorder, thus reflecting the contemporary discourse on homosexuality (Titus 222). Again, Titus backs up her argument using the work of sexologists, who represent homosexuals as outcasts whose ‘irregular’ sexuality threatens social and domestic order (Titus 222). This can also be seen in the work of Hellman. Not only does she link Martha’s state of being ‘half one thing, half another’ with sexual difference, she also associates her “with a marginality that threatens the dominant social order” (Titus 222). This results in Martha feeling excluded from ‘normal’ bourgeois life. According to Titus, Hellman’s text did not only follow those of contemporary sexologists, but also of male modernist writers, as the lesbian functions as a symbol of social disorder in their texts (Titus 222). American literary critic Sandra M. Gilbert analyzed modern literature and states that “for most male modernists the hierarchical order of society is and should be a pattern based upon gender distinctions” (Gilbert 393).

Because of the accusation, the trial and the aftermath, Martha has come to the realization that she may indeed be a lesbian and have feelings for Karen. Because she believes Joe and Karen have ended things, she confesses her love to Karen, who rebuffs her: “I resented your marriage; maybe because I wanted you; maybe I wanted you all along maybe I

couldn't call it by a name; maybe it's been there ever since I first knew you" (Hellman 71). Karen does not believe a word Martha is saying and even Karen calls her 'sick' for saying such things, referring to the common belief that homosexuality was an illness. Furthermore, Martha feels 'dirty' for having these homosexual feelings for Karen. Karen tells Martha to take a nap, but a few minutes later, a gunshot is heard. Martha has committed suicide. The fact that Martha commits suicide after sharing the revelation that she may be a lesbian is in compliance with the view of homosexuality at the time, as Martha pays with her life for her 'crime,' "an action to satisfy the most conservative audience" (Griffin 28). In the 1930s, having an open same-sex relationship was impossible in the United States and so most homosexuals remained 'in the closet,' because they knew public exposure would cost them their livelihoods and community acceptance. Thus, the act proceeds with a further 'stripping away,' as Lily Mortar first left, then Joe, and finally Martha (Griffin 36). Despite her confession, Martha could not accept her new identity and found herself unable to continue to withstand the social disapproval of the community (Sova 49). The gap between her inner and outer world is too great. Hellman has made the two main characters defeat themselves physically or metaphorically, as Martha commits suicide and Karen will always live with the suspicion that others will have of her. Even the other characters have lost in a way because of the case: Joe has lost Karen's love and trust, Mrs. Tilford loses self-respect, and Mary loses credibility and reliability (Ravindran 16).

Hellman had to submit to the traditional confining ideas, represented by Mrs. Tilford, which continues into the plot with the death of the queer. The queer is removed from the plot and from life, which is illustrated with the suicide of Martha. Even though she is portrayed as a sympathetic character and her true sexuality is debated, Martha had to die because of her possible homosexuality. She does identify as queer in the final moments of the play: "I have loved you the way they said" (Hellman 71). This crucial moment of the play shows how people believed homosexuality should not exist according to the conservative views, not in society and not in the fictional cultural world. In theatrical representations, the homosexual is often criminalized and contained by suicide, "perpetrating an act of violence on his or her own body" (Thomas 6). When Martha realizes that she is queer, "projecting all that is wrong and 'dirty' onto her own body, she 'cleanses' the play of that dirt" by committing suicide: "Lillian Hellman solves the problem of the play by eliminating the sexually deviant character, and again the queer is the perpetrator of the violence; this time, though, the site of the violation is her own body" (Thomas 6). Hellman never wanted to give Martha a happy ending because, as her confession reveals, she was 'at fault' all along. Hellman pronounces about her

intention in *Children's Hour*: "If the child's lie hadn't driven her to suicide, Martha would have ended up at fifty, with headaches, a lonely, irritable, neurotic spinster who had no idea of what brought her to where she was" (Tufts 72). According to Ph.D. Aaron C. Thomas, the general public sees homosexuality as a negative threat that must be done away with in western culture: "[Martha] diagnoses her own body as criminal, threatening, and potentially violent. [Her] queer body is something that must be removed for the good of society, and she redeems herself by selflessly perpetrating that removal" (Thomas 6). As such, Martha's suicide, as a result of her (supposed) lesbianism is both linked to heteronormativity and penalization, as "onstage, homosexuality is constructed as a threat to normative society, and this threat is embodied in the queer character who commits acts of violation," such as suicide (Thomas 7). The death of Martha and the reasons behind her action represent the lack of portrayal and acceptance of the queer in society. Because Hellman treats her characters from a heteronormative point of view, she "cannot allow herself to imagine a happy ending for Karen and Martha, a satisfying life that they might live together far from the condemnation" of society (Tufts 68). However, if Martha and Karen would have been accused of being murderers or thieves, "their crime would have been concretely verifiable and the uproar it caused would not have had the same edge to it, for these criminal acts would have had no seductive appeal for others, no potential to 'contaminate,' or tempt" (Tufts 69).

At the time, homosexuality was not only a taboo subject, but also a censored topic and so publishing houses had to alter the contents of (explicitly) homosexual works to avoid them from getting banned (Cuenca 123). Marijane Meaker, American novelist and short story writer, explains this in the introduction of the reprint of her lesbian pulp fiction novel *Spring Fire*, originally published under the pseudonym Vin Packer in 1952. She writes about the censorship her novel faced when her publisher 'demanded' that the novel could not have a happy ending: "You cannot make homosexuality attractive" (Packer ii). Even in the fifties, there were harsh restrictions placed on artists who wanted to broach homosexuality: "The works had to reproduce the homophobic discourses circulating on [homosexuals] at the time" (Cuenca 123). Thus, stories could not have a happy ending and so "homosexual women had to voice a rejection of their same-sex desire, on account of its 'perverted nature'" (Cuenca 123). In the case of Meaker, her editor told her that one character must acknowledge that she is not a lesbian: "She has to reject it knowing that it's wrong" (Packer ii). The other character she is involved with "is sick or crazy" (Packer ii). Hellman's play also meets these editorial requirements. There is no happy ending, as Martha shot herself after voicing her desire for Karen, a desire she rejects because it makes her feel dirty.

Shortly after Martha committed suicide, Mrs. Tilford has arrived to apologize and to beg for forgiveness: “I know it wasn’t true, Karen. (...) There will be a public apology and an explanation. The damage suit will be paid to you in full and – and any more that you will be kind enough to take from me” (Hellman 75). Karen believes that Mrs. Tilford is only doing this to clear her name, to relieve her conscience, for having “done a wrong” (Hellman 76). For Karen, it is too late: “That done and there’ll be peace for you. (...) But what of me? It’s a whole life for me. A whole God-damned life” (Hellman 76). Mrs. Tilford wants to restore Martha and Karen’s reputation, as well as her own conscience. This continues dramatizing homophobia, since Mrs. Tilford only seeks redemption because she now believes Martha and Karen are not lesbians. If Mary’s accusations had been based on facts, she presumably would not have done anything and would not have grieved as much over Martha’s suicide (Cuenca 124). Even though Hellman portrays Martha and Karen as innocent of the charge against them, yet she creates suspense and retains ambiguity around their sexual orientation (Spencer 46). Hellman castigates a society that condones and participates in the ruin of two innocent women’s lives and suggests that society should be condemned for its actions whether or not the accusation was true. In this, the public opinion is more powerful than the law, as legal vindication comes too late to save Martha and Karen from the severe consequences of the accusation itself (Spencer 46). A public apology and money paid will not bring Martha back and it will never derive any satisfaction from the vindication of Karen’s reputation (Corber 57). Mary’s lies have destroyed their innocent lives. In the last moment before the play’s ending, Karen asks Mrs. Tilford about the weather, opens the window and sits on the ledge, hinting at the return of hope, of normal life: “It is only after Martha is dead and Karen gives in, resuming her ‘correct’ position in society, that Hellman can allow her the possibility of living ‘happily ever after’” (Tufts 72).

Although there had been several plays that addressed homosexuality prior to Hellman’s play, *The Children’s Hour* challenged the moral values of contemporary American society. It suggested that intolerance, in this case of lesbianism, could lead to the destruction of one’s career and life. The word homosexuality or lesbianism itself is never spoken in *The Children’s Hour*. The mere hint of it was enough for the community to damn Martha and Karen. The play shows how an individual conflict can focus attention on its crucial social implications. On the one hand, the play deals with the injustice and mercilessness that is inflicted on the innocent Martha and Karen by the community, as the two women are presumably falsely accused of ‘unnatural’ sexual behavior, namely lesbianism, and because they lost the trial. On the other hand, the play’s ending captures society ‘rightly’ punishing

Martha for admitting her love for her female friend when the 'unconscious lesbian' kills herself.

Titus has examined Hellman's personal relationship to lesbianism and concludes that Hellman's relationship to the play is both complex and private (Titus 216). Hellman wrote a later, related short story called "Julia," a chapter in her second memoir *Pentimento*, published in 1973. The book is composed of stories focused on important people in her life. "Julia" portrays the story of her friendship with a pseudonymous childhood friend who awakened her erotic desire as an adolescent (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 89). It is interesting to note the similarities to *The Children's Hour*: "As in *The Children's Hour*, the exploration of desire is diffused throughout the text, and again, as in *The Children's Hour*, no clear resolution is reached" (Titus 226). Both works are inspired by a history: in the play, it is the Scottish lawsuit, and in "Julia," experiences from Muriel Gardiner (Titus 225). However, both works also deviate from the original material, as both texts end by violently disposing of the lesbian: Martha commits suicide by shooting herself and Julia is stabbed and disfigured (Titus 225). This is puzzling, because just like the schoolteachers in "The Great Drumsheagh Case" did Muriel Gardiner survive (Titus 226). In "Julia," Hellman wonders about her attachment to her friend, "having had over the years 'plenty of time to think about the love I had for her, too strong and too complicated to be defined as only the sexual yearnings of one girl for another. And yet certainly that was there'" (qtd. in Titus 225). Just as in *The Children's Hour*, in "Julia," there is also a confrontation. A friend's brother, Sammy, accuses Hellman and Julia of having a lesbian relationship (Titus 225). However, Hellman responds differently, as if she is insulted, and violently denies: "I leaned across the table, slapped Sammy in the face, got up, turned over the table, and went home" (qtd. in Titus 225). Titus wonders why Hellman decided to kill the lesbian character in her first play after having read "Julia," thus being aware of Hellman's acknowledged feelings for Muriel and her sympathy for sexual relations between women (Titus 226). According to Titus, "the violence against Martha Dobie and the diffusion of desire amongst all female characters" reflect Hellman's private struggle to understand her own personal desires (Titus 226). Several critics and biographers argue that Hellman's own acknowledged sexual attraction to women lies behind the character of Martha, such as Doris V. Falk, who speculates in the biography *Lillian Hellman* that "Hellman's complicated, half-understood feelings must have given her some insight into Martha Dobie" (qtd. in Titus 226). Professor Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio wrote that *The Children's Hour* as well as the Julia story are a "'lie with the ounce of truth' that reveal its author's bisexual fantasies" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 107). She further states: "Both stories can be productively

categorized as “coming out” fictions in which the female character who occupies a bisexual position represents Hellman. They are realistic inasmuch as they present the lesbian position as untenable in a regime of compulsory heterosexuality” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 107). Hellman made drastic alterations of supposed real life events, which leaves her open to accusations of homophobia directed towards others and herself. In “Julia,” Hellman makes Gardiner a lesbian character, thus writing homosexuality into her own biography, but erasing it by killing her off. This act is Hellman’s way of symbolically killing the homosexuality in herself: “[Thus,] by eliminating Martha Dobie [in *The Children’s Hour*], Hellman rather violently silenced any doubts about her own heterosexuality, doubts that could have been raised by her career choices and untraditional lifestyle, doubts that perhaps she, too, possessed” (Titus 217). The society within the play as much as outside made accusations of lesbianism that led to isolation and grief instead of a renewed social order. In the play, society brought on Martha’s suicide, and outside, as Titus puts it, “another society forced the playwright to murder the lesbian in her text, and perhaps in herself” (Titus 229).

### 2.3. Adaptations

*The Children’s Hour* was a very controversial play when it was originally performed because of its underlying subject matter of homosexuality, even though Hellman never intended for the play to focus on homosexuality. In 1936, the play was made into a film directed by William Wyler and produced by Samuel Goldwyn, the only producer interested in buying the rights, as everyone believed the play was solely about lesbianism (Berg 428). He wanted to turn the Broadway hit into a Hollywood success (Westbrook). However, Goldwyn had to agree to several restrictions set by the Hays Office, such as “to make no reference, directly or indirectly, (...) to the stage play” and “to remove from [the] finished production all possible suggestions of lesbianism and any other matter which is likely to prove objectionable” (Berg 429). At the time, the Hays Code would not permit any film that focused on or even hinted at homosexuality and so screenwriters had to abide by the Production Code (Dick 36). Because of that, Hellman had to adapt the play for the screen and the theme of homosexuality was completely left out. She turned the supposed lesbianism between Martha and Karen into a more conventional heterosexual love triangle and turned the lie into a rumor that Martha had slept with Karen’s fiancé. The name of the play was also changed, as the Production Code prevented even the use of or a reference to the play’s original title and so the movie was

eventually released as *These Three*. Again, the story of *The Children's Hour* faced harsh scrutiny, just like the censored text and the banning of the play. The queer had to be removed, which meant that the entire plot had to be reworked to accomplish this.

In the film, Karen and Joe fall in love, unaware that Martha secretly has feelings for him as well. Mrs. Mortar confronts her niece about her suspicions, but their conversation is overheard and turned into a rumor of Martha and Joe being engaged in an illicit sexual affair. Mrs. Tilford has all the parents withdraw their daughters from the school, thus ruining the careers of the two women. Martha and Karen sue her for libel, but lose the case. In addition, Joe is fired from the hospital because of the scandal. Karen breaks up with Joe because she believes the rumor, although Martha admitted to her that she never told Joe that she loves him. In the end, the truth comes out and Mrs. Tilford offers Martha compensation, but Martha only wants Karen and Joe to reunite and so the couple ends up happily together after all. Thus, *These Three* does not end as tragically as *The Children's Hour*, as Hellman modified the ending by omitting Martha's suicide. According to scholar Brett Elizabeth Westbrook, who researches Hellman's films, Martha's departure serves the same purpose as the suicide, as she is still removed from the story (Westbrook).

Although there is no reference to homosexuality in *These Three*, there are some instances that do try to suggest it, for example when Martha is crying over Karen's upcoming marriage, thus losing her friend. According to professor Bernard F. Dick, who studied the relation of the movie to the original, the music and camera shots play a part in these suggestions: "The music accompanying the pan shot seems to suggest that Martha is lonely because she is losing Karen to Joe, not because she is losing Joe to Karen" (Dick 39). The main difference between the original play and the film is the change of a trio to a couple in *These Three* as opposed to the atomization of a trio into a lonely person in *The Children's Hour* (Dick 42). For the couple in *These Three*, there is hope, which could be an underlying hint at heteronormativity, which is present in the original play. For the solitary person, there is only darkness (Dick 43).

It was not until 1961 that *The Children's Hour* received a more accurate adaptation, but before this new film adaptation occurred, there was another notable production of the play in the early 1950s. Ironically, because of the controversial theme of the play, it led to a revision and stage revival, opening in December 1952 (Spencer 45). Hellman chose to direct the production herself. The second version failed financially and ran for only 189 performances, although it was praised by most critics and reviewers. Although Hellman made less changes for the revival than she did for *These Three*, she worked more to avoid the use of



lesbianism as a metaphor for sickness or sin: “What emerges instead is the possibility that Karen, too, may have ‘unconscious’ sexual feelings for Martha that are cut short by Martha's suicide and never fully recognized” (Spencer 53). Even though the lesbian theme was less shocking in the 1950s, the revival was also surrounded with controversy, but it had more to do with its relevance to McCarthyism. The play was seen as an allegory in which lesbianism stood for communism: “Sexual dissent came to symbolize political dissent, which reflected (...) the hypocrisy of McCarthyism with respect to homosexuality” (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 189). Americans were persuaded into thinking that being gay was unpatriotic. By that time, Hellman was blacklisted by the American film industry after her appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). In May 1952, Hellman had to testify before HUAC, but she refused to name names (Griffin 11).

One of the most noteworthy differences and qualities of the revival is the appearance of Karen and Martha, which is picked up by critics. In the original play, both women appear particularly feminine and so they do not adhere to the heteronormative understanding of a couple as a pairing of a man and a woman. In the 1952 revision, as well as the 1961 film, Martha is no longer depicted similar to Karen in style and behavior, but instead appears more as a stereotypical lesbian. According to film critic Joan Mellen, Martha's ‘mannish’ manner can be read as evidence of the character's homosexuality, whereas Karen is clearly feminine, which in turn is seen as a marker for heterosexuality (Mellen 97). However, because Karen refused to set a date for her marriage, “preferring to remain with ‘Dobie’ on the grounds that she must wait until the school begins to prosper,” it suggests that she has also homosexual feelings (Mellen 97). As stated by Westbrook, women must be “prototypical lesbians when they do not conform to the social expectations of ‘feminine’ behavior (...) or full-blown lesbians” (Westbrook). Other critics have also worked the portrayal of Martha into a reading of a lesbian character, for example because of her ‘handsome’ appearance, ‘husky’ voice or ‘markedly mannish’ performance (Shedd 141). Hellman makes Martha's lesbianism obvious from the start to take away the power behind the taboo of homosexuality. She wanted Patricia Neal, the actress who played Martha, to convey Martha's lesbianism from the outset and so she “encouraged the actress to exaggerate her masculine gender presentation” (Corber 63). Neal's exaggerated masculinity and performance reinforced Karen's sexual ambiguity, who ended her relationship with Joe because she feels she can never convince him that she is not a lesbian: “Neal was a foot taller than Kim Hunter, the actress who played Karen, and their contrasting gender styles reinforced the lesbian connotations of Karen's and Martha's mode of intimacy” (Corber 63). However, critics objected to this reinterpretation of Martha's

character (Corber 63). Because Hellman relies on simplistic, degrading visuals of how a lesbian should appear instead of showing the queer in an innovative way, she inadvertently engaged in prejudice against the queer herself: “The queer is in a constant state of removal throughout the play’s text and productions,” even though Hellman may have never intended to put the queer in a position of elimination.

Years later, in 1961, when homosexuality was a more permissible topic, Wyler made another film of *The Children’s Hour*, as he was never completely satisfied with *These Three* because of the confessions he had to make. This time he adhered to the original play. For one, the film had the title from the original play. The first time around, Hellman had adapted her own play for the screen, but for the 1961 film, it was John Michael Hayes’ task to do so (Westbrook). Hellman gets screen credit for adapting his script, but she later claimed she had nothing to do with it, as “it was done by somebody else” (Hellman 170). Even in the sixties, the presence of homosexuality was still reason to prohibit a film to be released. Immediately after the play was produced, it was placed on the ban list for filmmakers because of its subject matter, which is why *These Three* differs so much from the original play (Sova 50). *The Children’s Hour* had more success against the censors and contributed to the revision of the Hays Code, although this was mostly the result of market pressures (Westbrook). Nevertheless, the Production Code Administration revised it so that “homosexuality and other sexual aberrations may now be treated with care, discretion, and restraint” (Corber 48). As Wyler dared to undermine the Hays Code, his film is often cited as one that “challenged and softened the Code’s prohibition on representing sexual aberrations” (Dhaenens 80).

Hayes followed the action of the drama more closely than Hellman did for *These Three* (Westbrook). In the remake, the lie is restored: Karen and Martha’s ‘sinful sexual knowledge’ of each other. However, there are also some significant changes. Wyler wanted to ‘update’ Hellman’s play, because he felt that the play’s treatment of lesbianism was dated. He wanted the film to appeal to contemporary audiences whose views had shifted considerably since the 1930s (Corber 49). Wyler especially altered the ending. This time, Martha does commit suicide instead of just exiting the narrative, but she hangs herself rather than using a gun. Hayes and Wyler have made the moment of discovery more cinematic and effective, as Karen breaks open the lock of Martha’s door and a noose and an overturned chair is seen. It is also remarkable that Martha committed suicide after hearing Mrs. Tilford’s confession. This could suggest that Martha could not bear the thought of living in a society where she is not fully accepted for being homosexual. After the funeral, Karen walks away alone with Joe watching her from a distance. Although both films have been directed by Wyler and contain

nearly identical parts, the effect is different, especially concerning the ending. *The Children's Hour* ends in utter tragedy, whereas the ending of *These Three* has a lighter mood and can be seen as a somewhat happy ending. Just like the original play, *The Children's Hour* ends with the death of an innocent woman, as the accusation has driven Martha to suicide. The final scene of the play takes place at the funeral, where Karen is left sobbing, making Martha's death utterly futile, as both women are unable to cope (Westbrook). It is this sense of grief that leaves a drastic and more profound impact on the viewer than the 1936 version. As such, the film illustrates the plight of homosexuals and the persecution they had to endure that is present in the original play.

The 1952 revival of the play was already related to McCarthyism, but the critics saw a relationship to the Cold War construction of the lesbian in the 1961 remake of the film. Although there are several instances that hint at Martha's desire for Karen, as mentioned in the discussion of the original play, Martha does not recognize her own lesbianism until Mary's accusation: "This belated recognition shifts attention away from the injustice of Karen's and Martha's persecution, focusing it instead on the social anxieties promoted by Cold War culture, anxieties that reflected the increasing dominance of a model of sexuality in which object choice, sexual practice, and gender identity did not line up neatly" (Corber 50). According to professor Robert J. Corber, the film ratifies the Cold War construction of the lesbian as a threat to the nation's security because of this shift of focus: "Martha's lack of knowledge about her own sexual desire confirmed the epistemological uncertainty that the Cold War discourse of female homosexuality attributed to lesbian identity" (Corber 50). It emphasizes that at the time it was difficult to see lesbianism as a form of identity (Corber 68). Furthermore, the film never clarifies Karen's love for Martha and thus "reiterates the unintelligibility of lesbianism" (Corber 71).

### 3. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

#### 3.1. The Playwright, the Plot, and the Reception

Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi on March 26, 1911, into a troubled and dysfunctional family. Many critics note that Williams used writing as a coping strategy and found inspiration in his own family situation. It was not until 1947 that he secured his reputation as one of America's greatest playwrights with his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams earned significant successes from the 1940s to the early 1960s. He won several awards and ten of his plays were performed on Broadway, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) (Prono 292). The play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1955 and includes references of Williams' personal life, such as homosexuality, mental instability, and alcoholism.

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opened on March 24, 1955 and was directed by Elia Kazan, who had asked Williams to revise the third act to improve its dramatic progression. The original Broadway production ran for nearly 700 performances (Billington). The play focuses on the relationships of a Southern family. The marriage between Brick and Margaret, usually called Maggie, is strained. They have not made love for a long time and Maggie finds herself unfulfilled in her marriage. Because she lives with Brick who does not love her, she has become a 'cat on a hot tin roof.' Tensions rise when they get together with the Pollitt family, i.e. Brick's family, to celebrate the birthday of Big Daddy. However, Brick's father is diagnosed with cancer and dying, but the family is keeping this from him and his wife Big Mama. In addition, Maggie and Brick are growing further apart, as Brick became mentally unstable and started to drink more when his best friend Skipper committed suicide. At the party, both Big Daddy and Maggie separately confront Brick about the true nature of his close friendship with Skipper. Maggie believes it had a romantic undercurrent. When she confronted Skipper on his desire, he took Maggie to bed to prove her wrong. However, Skipper failed, which made him question his sexuality and he became a lush. Brick also reveals that Skipper made a drunken confession about his feelings to Brick shortly before he committed suicide, but Brick rejected him. Brick is unable to confront his own and Skipper's latent homosexuality. With Big Daddy dying, Maggie is afraid that Brick's brother Gooper and his wife Mae end up with his estate, because of Brick's 'malaise.' To ensure Brick's inheritance, Maggie says she is pregnant. Big Daddy and Big Mama believe her. After the party, Maggie locks away the alcohol and the play ends with Maggie promising Brick to make the lie come true.

As mentioned earlier, there are two different last acts. Kazan wanted Maggie to be shown more sympathetically in the third act. He also asked for Big Daddy to reappear, because he was too vivid and important to just disappear, and lastly, for Brick to undergo some form of ‘moral awakening’ (Williams 92). In the last scene, Kazan also wanted to make it seem as if there is some real tenderness in the marriage of Brick and Maggie after all (Zinoman). Williams decided to publish the original and the Broadway version so that readers could make their own choice. The two versions are slightly different, as Williams’ original version is overall much leaner (Billington). Although the original script ends with a harsh exchange between Brick and Maggie, Kazan’s version shows Brick warming up to Maggie after she had asked him to sleep with her. Kazan believed that the play would be improved if Brick underwent a reformation (Zinoman). Williams was not very happy with having to make these alterations and explained his reservations in a note of explanation to the script. He did not want Big Daddy to appear, although he does not explain why not, and he felt that “the moral paralysis of Brick was a root thing in his tragedy, and to show a dramatic progression would obscure the meaning of that tragedy in him” (Williams 92).

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was a huge commercial success. Williams won his third New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play and his second Pulitzer Prize. In general, the play received praise for its interesting characters and controversial subject matter. Theatre critic Brooks Atkinson praises almost everything about the play in his review for *The New York Times*, calling it “a stunning drama,” superb for theatre, and “Williams’ finest drama” (Atkinson 18). Atkinson is especially positive about the play being “a delicately wrought exercise in human communication” and the acting that he calls magnificent (Atkinson 18). Pulitzer-winning critic Walter Kerr also wrote some positive remarks in his *New York Herald Tribune* review: “‘Cat on a Hot Tin Roof’ is a beautifully written, perfectly directed, stunningly acted play of evasion” (Paller 101). He is especially impressed with some of the scenes that were “of sudden and lashing dramatic power” (Paller 101). However, not all critics were impressed with Williams’ treatment of homosexuality, such as Eric Bentley. According to him, Williams had not approached the subject in a direct or satisfactory manner, but instead remained vague and equivocal, and so the story is incomplete. In his 1955 review in the *New Republic*, Bentley wrote: “*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was heralded by some as the play in which homosexuality was at last to be presented without evasion. But the miracle has still not happened” (Murphy 119). Even Kerr wondered about the relationship between Brick and Skipper. He felt that there was something missing and so accuses Williams of being “less than candid” about it: “We do learn, in a faint echo of ‘The Children’s Hour,’ that there has been

something to the accusation – at least on the part of Brick’s friend. We learn that Brick himself, in his horror at the discovery, has done the damage he blames on his wife. But we never quite penetrate Brick’s own façade, know or share his precise feelings” (Paller 102). Williams had picked up on the critics’ charges of Brick’s character not being clear-cut enough and responded to Kerr’s review with an article entitled “About Evasions” in which he denied that Brick was a homosexual: “Brick’s overt sexual adjustment was, and must always remain, a heterosexual one” (Paller 103). At the same time, Williams calls Brick’s sexual nature “not innately ‘normal’” at one point, and so his declaration about the presence of homosexuality in the play is still not straightforward (Paller 103).

### 3.2. Heteronormativity, Penalization, and Explicitness

Before the play unfolds, Williams already hinted at a possible presence of homosexuality. In his stage directions, he describes the setting of the place, the bedroom that once belonged to the lovers Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. The plantation that is now in the hands of Big Daddy was inherited from Straw and Ochello. Thus, both financially and sexually, the two lovers and their legacy lies at the heart of the play “and the love of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello stands as a counter to the compromised heterosexual relationship we see played out” (Clum 158). Williams calls their relationship one that “must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon” (Williams 1). It appears as if Williams is focusing on the friendship as opposed to the implied homosexuality. The fact that he called it ‘uncommon’ could suggest that Williams was aware of the societal disgust for homosexuality that was present at the time, as he does not explicitly state that Straw and Ochello were lovers. As opposed to Williams’s other homosexual characters, Straw and Orchello “do not carry the freight of negative stereotypes,” such as the self-hating Skipper, but in the play itself, there is no positive language for the two lovers, as they become in the action of the play the targets for Brick’s homophobic tirades (Clum 158). However, with Big Daddy’s inheritance, Williams also undermines conventional patriarchal control and heterosexuality. The homosexual couple Jack Straw and Peter Ochello owned the plantation before Big Daddy and dispelled the ‘plantation laws’ through their relationship to Big Daddy. Plantations were passed down from one generation to another, fathers to sons, the heirs of heterosexual unions (Kolin xix). Brick also destabilized the plantation mythos, because as the son, he risks losing his inheritance by refusing to have an heir with Maggie, but also because of his ambiguous friendship with Skipper (Kolin xix).

The first hint at homosexuality in the play can be found in the first act when Brick and Maggie are talking about their failing marriage. Maggie blames it on Brick for not loving her, for no longer making love to her. They made conditions on which Brick agreed to stay on living with her, but living with someone who does not love back makes Maggie feel even more lonely. It turns out that Brick only agreed to stay married to Maggie as long as they do not have sex, which frustrates Maggie. Not only because of her lust, but maybe even more so because they are childless. Even though Brick used to make love with Maggie, although in a disinterested manner, he is now showing no sexual interest at all. The fact that he was slow, indifferent, and passive in his sexual intercourse, according to Maggie, could be because of his homosexual yearning. With Brick's father dying of cancer, Brick's brother and sister-in-law, who have five children, are more likely to inherit Big Daddy's land and wealth. At this point, Maggie brings up the relationship between Brick and Skipper and Brick falls silent. Instead, he grabs for the bottle. The reader does not yet know who Skipper is or what he means to Brick, but one can already feel it is a sensitive topic.

But then Maggie says she made a mistake when she told Brick about what happened between her and Skipper, which enrages Brick: "You got to shut up about Skipper" (Williams 26). Still, Maggie spills the truth and confesses that she slept with Skipper: "Skipper and I made love, if love you could call it, because it made both of us feel a little bit closer to you" (Williams 26). Apparently, Skipper already confessed to Brick, but Maggie claims she told him first. She then describes the relationship between Brick and Skipper, without explicitly referring to the two, as a beautiful and pure love that "couldn't be anything else (...), that never could be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly" (Williams 27). This 'sexual implication' is further stressed when Maggie reminisces a double-date with Skipper and his then-girlfriend Gladys Fitzgerald that occurred years back: "It was more like a date between you and Skipper, Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along" (Williams 27). By then, Brick is furious and is about to hit Maggie with a crutch. He reacts to Maggie's accusation and equates homosexuality with dirtiness and disgust: "One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true!--I had friendship with Skipper.--You are naming it dirty! (...) Why would I marry you, Maggie, if I was-?" (Williams 27). This shows his homophobia, because he considers it dirty or perverse, and so he has to eliminate anything related to homosexuality in his relationship with Skipper. Instead, Brick idealizes it as something great.

Maggie continues to draw attention to the homosexual nature of their relationship: "I'm naming it so damn clean that it killed poor Skipper!--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..." (Williams 27). By speaking about the relationship, she is making it a reality. Because of its nature, it had to be kept secret from society, as it was something society would never condone, and death was the only way to make that happen. Maggie knows that society would view the close friendship between Brick and Skipper as something homosexual and thus unacceptable. Maggie tells she confronted Skipper about her thoughts on the relationship between Brick and Skipper. She told Skipper to either stop loving her husband or to admit his love for Brick to him, to which Skipper responded by slapping her in the face and storming off. That same night, Maggie went to his room where he "made that ineffectual little attempt to prove that what I had said wasn't true" (Williams 28). She wanted to see if her suspicion was right. However, the whole event had destroyed Skipper, who turned to liquor and drugs and eventually even committed suicide: "I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in had told him could not be told?" (Williams 28). Skipper had to repress his feelings for Brick, which eventually killed him.

In act two, Brick is having a conversation with his father, Big Daddy, who wants to know why Brick drinks so much. He believes Brick started drinking excessively because Skipper died, but there is something more to it: "Gooper an' Mae suggested that there was something not right exactly in your... (...) Not, well, exactly normal in your friendship with..." (Williams 60). Then, Williams interposes with a stage note, in which he suggests that "the 'mendacity' that Bricks drinks to kill his disgust with" has to do with his relationship with Skipper that "had to be disavowed to 'keep face' in the world they lived in" (Williams 60). The supposed homosexual relationship between Brick and Skipper had to be disavowed in order for them to seem 'proper' in the eyes of society. Brick was afraid of what people would think of his relationship with Skipper. Brick thinks that Big Daddy also believes that his son is a 'queer.' The words 'homosexual,' 'gay' or 'homosexuality' are never used in the play. Thus, the issue of homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned. The only term that is used to refer to this is 'queer:' "Oh, you think so, too, you call me your son and a queer" (Williams 61). It could be that Williams deliberately avoided using explicit terms such as 'homosexual' to emphasize how at the time, people avoided talking about difficult and sensitive issues, such as homosexuality. In the play, the subject of homosexuality is very much a taboo topic, so far that the characters have difficulty calling it by its name: "[Some characters are] guilty of a crime, a transgression so dreadful that neither [Brick] nor his family dare speak its name" (Griffin 112). Instead, Brick uses derogatory words, such as 'sissy' and 'queer.' This reflects Brick's view on homosexuals. He sees them as degenerates and as such can only refer to them



with insulting words. Even though Big Daddy appears tolerant concerning homosexuality, he does not talk directly about the subject, but makes implications, such as “not, well, exactly normal” (Williams 60). During the 1950s, when *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was written, homosexuality slightly started to become more common and liberal in society, partly as a result of the upcoming gay rights movement that caused more attention for the suppressed situation of homosexuals. However, because homosexuality was still not fully accepted in society, it could be that Williams did not state the word ‘homosexual’ in his play to try to introduce the sensitive subject indirectly. By doing so, he is making it more acceptable for its audience.

Brick is obsessed, terrified of being called ‘queer’ that he cannot listen to his father and throws an attack on Straw and Ochello: “Maybe that's why you put Maggie and me in this room that was Jack Straw's and Peter Ochello's, in which that pair of old sisters slept in a double bed where both of 'em died!” (Williams 61). Big Daddy is interrupted by the appearance of Reverend Tooker and it is this interruption that “allows Brick’s homophobic discourse to dominate the scene” (Clum 159). Once again, Big Daddy points out that he has started drinking since Skipper is dead, but Brick only wants to know if his father believes he and Skipper did ‘dirty things’ together: “You think so, too? You think me an' Skipper did, did, did!-- sodomy!--together? (...) You think we did dirty things between us, Skipper an'...” (Williams 62). It appears as if Brick is almost obsessed to find out who thinks that he is gay. He is outraged at Big Daddy’s insinuations, especially his accusation of sodomy. It is remarkable that Brick uses the word ‘sodomy,’ because sodomy, sex with a member of the same sex, was at the time considered a serious crime. The idea has been very well ingrained in Brick’s mind as repulsive. Brick is actually shocked by his father’s reaction, who, according to Brick, talks very ‘casual’ about such a ‘taboo’ topic, shocked because of public opinion: “Don't you know how people feel about things like that? How, how disgusted they are by things like that?” (Williams 63). Again, this passage makes clear how important it is for Brick to not violate any societal values or codes. He believes in certain ideals that society presented as being noble or good. When he recalls an event that occurred during college, Brick emphasizes the pressure of behaving according to one’s gender role, thus in a socially acceptable manner. Brick wanted to avoid being labeled as homosexual, because he experienced what kind of horrible things people do to homosexuals: “At Ole Miss when it was discovered a pledge to our fraternity, attempted to do a, unnatural thing with--We not only dropped him like a hot rock!--We told him to git off the campus, and he did, he got!” (Williams 63). Furthermore, because it is inevitably public, Brick is terrified of

homosexuality. According to John M. Clum, professor of Theater Studies, his homophobia is part of his sexual and emotional uneasiness: “He is painfully aware that his nonsexual, nominal marriage to Maggie is a far cry from the total relationship the bed signifies. (...) Yet he is horrified at the thought of a sexual dimension of his friendship with Skipper” (Clum 159, 160).

Brick continues to rant about his relationship with Skipper. He indicts society, as he does not understand why a relationship between two men cannot be “clean and decent” without being thought of as something queer (Williams 63). In the 1950s, a close friendship between two men was generally not respected by society and was looked upon with suspicion. People often implied that the two men must be gay. Literary critic Mark Royden Winchell analyzed Williams’ play and discussed Williams’ exploration of homosexuality in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in his essay entitled “Come Back to the Locker Room Ag’in, Brick Honey.” He begins the article by stating that “the ideal of male companionship is one of the most enduring myths in American literature” (Winchell 83). Williams used this ‘theme’ for his portrayal of the relationship between Brick and Skipper. However, according to Winchell, Williams twisted the myth and subverted it when he hints that the two male characters might have more than an innocent relationship (Winchell 83). Brick blames Maggie for insinuating the idea that everyone is now talking about. The only physical moments Brick and Skipper had were putting a hand on the other’s shoulder or shaking hands to say goodnight. Brick describes how pure and rare their friendship was: “No!--It was too rare to be normal, any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal” (Williams 64). He calls it pure because it did not conform to ‘appropriate’ or ‘normal’ behavior that society would accept. As such, Brick is for the first time distancing himself from the norms of society. In a way, Brick is also deceiving himself by describing his friendship with Skipper as ‘clean’, because it prevents him from accepting his own true feelings for Skipper. By idealizing it, he refuses to look honestly at the true nature of their friendship. Brick wants to let the conversation about Skipper go, but Big Daddy is interested in Skipper’s motive behind his suicide.

According to Brick, Maggie put this ‘dirty,’ false idea in Skipper’s head that he and Brick were homosexual lovers. To prove his sexuality, Skipper went to bed with Maggie, but it did not work out. Because Skipper believed it must be true then, he committed suicide. Just the thought that their friendship might be anything more than that was enough for Skipper to kill himself. Just before he died, Skipper called Brick to make a drunken confession during which he admitted his homosexual feelings for his friend, but Brick hung up on him, just like he cut off his own feelings with alcohol. The characters in the play had to act in accordance

with the sexual identity that is assigned to their gender role, but Brick feared that his friendship with Skipper meant compromising his masculinity. As such, he does not want to acknowledge or admit his love for him, because it means giving up a part of his identity and personality, which he so eagerly holds onto. Brick feels ashamed to be even associated with homosexuality. Big Daddy even accuses him of not facing the truth with Skipper, but Brick replied with: “His truth, not mine!” (Williams 67). He still denies any possibility of having homosexual feelings for Skipper. Brick could have said no to Skipper on the phone, if he really loved his wife, but he could also have said yes, if he had the courage to face society. However, Brick could not say either, which could mean that he is a homosexual, but wanted to be a heterosexual because he could not compromise his identity with the social image.

Alcoholism is another important theme in the play and is in a way closely linked to the issue of homosexuality. The gay or quasi-gay male characters use alcohol as the means to run from their inner selves (Shackelford 105). When Big Daddy asks Brick why he drinks, he says it is because of disgust. He is disgusted with untruthfulness or lying, but in fact, Brick uses alcohol to escape from his thoughts and feelings about his relationship with Skipper. He does not want to be vulnerable or feel pain and so he drinks heavily to block this. In addition, Brick is also avoiding having to deal with the consequences of possibly being gay and the pain of his role in causing Skipper’s suicide. Brick’s rejection plays a large role in Skipper’s death. It was no surprise that Skipper committed suicide: “Gay subjects in American drama often commit suicide because of conventions about punishing the nonconformist in American culture and the playwright’s fear of repercussions from a rejecting public” (Shackelford 105). However, according to some critics, the play suggests that not Skipper’s homosexuality, but the social rejection is what caused his downfall (Shackelford 106). If Brick had not hung up on Skipper and thus rejected him, Skipper might not have drunk himself to death. Furthermore, Brick drinks to achieve a certain state of mind, which he needs to cope with life: “This click that I get in my head that makes me peaceful. I got to drink till I get it” (Williams 51). For Brick, alcohol is a substitute for suicide. He continuously tries to avoid talking about his relationship with Skipper and drinks heavily to escape from his thoughts and feelings. This suggests that his perception of homophobia is so strong that he does not even want to explore the possibility of being homosexual. Even after Skipper’s death, Brick is more focused on defending himself from the accusation or insinuation that he is homosexual instead of admitting his responsibility in Skipper’s suicide. Many critics argue that the ‘click’ Brick experiences from drinking alcohol excessively in fact marks the return of the repressed

in which alcoholism gives the effect of homosexual closeting (Hardie 166). Thus, Brick's alcoholism is linked to his repressed homosexual feelings for Skipper.

Skipper also used alcohol as a means to escape. When Maggie confronted him about his love for Brick, he gradually drank himself to death after his failure to prove otherwise and his confession, as he could not handle the truth. In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a close link between drinking and homosexual activity: "Both psychiatric literature and popular fiction of the period portrayed the alcoholic, as a repressed homosexual who acted on his same-sex desires only while intoxicated" (Johnson 9). In the play, Williams associates alcoholism with homosexuality, as he intersects disability, queerness, and alcoholism with Brick and Skipper in his play (Pope 19). By doing so, he responds to society's current view of that time, which meant considering the alcoholic and the homosexual as security risks: "In 1950s public discourse, both alcoholism and loquaciousness were traits closely associated with same-sex desire" (Johnson 8). Thus, the homosexual became associated with the alcoholic.

Both Brick and Skipper struggled with their sexual identity in a time when American society did not tolerate anything that deviated from a heterosexual relationship. As a result, they denied their sexuality or kept it in the closet. A physical relationship between the two men would be considered as "not in the service of life" by society, simply because they cannot generate new life: "On that basis alone, society would place a higher value on the marriage between Brick and Maggie" (Adler 37). This is partly why so much pressure is put on Brick, and Maggie as well, by Brick's brother and his wife, Big Daddy, Big Mama, and Maggie herself. For one, Brick and Maggie have no children yet and do not conform to the norm of heteronormativity. There is also no sense of love between them on the part of Brick and it is suggested that Brick is secretly having homosexual feelings that he is not acknowledging. For Maggie, her childlessness calls her status as a 'normal' wife and woman into question: "Something's not right! You're childless and my son drinks," Big Mama yells at Maggie (Williams 21). Maggie is concerned she does not conform to society's norm of having a husband and two children. What mattered in 1955 was adhering to the social contract. In failing to show love and have children, Brick and Maggie "have violated the heteronormative, gender-binariated nuclear model that served as contract and life map for American families—fictional and real—in 1955" (Brooks 21).

In the play, the conventions of marriage are tested, as Brick and Maggie struggle to maintain the appearance of a patriarchal marriage of the 1950s (Lapchak 26). Throughout the play, Maggie puts on a front for the family, trying to uphold the 1950s' appearance of a

'normal' marriage, because she wants to prove that she and Brick are happily married (Lapchak 28). When she is no longer wanted sexually, Maggie loses her identity as a wife and uses pregnancy to take control of her failing marriage. She hopes that a baby will reunite them and will restore love and sexuality in their marriage. However, Brick is unhappy in his marriage and only stays with Maggie because he feels obligated to uphold appearances in order to fit into society (Lapchak 27). This is partly why Brick turns to alcohol. He tries to escape his natural feelings and act in order with societal orders, so Brick also uses alcohol to handle staying with Maggie: "The patriarchal system (...) has seduced [Brick] into believing [he is the heir (of Big Daddy's plantation)], but because [his] sexual attraction to other men prevents [his] from living up to the heterosexual definition of masculinity, [he is] profoundly confused, tormented, and unhappy" (Powers 125). In the 1950s, pressure was high to stay in a marriage "because there were [less] leniencies in gender roles within the household and the stigma of divorce was [larger]" than in the 1980s, for example (Lapchak 27). Due to this pressure, Brick wants to prove his manhood and puts all his time and energy into his sport. During the 1950s, "the American male was effectively on trial to prove that he had the muster to earn the respect of a nation built on the myth of the cowboy warrior. At a time when identity was essentially what others considered it to be, regardless of the truth about where one's political or sexual sympathies lay, American men had to perform their masculinity" (Bak 232, 233). This 'cowboy warrior' mentality of the 1950s meant that a successful man had to appear a certain way in society and being homosexual was surely not acceptable (Lapchak 30). Brick only knows what society tells him to be homosexual and so he views homosexuality as a physical sexual act between people of the same sex. Because he and Skipper only ever held hands, their relationship was platonic (Lapchak 27). When the play came out, during the Cold War, many people were too afraid to act against the grain of society and so Brick could never admit or realize that his friendship with Skipper might have had deeper feelings (Lapchak 27). Thus, the play shows the sociopolitical pressure of heteronormativity, to be 'normal.' When the characters cannot fit the all-American mold, they retreat into a dysfunctional relationship: "American society was not accepting of unconventional sexualities, and this societal pressure created a conflict of identity within the characters who were afraid to act on their sexual desires that did not fit the norms of their respective time periods" (Lapchak 26).

Big Mama asks Maggie whether she makes Brick happy in bed, because that is the place where all marriage problems begin, according to her. During an earlier conversation, when Maggie changed her dress because of the children using it as a napkin, Big Mama tells

Maggie she must not like children. Although Maggie refutes, Big Mama is not convinced: “Well, why don't you have some and bring them up well, then, instead of all the time pickin' on Gooper's an' Mae's?” (Williams 18). Having a child with Brick also ensures their place in Big Daddy’s heritage, now that he is dying of cancer. As a result, Maggie is putting pressure on Brick by continuously bringing up their sex life. Big Daddy, Gooper and Mae are also putting pressure on Brick and Maggie to get children. Brick’s brother has five children with his wife, which indirectly pressures Brick to follow his brother’s example. Mae is described as “a good breeder” by Big Daddy, having brought five children into the world and another one on the way (Williams 40). She makes comments that highlight the childlessness of Brick and Maggie, for example when a trophy lies around in the house: “It's a mighty dangerous thing to leave exposed round a house full of nawmal rid- blooded children attracted t'weapons. (...) Maggie, honey, if you had children of your own you'd know how funny that is” (Williams 14). Eventually, at the end of the play, Maggie informs the family that she is pregnant which is a lie, but she is determined to make it come true, she tells Brick. Thus, even Maggie is putting pressure on Brick.

In Williams’ plays, the male characters often suffered the consequences of their sexual attractions to other men: “Constraints on depictions of sexuality in Williams’ time meant that his sexually confused characters – gay, straight, or something in between – are inherently fugitives from mainstream society. They can only be fulfilled through transgression against its rigid strictures and these transgressions come, in the final analysis, at great, often tragic, personal cost” (Fisher 10). In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, homosexuality is depicted as destructive and cancerous. Skipper, Big Daddy, and Brick all receive some sort of penalization for having homosexual feelings. There is one moment in the play where Big Daddy briefly and ambiguously hints that he has had a sexual experimentation with men in the past when his son is afraid of being considered a ‘queer’: “Now, hold on, hold on a minute, son.--I knocked around in my time (...) before I--” (Williams 61). Big Daddy does not finish his sentence, but associate professor of theatre W. Douglas Powers assumes he would have said something like “‘before I settled down, before I got married,’ meaning that his possible homoerotic encounters occurred before he grew up and started playing the acceptable male gender role” (Powers 131). In this moment, Big Daddy reveals his own sexual identity as a bisexual, because he still desires women, too (Williams 48). He also admitted that sex with his wife has been joyless for him. However, Big Daddy is paying a big price for his youthful ‘prodigality’ (Savran 53). The fact that Big Daddy is diagnosed with bowel cancer, is dying, and is only sixty-five years old could indicate that Williams wanted to punish him for his sexual identity:

“For Big Daddy, bowel cancer seems to be the wages of sodomy” (Savran 53). However, although Big Daddy has had sexual encounters with men in the past, in his talk with Brick, he still him Brick to keep up appearances (Lapchak 29). Big Daddy is living a successful life, but he knows he could never be free and open with his unconventional sexuality. He believes that in order to be successful, one must conform to society, which is why he tries to save Brick from going down ‘the wrong path’ (Lapchak 29).

Then, although Skipper is not a ‘living’ character on stage, his storyline is nevertheless important. He committed suicide, partly because of Brick’s opposition against homosexuality, but also because he could not deal with his homosexuality in a heterosexist environment (Guilbert 90). In the twentieth century, American society had very strict prejudices regarding homosexuality. Homosexuals were forced to hide or repress their sexual identity. In the play, Brick is hiding his feelings, whereas Skipper is repressing them by committing suicide. In his article, academic Dean Shackelford explains the social context of the 1950s when the play was written. During this era of Senator McCarthy, gays and lesbians faced heavy repression (Shackelford 103). They were considered ‘traitors,’ ‘maladjusted’ or ‘mentally ill’ and were associated with scandals and behavior that was called ‘un-American’ (Shackelford 104). Therefore, no American artist was free to declare his or her opinion about homosexuality in their work. This is why writers often ‘killed off’ a character “whose actions or presence contradict or threaten society’s most cherished mores,” such as Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, “thus raising a question without openly challenging the society with an explicitly stated answer” (“A Study Guide for Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"” 29). Lastly, Brick punishes himself by drinking excessively until he feels this ‘click,’ which brings him into a state of oblivion, because he struggles to come to terms with his own sexual confusion: “Very much in line with the image of the homosexual in cinema an drama of much of the twentieth century, the homosexual character is a doomed character, as society does not condone his existence and Williams suggests that liquor will ultimately destroy him, just as it destroyed Skipper” (Powers 124). Brick is also suffering from self-hatred. He cannot deal with societal expectations. He also imposes the punishment of sexual abstinence, not only on himself, but also on his wife Maggie by not making love to her and withholding her from having children. Thus, Brick uses abstinence, silence, and alcohol as means to fight the attempts of his wife, father, and brother “to package him materially as the wayward stud, the prodigal son, or the effete drunkard – all indirect epithets of his homosexuality” (Bak 229). The possibility of having homosexual feelings not only drives Brick to drink, it also threatens to destroy his marriage with Maggie and it endangers his inheritance of Big Daddy’s

plantation (Winchell 84). In his play, Williams shows the destruction and penalization, largely caused by American society, as a result of heterosexuality and heteronormativity being viewed as the norm (Cook 80).

Williams scholar John S. Bak analyzed character Brick in light of what he calls 'Cold War masculinity,' the resultant hypermasculinity that infused Cold War discourse: "Men consciously resorted to poignant heterosexist language or affected masculine sensibilities, both of which helped to project a strong national image abroad as much as it did stave off sexual suspicion at home. (...) At a time when identity was essentially what others considered it to be, regardless of the truth about where one's political or sexual sympathies lay, American men had to perform their masculinity or effectuate it by ridiculing the effeminacy in others" (Bak 232, 233). It could be, so he states, that Brick "questions his own sexual identity based on what others have told him homosexuality means" (Bak 227). In the play, he is a psychological alcoholic who may drink to hide these facts from everyone or to avoid contemplating them himself, "either out of disgust for the world that has underwritten them, guilt in his role in choosing to sustain them with regards to Skipper, or fear that what his society and his family are intimating may in fact be true" (Bak 227). Bak argues that Williams holds his Cold War society responsible for Brick's inability to understand what homosexuality is or how it is precisely defined (Bak 227).

At the time, many American men, such as character Brick, struggled with what to identify and as such often found themselves trapped in "that shadowy no-man's land between hetero- and homosexuality" (qtd. in Bak 233). Publicly, Brick is representative of the heteromale American: he is good looking and athletic and has a fawning, supporting wife. Privately, he is its anathema: he has a suspicious relationship with his best friend, he refuses to sleep with his wife, and he drinks excessively (Bak 233). However, Williams calls into question American views of masculinity and homosexuality, by hinting that Brick, who represents the male ideal in American culture, may be attractive to gay men (Shackelford 109). According to Shackelford, Brick portrays all the traits normally associated with latent homosexuality: "indifference to women, excessive attention to masculinity, and internalized homophobia. All signs indicate Brick's dispassionate and repressed nature" (Shackelford 111). Furthermore, Bak argues that Brick is "of an age of social definition based on sexual conditioning," as he is sensitive to the social implications of his relationship with Skipper because at first, he was not aware of them. When Skipper was still alive, Brick saw their friendship the same as when they were younger, "which significantly removes from it any stigma of harbored or conscious desire, regardless of how it was externally perceived at the



time” (Bak 240). Brick and Skipper went to college together, belonged to a fraternity, and played football together: just two boys having a camaraderie, one would say. No one suspected that there was something ‘other’ to their male-bonding than just that, a friendship: “Life was presumably simpler then for Brick because he understood homosexuality solely as having engaged in gay sex,” which can be found in his story about the suspected homosexuality of a fraternity brother (Bak 240). Because of their youth and participation in a socially-sanctioned milieu, society did not challenge them (Bak 240).

However, as Brick and Skipper grew older and refused to be apart – they shared hotel rooms during away games, for example – society began having its doubts, as Maggie points out when she recalls a double-date they had: “Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along (...) to make a good public impression” (Williams 27). Brick defined homosexuality simply by what one did, not by who one was, and “with that act threatening the benchmark of homosocial American society” (Bak 241). He failed or refused to see how a male bond could be perceived as queer: “In not acknowledging/recognizing how society's rules of normalized sociosexual behavior had changed for him or, more importantly, why, Brick is perhaps only guilty here of failing to discern that modern social mores of intimate male companionship come with an expiration date” (Bak 241). He is an icon of Cold War heteromascularity and is free from the stigma of having actually committed a homosexual act: “He and Skipper had never slept together, with Brick still insisting on the primacy of the homosexual act over the identity because it is tangentially more viable as proof and also consistent with his existential nature” (Bak 241, 243). To protect his sexual identity, Brick relies on homophobia by systematically defaming the gay men in the play, for example when he denigrates Straw and Ochello by labeling them “fucking sissies” (Bak 243, Williams 63). By doing so, Brick enacts homophobia as proof of his heterosexuality.

Mae and Gooper also play in a role in representing the Cold War policy with their eaves-dropping behavior and supposition. They equate Brick’s refusal to sleep with Maggie with his incapacity for heterosexual performance: “Given HUAC's ‘guilt by association’ politics toward American artists, who were communists simply because they were not publicly flag-waving patriots, Williams appears to be precisely critiquing Cold War society's role in determining someone's private identity, be it political or sexual, based solely on the absence of some positivist performative act” (Bak 246). Associate professor J. Corber also located Williams’ work in its Cold War context and states that Gooper and Mae’s attempts to expose Brick as a homosexual are “reminiscent of the surveillance practices of the national security apparatus” (Corber 132, 133). For example, Gooper and Mae tried to overhear what

Big Daddy and Brick were talking about. Thus, not only Brick's exclusively homosocial preference for Skipper, but also his psychological impotence with regards to Maggie, leads to Mae and Gooper pointing out to Big Daddy that they deserve the plantation.

The Cold War was a state of tension after World War II between the two former wartime allies and new superpowers the Soviet Union and the United States and its allies. They had severe economic, political, and ideological differences, such as the United States being a democracy and the Soviet Union a communist government, for example. Despite the tension created by the Cold War, there was also a period of prosperity in the United States, as businesses flourished and families started to grow. During that time, the cultural ideal became centered on the heterosexual, married couple with children. However, the Cold War also brought a dark side to American culture, as some politicians feared that communists were infiltrating the United States. Some of them believed that these secret communists were homosexuals trying to spread homosexuality throughout the United States, thereby weakening the American moral fiber. Homophobia is the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being homosexual. Homosexuality and communism was associated as threats to the American way of life. As such, in the 1950s, the United States government began 'witch-hunting' and removing homosexual people from state employment (Shackelford 103). Any men who did not pursue the ideal of getting married to a woman and having children was suspected of being homosexual. A young, single man with other male friends was often looked on with suspicion. In the play, Williams speaks directly to this homophobia. Brick is frustrated about how his close friendship with Skipper was looked on with suspicion. Big Daddy also feels the pressure to what American society considered as normal and because of this, he married Big Mama and stays married to her, even though he hates her. Williams describes how homophobia during the Cold War in the 1950s had a devastating effect on people.

### 3.3. Adaptations

On 11 December 1956, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) announced that the Hays Code, or Production Code – the moral guidelines applied in film industry – would be revised. Controversial matters, such as abortion and drug addiction, were now allowed to be presented in Hollywood movies, although with important restrictions (Lev 93). However, the prohibition of "sex perversion," i.e. homosexuality, did not change (Lev 94). As such, when

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was adapted as a motion picture in 1958, made by Metro-Goldwyn Mayer Studios Inc. (MGM) and directed by Richard Brooks, Williams had to remove and revise his original play to minimize the suggestion of homosexuality (Benshoff 92). Thus, in the film version, Brick resents his wife Maggie, because he believes that she had cheated on him with his best friend Skipper. However, Maggie wanted to ruin the relationship between Brick and Skipper, which she believed was too close, by intending to seduce Skipper and then turn it around so that Skipper seems a disloyal friend. She did not complete her plan as she was afraid that Brick would end up blaming her instead. In the play, Maggie admitted to sleeping with Skipper because they both wanted to be closer to Brick. In the film, Maggie denies this and it appears as if she never had any relations with Skipper. Brick still blames Maggie for the death of Skipper, but also feels guilty for not helping him. To distract himself from his friend's death and his wife's infidelity, Brick starts to drink. In the end, Brick and Maggie reconcile with the implication that they will make love and so make Maggie's lie that she is pregnant become truth. Williams also had to revise the third act to include a reconciliation between Brick and Big Daddy. Williams was not happy with the screenplay, because of the removal of the themes of homophobia and sexism, and even star Paul Newman, who played Brick, expressed dissatisfaction (Billington). Nevertheless, the film was highly praised by critics and nominated for several Academy Awards and was one of the top-ten box office hits of 1958 (Daniel 130).

Since the homosexual elements have been eliminated, the film portrays Brick's sexual withdrawal as the aftermath of a past incident between Maggie and Skipper. Brick's sexual identity never comes up. Just as in the play, Brick is filled with guilt and self-hatred for letting his friend down, for having hung up on Skipper right before he committed suicide. However, in the film, Skipper phoned Brick to confess something else. He was scared to lose Brick's faith in him as a football player, because he had played poorly that day. In the play, Skipper phoned Brick to tell him that he is in love with him. Because it was at the time forbidden to allude to the fact that there was a possibility that Brick might have had homosexual or romantic feelings towards Skipper, his internal struggle about his sexuality and dissension with the mingling of homosexuality and purity are missing in the film. Furthermore, the film suggests that Brick's alcoholism and withdrawal have to do with a feeling of responsibility for his friend's death, but also his 'childhood trauma,' which comes to the forefront only towards the end of the film. One of the major differences was the added scene in the third act of the film which stresses Big Daddy and his failed fathering and Brick and his misplaced priorities and functions as an explanation for the nature of Brick's and Skipper's friendship. Without

the theme of homosexuality, the film puts emphasis on a dysfunctional family and so the final scene is changed to focus more on the 'renewed' goal of the work. Big Daddy asks his son why he never came to him, why he leaned so much on Skipper and not on him: "I'm your father. (...) What was there that you wanted that I didn't buy for you?" to which Brick angrily responds: "You can't buy love. (...) I don't want things" (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Brick blames him for not having been a father: "Can't you understand? I never wanted your place or your money. I don't wanna own anything. All I wanted was a father, not a boss. I wanted you to love me" (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Again, any hint of homosexuality is removed from the film, as Brick sees Skipper as a father figure. Brick's affection for Skipper is simply that of an unloved child that seeks love from a father figure. The film suggests that Big Daddy's inability offer affection – instead, he only offers material things – turned Brick into this 'grown-up kid' who has difficulty with life. However, this scene, that was entirely absent in the original play, does not seem to fit into Williams' intended message about homophobia.

After that conversation, Brick's character undergoes a transformation. Brick plays along with Maggie and her lie about her pregnancy and then lures her into bed, after ignoring her lust throughout the film. This drastic change in Brick's character appears odd and out of place. The ending is a typical Hollywood 'happy ending,' although unbelievable. Added to that, the fact that homosexuality is left out in Brick's conversations and a change in Maggie's interaction with Skipper remove any doubt that Brick might be homosexual, "which makes many of Brick's ravings and ragings largely inexplicable," according to Williams himself (Williams 59). Williams' displeasure over the film adaptation primarily focused on the elimination of any and all hints of Brick being homosexual. He believed that Brick's repressed sexuality was a crucial element in the drama and felt that this omission robbed its play of its underlying plot. Because the play's core principle remains unspoken, the film does not have the same effect. The message had to be watered down for public consumption (Billington). Hollywood has also always been more strict concerning 'controversial' works and writers than Broadway has, which is exactly the case with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The film version does not 'cover up' Brick's character as heterosexual, because in the original, his sexuality and his feelings for Skipper also remain ambiguous. However, the possibility of homosexuality is omitted, which leads to a loss of depth and nuance in Brick's character. Brick's relationship with Skipper, and especially its nature, is a major theme in the play, which the film whitewashes. Brick believes that their close relationship was 'abnormal' because it was pure and true. He does not see it as 'dirty,' meaning homosexual or romantic,

because of his internalized homophobia. In Brick's mind, homosexuality and purity do not go hand in hand.

It was not until the 1960s that the Production Code Administration decided to rethink its strategy after more Hollywood films began mentioning 'the unmentionable' (Benshoff 93). By this time, the movie industry also had to compete with television and the growing access to foreign films, which openly confronted prejudices against homosexuality, but they were not bound by the Code. In 1961, the Code was amended to allow a 'sensitive' representation of homosexuality "if treated with care, discretion, and restraint" (Benshoff 93). This simply meant treating homosexuality "like a dirty secret" (Benshoff 93). In the first half of the twentieth century, Hollywood representations of queers were depicted in stereotypes: "Homosexuality was silly and comedic, villainous and scary, or shameful and tragic" (Benshoff 94). Often, male characters were identified as effeminate, female characters as overtly mannish, and in general, gay characters were depicted as humorous and flamboyant (Benshoff 15). Furthermore, gay men and women were depicted as sadists, psychopaths, and villains, as this fitted in with the general American view on homosexuality. The depiction of "sexual perversion" was only allowed if it was depicted in a negative manner: "Homosexuals, when not being written out of the culture entirely, were scripted in narrow, stereotyped roles – as comic devices, as sissies and tomboys, as suicidal and self-hating, as targets of violence, or as violent predators. When they were not being treated as laughable, that is, gay people were either killing themselves or killing others" (Gamson 340). With the 1961 revision, the only difference was that the queer issue could now be named directly instead of only hinting at it (Benshoff 94). Nevertheless, films in which homosexual characters had small roles and were presented as queers in a negative light were more likely to get the Code's seal of approval than films that tried to explore queer issues in sympathetic or complex terms (Benshoff 94).

Although the Code started to become more liberalized in the 1950s and 1960s, it was not until the 1970s that mainstream American cinema began to market films for a LGBT audience. In 1974, there was a revival, first by the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut, and later the production transferred to the ANTA Theatre in New York. Before its transfer, the performance enjoyed a successful run of 160 performances and was nominated for several awards (Brooks 47). Williams made substantial excisions and alterations to this production, such as a revision of the third act. He restored much of the text which he had removed from the original play at the request of director Elia Kazan. Williams restored his preferred ambiguous conclusion (Robertson). In this version, Big Daddy returns to the stage in the end to tell a mildly pornographic elephant joke (Brooks 45). Also, the

couple does not end up in bed and a few ambiguous lines from the original version have been added (Crandell 119). If the original play was meant to startle its audience, despite Kazan's influence to mute the subject of homosexuality, this time it was not shocking: "The critical response in 1974 reflected changing attitudes toward homosexuality, such that some critics considered Williams's treatment of the topic in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* somewhat dated" (Crandell xxxiii). Greta Heintzelman and performance historian Alycia Smith-Howard also noted that even "though the 1955 premiere had shocked audiences, by 1974, audiences were no longer struck by the controversial themes" (Heintzelman 62). The original play and the revival are separated by nearly two decades and there have indeed been revolutionary movements towards visibility and acceptance for homosexuals in America (Brooks 40). For example, Dr. Alfred Kinsey's published his controversial human sexuality tests, which showed that 37 percent of adult males had at least one homosexual experience and 50 percent conceded to have occasional sexual attraction to other males (Tripp 14). In 1974, homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (Tropiano 2). Actor Jeb Brown recalls 1974 as an optimistic time for gay culture: "If the aspect of the play that dealt with the taboo of homosexuality in 1950s Mississippi blew unnoticed past me, the reality of a more modern attitude was all around us in the theater world of 1974. (...) The examples of openly gay friends and colleagues were myriad" (Brown).

For the 1974 text, Williams dispensed notes, alternate scene versions, and some dialogue and invited the actors to improvise, rewrite, and explore new readings of his lines (Brooks 45). This time around, he had director Kahn's approval. The most important restoration is at the end of the play when Brick has to choose whether he gives in to Maggie, emotionally and sexually, or if he remains aloof. In the 1974 version, ambiguity holds sway as Brick says, "I don't say anything, I guess there's nothing to say" after Maggie proposes to "make the lie true" and then to get drunk together. She says he needs someone to take hold of him and she tells Brick that she loves him to which he responds: "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?" In the 1955 version, Brick very clearly surrenders: "I admire you, Maggie" and the play ends with the implication that they will make love. Another difference is that Williams added the swearing. He put in what he meant to say all along. The new script now included expletives as substitutes for euphemisms and so the version more clearly expressed Williams' intention (Robertson). The language of the original version had to be revised as strong language was not as allowed in the 1950s, which is why the original play contains hokey words such as 'rutting' and 'ducking' (Robertson). In 1990, there was another Broadway

revival, which ran for nearly 150 performances and was nominated for several awards. Director Howard Davies used Williams' less sentimental ending (Hischak 80).

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has also been adapted for television. In 1976, a television version of *Cat* was produced by Laurence Olivier that mirrored the 1974 version of the play (Crandell 120). It appeared on NBC TV on 6 December. Olivier tried to restore Williams' original script, but he had to limit it to six short scenes to accommodate commercials. By doing so, the emotional effect of the play was lessened. Olivier's production was different from the censor-driven 1958 Hollywood version: it was "more sexually explicit, (...) but [it] wasn't quite as strong dramatically" (Kolin lxii). Critics felt that the cast was miscast. Especially Big Daddy was very different from Burl Ives' interpretation of the 1958 film. Olivier also made changes to the setting (Kolin lxiii). In 1984, the play was made into a second made-for-television drama film, produced by American Playhouse and directed by Jack Hofsiss. This adaptation revived the sexual insinuations that had been muffled in the 1958 film. It originally appeared on Showtime and was later reshowed on PBS television in 1985 as part of the American Playhouse series (Kolin lxiii). Critics generally agreed that the television production did not improve upon previous productions. Both televised versions could not measure up to Williams' original script (Kolin lxiv).

#### 4. *The Boys in the Band*

##### 4.1. The Playwright, the Plot, and the Reception

Mart Crowley was born on August 21, 1935, in Vicksburg, Mississippi as the son of an alcoholic father and a hypochondriac mother who was addicted to both drugs and alcohol (Schiavi 93). Thus, he had a turbulent family life. During his childhood, Crowley frequently visited the local movie theater to take a break from the unhappy situation at home (Rapp 80). By 1967, Crowley drafted *The Boys in the Band* (Schiavi 94). *The Boys in the Band* is given a unique place in gay history, as it was performed as a play in 1968 and then released as a film two years later, thus its two versions appear on either side of the 1969 Stonewall rebellion. On April 14, 1968, *The Boys in the Band* opened at Theater Four, after the producers decided not to move the play to Broadway. Robert Moore directed the drama (Hischak 66). It was a major off-Broadway hit, running for more than a thousand performances in nearly three years before it closed on September 6, 1970 (Fujita 31).

In *The Boys in the Band*, thirty-year-old gay man Michael has invited some of his homosexual friends to his apartment in New York for a birthday party for their gay friend Harold. The group consists of Donald, Emory, Hank, Larry, Bernard, and a male prostitute as a birthday gift for Harold. During the play, the backgrounds of the characters are discovered. Michael, the host, is struggling with his addiction to alcohol and cigarettes. Donald is staying with Michael, as he has moved from the city. He feels his life is a failure and is committed to therapy. Emory is described as flamboyant and effeminate. He hired the 'Cowboy,' a male prostitute, to sing "Happy Birthday" to Harold and spend the night with him. Hank and Larry are a gay couple, but they are having relationship problems as they disagree on the issue of monogamy. Larry, who is a fashion photographer, prefers multiple sex partners, as opposed to Hank. He has left his wife and children for a relationship with Larry and works as a schoolteacher. Bernard is the African-American of the group. Lastly, Alan, Michael's friend from college, crashes the party after calling Michael earlier in an emotional state. He is straight, married, and hostile towards homosexuals. He is not aware of Michael's homosexuality. Alan recognizes Emory as the stereotypical homosexual and is offended by his behavior. After Alan punches him, he finds out that the others are also gay. They decide to play a game, where each man must call someone and confess that he loves him. When Alan makes his call, at first Michael believes he finally 'outed' himself, but he soon realizes that Alan called his wife. The audience never learns what Alan wanted to tell Michael earlier. After the phone call, the party is over.



Even though it opened off-Broadway, the play gained much attention from various media (Fujita 31). *The Boys in the Band* was one of the first plays that presented an honest and realistic look of what it meant to be homosexual in America. The play was not the first (popular) drama to have gay characters or an underlying gay theme, but what makes it such a groundbreaking work is that it was the first mainstream piece to show homosexuals in their own environment and interacting with each other, what critics then referred to as ‘the homosexual milieu.’ Critic Clive Barnes wrote in his review for *The New York Times* that the play “is by far the frankest treatment of homosexuality (...) ever. (...) [It] takes the homosexual milieu, and the homosexual way of life, totally for granted and uses this as a valid basis of human experience” (Barnes 48). The play is not about homosexuality, but is rather a homosexual play. According to Barnes, “the power of the play (...) is the way in which it remorselessly peels away the pretensions of its characters and reveals a pessimism so uncompromising in its honesty that it becomes in itself an affirmation of life” (Barnes 48). Theater critic John Simon also praised this change of perspective in his review for *New York* magazine: “Our social climate has until now demanded that homosexuality be viewed as a shameful or pathetic lapse in the midst of a heterosexual world (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). (...) But now along comes a view of it that is knowing rather than sensationalistic, sympathetic rather than apologetic or defiant, and above all, unruffled” (Simon 48). Simon also reflects on the point of the play: “The homosexual part of the audience is to feel purged and to some extent vindicated by this play and production, whereas heterosexual spectators are to be made more aware of homosexual life styles, and if possible, sympathetic to them” (Simon 48).

However, many responses from the mainstream media carried homophobic views, but there were also critics that showed liberal attitudes toward homosexuals (Fujita 43). Reviewer Martin Gottfried wrote a typical homophobic response in *Women’s Wear Daily* in which his homophobia is overtly shown: “The characters keep talking about love (or play cruel truth-games about love) but their love is, I think, in the most horrifying sense, shallow and perverse. Perhaps homosexuals really can love each other but ‘The Boys in the Band’ doesn’t show it. And one more matter – perhaps it’s my thing but I just can’t take guys dancing with each other. It only looks like pathetic imitation of men with women” (Gottfried 44). Another example of a homophobic review is the one by Elliot Norton in *Record American*. Just as Gottfried, Norton warns readers to be careful and even not to see it if they are unsophisticated or unprepared (Fujita 47). He refers to the characters as “pervert” and to gay people as “men but not male,” thus indicating that he does not approve of them as ‘decent’ people (Norton 32). Although critics praised *The Boys in the Band* for being the first successful play to

explore the gay experience in an open and realistic manner, the play also received criticism for presenting negative stereotypes of homosexuals. In 1971, gay rights activist Dennis Altman called *The Boys in the Band* “Crowley’s portrait of unredeemed misery” and stated that not all homosexuals “are corrupted by self-hate,” as is thus wrongly pictured in the play (Altman 36). A year later, gay liberationist Peter Fisher wrote that the play “was seen as a breakthrough by many people, but it presents a stereotypical picture of unhappy people unable to come to terms with themselves” (Fisher 203). Some critics believed the self-loathing displayed by the characters to be dated. Homosexuals had to live in seclusion and were given a feeling that they had to regret being the way they were, but because of the Stonewall Rebellion only one year after *The Boys in the Band* premiered, society became more accepting towards homosexuality and homosexuals were taught to be proud of who they were.

#### 4.2. Heteronormativity, Penalization, and Explicitness

Crowley addresses the subject of homosexuality very explicitly and directly in his play. The first instance can be found immediately at the beginning of the play, when Michael says he wants to buy toiletries for his friend Donald, as he is sick of Donald using his toothbrush. Michael’s friends are coming to his apartment to hold a birthday party for their friend Harold. Donald was the first one to arrive and is staying at Michael’s house for some time. Donald says borrowing Michael’s toothbrush it is even worse for him, to which Michael responds: “You’ve had worse things in your mouth” (Crowley 8). Given the subject of the play, it is not hard to figure out what Michael means. To address the subject, Crowley frequently uses these “puns” and “sly put-downs,” but his frequent use of swear words is especially remarkable, such as ‘cunt,’ ‘fag,’ ‘bitch,’ and ‘faggot.’ He also calls gay people “fairy queens” and “queer” (Crowley 10). Thus, in *The Boys in the Band*, homosexual desire and identity are explicit, as each character speaks of himself as a “fairy” or a “queen” (Cohen). The play is deliberately outrageous in its employment of such words and use of campy and bitchy humor (Prono 71). An example of a funny quip is: “One thing you can say for masturbation... you certainly don't have to look your best” (Crowley 11). The characters are unashamedly campy in speech and affect, using it as a survival strategy to disguise the pain of difference (Cohen).

Immediately in the beginning, the play positions homosexuality within a medical discourse when Michael and Donald are talking about their psychiatrists, revealing that they need medical help for problems that seem to be related to their sexuality: “As [Donald] begins to elaborate on what he has learned from his analysis, he provides a developmental profile

that sounds very much like those which position homosexuality as a developmental maladjustment” (Scroggie 242). Both are taking counseling to fight against self-hatred for their homosexuality (Fujita 35). Donald states that he is depressed and has a constant feeling of failure. Although none of the gay characters commit suicide or are killed off, they still receive some form of penalization for their homosexuality. Donald reflects on his childhood early in the play: “Failure is the only thing with which I feel at home. Because it is what I was taught at home” (Crowley 13). He could not live up to his parents’ standards. His father wanted him to be perfect, but when he failed, his mother tried to make up for it with her love. As a result, Donald retreated from society, dropped out of college, and eventually left the city. He is now a twenty-eight-year-old who is scrubbing floors for a living. Michael tells how he used to be addicted to alcohol and drugs, going to parties and bars every night. Later on in the play, he grabs for the bottle again to deal with the situation. Another example of penalization is the character of Harold, who has been saving pills so that he can kill himself when he finds it is time. Ironically, Michael comments: “But I tell you right now, Hallie. When the time comes, you’ll never have the guts. It’s not always like it happens in plays, not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story” (Crowley 82). Another example is when Michael questioned Harold’s lateness, who was the last friend to join the party. Harold tells him he needs time to pull himself together. He takes drugs before he dares to show his face to the world.

Before the others arrive, Michael gets a phone call from Alan, his old college friend, who is in the city and wants to visit him. He needs to see Michael, must see Michael, and needs to talk with him and so Michael invites him over for a drink. He got a weird vibe from their phone call, as Alan was hysterically crying which is nothing like him: “He’s so pulled together he wouldn’t show any emotion if he were in a plane crash” (Crowley 20). Michael is worried about Alan meeting his gay friends, as he does not know that Michael is gay. Donald does not understand Michael’s concern and says he should not care what Alan thinks of them, to which Michael responds: “Some people do have different standards from yours and mine, you know. And if we don’t acknowledge them, we’re just as narrow-minded and backward as we think they are” (Crowley 20). Then, the other friends arrive one after another. Michael explains he was not openly gay when he was in college and so he does not want them to do anything that would let Alan know that they are gay. Again, he tells the others that he does not care what Alan would think of him but rather “it’s just that he’s not ready for it. And he never will be” (Crowley 27). Even in his own private space, Michael wants to tone down their homosexuality and asks for heteronormative social norms to be respected and enforced (Costa

33). Among Michael's friends are Hank and Larry, a couple. Although their relationship is going better now, they still argue about Larry's promiscuity, which emphasizes a stereotype of gay people. Larry's character "minoritizes" gay people (Fujita 36). Larry does not want to commit himself to their relationship exclusively and declares: "It's my right to lead my sex life without answering to anybody! (...) Numerous relations is a part of the way I am!" (Crowley 112). Their relationship does not follow a heteronormative model of monogamy, as Hank wants to be only sexually involved with Larry, whereas Larry wants independence and sexual freedom (Costa 38). It is typical for homophobes to accuse gay people of having numerous sexual relationships. It has even been used in a criticism on the AIDS epidemic in the eighties and nineties, for example: "AIDS is a divine punishment for promiscuity of gay people" (Fujita 36). However, the couple also suggests a universalizing view, as their relationship is an example of a happy gay couple. Hank was married to a woman with whom he has two children, which made Alan believe that Hank is not homosexual, but here is a person who 'chose' to lead a homosexual life (Fujita 36). Hank and Larry openly confessed their love to each other and so they break free from the heteronormative social strings: "I do love him. And I don't care who knows it" (Crowley 109).

There are more stereotypes depicted in the play. Another example is when Michael talks about his childhood: "I picked out her clothes for her and told her what to wear and she'd take me to the beauty parlor with her and we'd both get our hair bleached and a permanent and a manicure" (Crowley 17). His mother thought he should have been a girl, as he looked and acted like a girl and played with dolls. It is often wrongly believed that gay men display femininity and as such are usually into fashion and make-up, take care of their appearance, and so on (Lipp). This is also seen when Michael criticizes Harold's excessive concern with his beauty: "Standing before a bathroom mirror for hours and hours before you can walk out on the street (...) after Christ knows how many applications of Christ knows how many ointments and salves and creams and masks" (Crowley 81). Another stereotypical example in *The Boys in the Band* is the character of Emory, who is the most flamboyantly gay. Emory always refers to himself and the others as women, using "she" and "her," and calls himself Mary. He even has a list of feminine names for his friends, such as Bernardette for Bernard and Hallie for Harold. Emory is the only character that acts in a particularly feminine way, for example when he pretends to be a "topless cocktail waitress," when he is extremely worried about his sweater that is 'ruined,' or when he says, "I'd make somebody a good wife" after being complimented on the food he has made (Crowley 33, 76). It is his

girlish attitude that makes Alan extremely angry that he lets out when he attacks Emory at the end of the first act.

Even though Michael had asked his friends not to let Alan know that they are gay, Emory does not hide his gayness and tells camp jokes. The fight between Emory and Alan is a direct result of Emory's remark about Alan's wife, after Alan told Hank he would love it if he met his wife: "Yeah, they'd love to meet him – her. I have such a problem with pronouns" (Crowley 57). Thus, his homosexuality leads him away from stereotypical masculine behavior. In his article "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," author and lecturer Jack Babuscio describes camp as a product of gay sensibility and a form of expression for the gay community (Babuscio 121). According to Babuscio, camp can only be perceived in this context of gay sensibility: "I define gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, and defined by the fact of one's gayness" (Babuscio 121). He also mentions the process of 'polarization' that is present, which leads to society labeling people into distinct types. Heterosexuality is believed to be "normal, natural, healthy behavior" and homosexuality is considered "abnormal, unnatural, sick behavior" (Babuscio 121). Because of this process of polarization, "there develops a twin set of perspectives and general understandings about what the world is like and how to deal with it" (Babuscio 121). For homosexuals, one of such response is camp (Babuscio 121). In relation to Emory, his campiness is a theatrical gay sensibility "that when faced with heteronormative hostility is projected against that oppressive force" (Costa 36). Camp implies that roles are superficial and in terms of theatricality, this means that homosexuals do not conform to socially expected ways, to sex-role expectations, as they do not show appropriate interest in the opposite sex and are therefore seen as something less than 'real' men and women. In the play, Emory rejects the socially defined roles that are perceived in exclusively heterosexual terms by behaving effeminate, calling himself 'Mary,' and using feminine names for his friends (Babuscio 125). Emory uses a particular sort of humor, also characterized as 'homosexual humor,' to hide the pain from the gay social experience. Emory's campiness should be seen as a political reaction against societal norms that promotes heteronormativity and defies a queer identity (Costa 39).

As more friends are coming over, Alan calls again, saying he is not coming anymore. When the door panel buzzes, the men think it is the delivery boy with the birthday cake, but it is Alan who steps through the door. He sees the men dancing together. Alan appears

uncomfortable in the room full of obviously gay men: “Within 1960s heteronormativity, a group of men dancing together is a visible sign of homosexual behavior and Alan’s entrance interrupting the dance visibly represents the conflict between straight and gay society” (Costa 33, 34). Alan feels a connection with Hank, who is also married and has two children. When Larry interferes, Hank says he is in the process of getting a divorce and describes Larry as his roommate (Crowley 45). When Michael and Alan have a private conversation, Alan says that all his friends seem nice, Hank in particular: “That Hank is really a very attractive fellow” (Crowley 49). He shows interest in Hank, as he wants to know more about him and Larry. The one he does not like is Emory and his talk about Emory has obvious homophobic outlines: “I just can’t stand that kind of talk. It just grates on me. (...) He just seems like such a goddamn little pansy. (...) You have to admit he is effeminate” (Crowley 50). Michael responds superficial, but Alan says Michael knows how he feels about him, about his private life: “I couldn’t care less what people do – as long as they don’t do it in public – or – or try to force their ways on the whole damned world” (Crowley 53). Towards the end of the first act, Alan has enough of Emory’s remarks and he lashes out at him: “Faggot, fairy, pansy... queer, cocksucker! I’ll kill you, you goddamn little mincing swish! You goddamn freak!” (Crowley 57). Emory refused to ‘adapt’ for Alan’s visit, as he does not tone down his homosexuality, but continuously uses pronouns and gender-switching through name-calling. His homosexuality is further emphasized by his effeminacy and campiness (Costa 34). After Alan attacked Emory, Michael returns to drinking again as a result against the reaction of outside world, i.e. Alan’s attack: “Thus, the play suggests that the oppression of homosexuals and homosexual self-destruction will continue until people like Michael challenge the cultural construction of homosexuality” (Scroggie 248). At the end of the play, Emory and Alan seem to make up when Michael forces Alan to play his game. Emory tells Alan not to play because it is humiliating and Alan apologizes for lashing out at him. Emory and Alan are the two most oppositional figures in the play: Emory on the one hand, the most typically ‘fairy queen’ and Alan, the most heterosexual, on the other hand. This reconciliation suggests a universalizing view: “At least superficially or temporarily, Alan’s homophobia seems to disappear” (Fujita 37).

The second and final act opens with Alan covering his ears with his hands. A few moments later, he rushes out because he has to throw up, either from drinking too much alcohol or because he feels disgusted with himself. When he returns, once again the men are dancing with each other. Then, Michael decides they play a game called the ‘Affairs of the Heart,’ that he had just made up. Each person has to call someone they have truly loved and

then confess his love for that person. Really, Michael wants to out Alan, because he suspects he had an affair with their mutual friend Justin Stuart. Michael's discomfort with (his) homosexuality is also visible with his game. He wants to show that homosexual desire and truth cannot go together: "Telling the truth, revealing a desire, is to show a weakness, and showing weakness can only be allowed in a private circle – in this party, among equals – and never in the heteronormative circle" (Costa 39). At this point, the play shifts from a tone of humor in the first part towards melodrama in its second half (Prono 71). Not everyone wants to play and when Alan asks Hank to leave with him, Michael forcefully tells him that Hank and Larry are lovers: "Not just roommates, bedmates. Lovers. (...) No man's still got a roommate when he's over thirty years old" (Crowley 93). This puzzles Alan, as Hank is married, and the other men start laughing: "Don't you love that quaint little idea – if a man is married, then he is automatically heterosexual" (Crowley 94). Alan's idea of manliness is destroyed by Michael, who explains Hank's situation to him: masculinity belongs to both the heterosexual individual as the homosexual. This duality is expressed by depicting Alan and Hank as characters that share everything: they are both manly, were married, and have children. As such, heteronormativity is also undermined by an ambiguity in the interpretation of masculinity "that questions if that masculinity is synonym of a heteronormative sexuality, or just a performance that hides a dissident sexuality" (Costa 37). After Bernard and Emory, it is Hank's turn to call someone. He called the answering machine of him and Larry to leave a message for Larry, saying that he loves him. Alan does not understand: "Are you crazy? (...) Don't say that. (...) I can't believe you. (...) I don't want to hear it. It's disgusting!" (Crowley 109). Hank tries to explain to Alan that it is not something one chooses, which is often believed by homophobes: "It just doesn't always work out that way, Alan. No matter how you might want it to" (Crowley 110).

The play comes to an end with a conversation between Michael and Alan. At first, Michael was determined to hide Alan from the truth about his sexuality, but when he loosened up because of the alcohol, Michael opens up to Alan, hoping that Alan would admit his true sexual identity as well: "Disclosure became a central strategy of the gay movement. Confronting others with one's homosexuality came to be viewed as the principal way for gay individuals to bring about social change," while secrecy was seen "as an indicator of self-oppression and as one of the major reasons for the ongoing oppression of gays" (Cain 31). Michael accuses Alan of being a "closet queen," of being in the closet still, thus insinuating that he is homosexual (Crowley 120). He recalls the friendship of Alan and Justin Stuart: "How many times did you have to say it about Justin: (...) what a good body he had; what

good taste he had; how bright he was – how amusing he was – how the girls were all mad for him – what close friends you were” (Crowley 121). The relationship between Alan and Justin Stuart appears quite like the one between Brick and Skipper in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, discussed in the previous chapter. As with Brick in Williams' play, according to Alan, they were just very good friends and that was all, but Justin Stuart had supposedly told Michael that their friendship was “quite passionate,” meaning that they slept together in college (Crowley 120). Because Justin Stuart is openly homosexual, Michael believes it to be true, despite Alan continuously denying it. At first, Alan said they had a parting of ways which ended the friendship, but then changes his story because of Michael's accusations. He says he had no choice but to drop him because Justin Stuart told him about himself and that he wanted to be his lover: “He made me sick... I told him I pitied him” (Crowley 122). Michael knows the real reason why Alan ended the friendship is because he could not face the truth about himself: “You couldn't take it and so you destroyed the friendship and your friend along with it. (...) To this day he still remembers the treatment – the scars he got from you” (Crowley 122, 123). Michael wants to continue playing his game and pressures Alan to call Justin Stuart to confess his love and make an apology. Out of all the characters in the play, Alan appears the only straight one and does not explicitly identify as homosexual, but the depiction of his sexuality becomes more obscure, despite Michael emphasizing Alan's heterosexuality in the beginning. Although the play never confirms whether Alan is straight or not, he is the only character that can suggest a heterosexual point of view that a large part of an audience can sympathize with. Alan's homophobia is shown when he criticizes Emory's effeminate behavior, for example when he warns Michael as Emory “probably wanted to dance with you” (Crowley 50). Nevertheless, Alan picks up the phone and everyone thinks he will call a man and will thus out himself (Prono 71). Immediately after Alan finally got around to say, “I love you,” Michael snatches the phone from Alan and yells: “Justin! Did you hear what that son of a bitch said!” to then find out that Alan's wife is at the other end (Crowley 124). Thus, by calling his wife, Alan reasserts his own heterosexuality (Prono 71). He leaves, knowing he has to give an explanation to his wife.

Towards the end of the play, Harold attacks Michael's malignant self-hatred: “You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it” (Crowley 125). He instructs Michael, who is struggling with a self-loathing born of homophobia, to accept his homosexuality before destroying himself and everyone around him. But Harold's speech also contains a hidden liberating message: “Not all your prayers to your God, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you've got left to



live. You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough – if you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate – but you will always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die” (Crowley 125). Harold responds to the complicity of psychiatry and religion in gay self-hatred: “Thousands of psychiatrists had committed unprosecutable malpractice by nurturing the myth that homosexuality could be – and should be – ‘cured,’ instead of encouraging gay people to value themselves for who they were” (Kaiser 189). Crowley aimed at showing the torturous path homosexuals had to take to reach self-acceptance: “People were either calling you mentally ill, or the Catholic church was saying you’d go to hell, or your parents were disowning you” (qtd. in Schiavi 95).

In the end, only Michael and Donald are left when Michael, after having behaved like an ass the whole evening, closes the play rather depressingly: “If we... if we could just... not hate ourselves so much. That’s it, you know. If we could just *learn* not to hate ourselves quite so very much” (Crowley 128). He is not only speaking of himself, but also of the gay community at large. The most-often quote line of the play is Michael’s death-sentencing at the end: “You show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse” (Crowley 128). When Michael is not drunk on alcohol, high on drugs or dependent of psychiatric help, his somewhat negative view of his homosexuality is revealed. They talk about what happened with Alan and before they both leave, they wonder what it was Alan had to tell him. The play never makes clear what Alan was planning on telling Michael and so the audience is left wondering whether he wanted to confess his homosexuality. According to scholar Luca Prono, “the disgust for the homosexual lifestyle that he has witnessed at the party” held him back from doing so (Prono 71). In his article, cultural critic William Scroggie presents three queer identity ‘constructions’ that were present during a Stonewall ‘period’ that stretches from 1968 till 1972. He believes that all three of them can be found in the play. First, many queer people distanced themselves from or resisted the label ‘homosexuality,’ as it was equated with mental illness and so they viewed it as such, too. Second, many moved to the idea of creating a social identity as homosexuals, even though they still understood themselves to be mentally ill. These two ideas were present prior to the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969. Lastly, queer people reconstructed their understanding of homosexuality. They no longer equated themselves with a mental illness, but rather viewed themselves as a minority that had been denigrated for years and needed civil rights. The first idea is most evident in the character of Alan who appears to be ‘in the closet’ still. The second one can possibly be applied to all other characters. The men have acknowledged their homosexuality, but are still

aware of societal norms of heteronormativity, for example. The men have to keep their sexual identity a secret from the outside world and so they go to bathhouses and gay bars where they can be open about it. Another example is when Michael asks his friends to pretend they are not gay when Alan is supposedly coming over. Living life in the closet is compared to hiding the fact that one is homosexual. Thus, the play bridges the period of being ‘in the closet’ and the post-Stonewall liberation (Costa 32). Crowley hinted at the presence of the third idea only at the end of the play when Michael says: “If we could just *learn* not to hate ourselves quite so very much” (Crowley 128). Crowley deliberately italicized the word ‘learn’ in the script, possibly calling for another way of understanding what it means to be homosexual in American society in the sixties, a way that Michael and his friends at the time could not address explicitly, but a way that is in line with the call for civil rights, and that started to grow more after the Stonewall Rebellion which paved the way for the equal rights movement for homosexual men and women.

*The Boys in the Band* became known as the first groundbreaking play to include a full cast of gay characters and to deal realistically with homosexuality before a mainstream audience. Earlier works mostly portrayed homosexuals as clowns or victims who typically ended up dead or converted to heterosexuality (Highleyman). Members of society were being socialized “to buy into the perfection of the heteronormative orientation,” as society proclaimed heteronormativity as the norm (Goltz 33). As such, “homosexual victimage [turned] hegemonic” in American theater, which meant that the ‘heterosexual heroes’ killed off the ‘evil’ homosexual for the good of society (Goltz 33). But with the years, starting after Stonewall, some (gay) critics claimed, on the contrary, that his play still perpetrates the usual stereotypes about homosexuals as sad, depressed, and self-loathing (Prono 70). Critics found the characters too stereotypical because of its self-loathing, camp behavior, and dialogue filled with four-letter word (Fujita 35). They argue that the play presents a depressing portrayal of gay life and does not assert an alternative lifestyle (Prono 71). Overall, the main complaint was that there was too much self-hatred in the depiction of the characters (Fujita 31). However, according to Crowley himself, the characters were drawn from real life: “The self-deprecating humor was born out of a low self-esteem, from a sense of what the times told you about yourself,” Crowley later explained in the 1995 documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (Highleyman). The main reason why the characters are miserable is because the ‘straight world’ made them that way. If society had been tolerant towards homosexuals, these men would not have turned out as they did (Filichia). The gay characters not only faced personal and societal difficulties, their problems were heightened by the guilt and repression caused by

society's homophobia. The story reflects a period in which homosexuality was seen as a mental illness and a crime. Furthermore, heteronormative perfection is most convincing when punishment is inflicted on the homosexual's self (Goltz 33). Gay self-hatred became an inherent part "and the identifications of homosexuality with loneliness, bitterness, perversion, isolation, rejection, self-hatred, shame, guilt, a life of misery, and a doomed future perpetuate the logic of 'show me a happy homosexual and I will show you a gay corpse'" (Goltz 34). This line, uttered by Michael at the end of the play, strengthens homosexual misery, "perpetuating the 'harder path' narrative that shapes gay future" (Goltz 34). Theater critic and author Peter Filichia believed the 1969 Stonewall riots and gay rights movement to be inspired by the play: "After gays saw *The Boys in the Band*, they no longer would settle for thinking of themselves as pathetic and wouldn't be perceived as such any longer. Now that Michael and his friends had brought their feelings out of the closet, this new generation would dare to be different" (Filichia). He even stated that the outlook of many straights changed after they saw the play: "Some whom I personally know felt terrible and -- I saw this happen! -- actually changed the way they treated gays" (Filichia).

#### 4.3. Adaptations

Following the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969, that proved a major turning point in the gay rights movement, Hollywood began to look at homosexuality as a possible consumer. At the same time, the American attitude towards homosexuality and gender roles started to change as a result of the sexual revolution and the gay rights movement that followed. *The Boys in the Band* (1970) was the first attempt of Hollywood to produce a film aimed at the gay community while presenting an honest look of what it meant to be homo- or bisexual in America. Mart Crowley wrote the screenplay for the film version, which was directed by William Friedkin and starred the original stage actors, as Crowley insisted on using the play's original cast in the film (Landazuri). Friedkin kept almost every line of bitchy dialogue intact. He also largely retained the real-time format, preserved the 'drama feel' of the original play, and used Michael's apartment as the setting, the original location (Boslaugh). However, Friedkin did make one major addition. He added a pre-title montage that serves as an introduction to each of the major characters individually, showing them in their natural environment before they arrive at the party. It shows Donald taking books from a bookstore and Emory strolling down the street looking for a present for Harold, for example (Morris). In addition, all men are getting male attention and Donald even flirts with the garage attendant.

After that shot, the play's text begins and the film adheres closely to the text. The montage takes up about four minutes of screen time, but in that short period of time, it accomplishes several goals (Boslaugh). First, it opens the play by introducing the characters one by one, which offers the viewer a chance to tell them apart, as eight of the nine cast members are white and of similar age. Secondly, it shows each character in their milieu, how they look and behave when they are out in the 'straight world.' The montage underlines that the characters are different from each other: one makes a living as a schoolteacher while another works as a photographer, hereby showing that they act just like 'ordinary' people. Furthermore, the montage contrasts with the stereotyping and negativity that is present in the film: "The montage presents them as people who have found a way to live in a sometimes hostile world, more importantly, have formed a community of friendship and support" (Boslaugh).

However, according to Pamela Robertson Wojcik, associate professor of Film and Theater, by moving from outside to inside, it heralds a movement 'out' into open gayness: "As the men arrive, they acknowledge their gayness to each other in direct references, innuendoes, and dirty jokes" (Wojcik 135). They may appear to look and behave as ordinary people, as their natural self, as "each man's public persona indicates the different degree to which he is 'out' or readable as gay in public," but it is when they are in the apartment that they can be their gay self, "a self that cannot exist as fully or openly in the outside world" (Wojcik 134, 135). This is also shown during the party itself, as Michael approaches the door very cautiously whenever the doorbell rings: "The apartment is shown as vulnerable to straight surveillance" (Wojcik 136). When the delivery boy comes to bring the cake, for example, Michael steps outside the apartment to take it from him, while the boy tries to take a look inside as he peers curiously past Michael. This sense of vulnerability is better carried out in the film and is furthered by the camera movement. The men are frequently shot through exterior windows or through the terrace door, as if they are spying (Wojcik 136).

Crowley and Friedkin collaborated on which parts would be removed from the play for length, such as Emory explaining how he found the hustler, his present for Harold, which was not a difficult decision to drop. There were other edits that did cause some problems. Friedkin deleted Michael's long monologue about how he was 'turned gay' by his mother, which "challenges claims that Friedkin and Crowley simply mined stereotypes" (Morris). Friedkin shot a romantic kiss between Hank and Larry that was offstage in the play, but filming the scene caused some controversy. The authors were reluctant to kiss on film as they were mostly concerned about the price they might pay for playing openly gay by kissing. Eventually, they agreed to film but the shot was not used in the final cut: "We didn't need it,

and I felt it would only sensationalize the piece,” explained Friedkin (Bart). Later, he regretted that decision.

Although Friedkin deemed the play worthy of a film because “it was a damn good story,” the director did not get much encouragement in the marketplace, as no studio wanted to finance it (Bart). Eventually, production company Cinema Center Films, then owned by CBS Television, took the risk, but as they did not have the money to distribute or market the film widely, the film reached a fairly small audience and was thus not a big success commercially (Bart). Nevertheless, the film scored a breakthrough at the time it was released in obtaining an R rating from the usually prudish Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) because of its subject of homosexuality (Morris). The rating system, established by the MPAA in 1968, provides information about the content of films to help parents make informed decisions about what their children watch. Ratings are based on the presence of factors such as violence, language, drug use, nudity, and sexual content. From 1970 to 1972, four ratings were used, one of them being the R rating, which stood for restricted and meant that anyone under the age of seventeen required an accompany parent or adult guardian. A year earlier, the film may have been given an X rating: no one under seventeen years old was admitted. In 1968 and 1969, the MPAA had given such rating to films such as *The Killing of Sister George* and *Midnight Cowboy* simply because there were homosexual characters in it (Landazuri).

In his article on *The Boys in the Band*, Dr. Joe Carrithers, professor in the English department, took the audience into account while analyzing *The Boys in the Band*, focusing primarily on the film version. He notes that for a film, or play for that matter, to be successful, at least financially that is, it must attract the often larger heterosexual (straight) audience (Carrithers 64). For the 1970 film version, *The Boys in the Band* modifies its images of homosexuality in order to provide a ‘comfortable’ experience for straight viewers. In general, in films that feature homosexuality, there is a “privileging of heterosexually inspired images, (...), images that are antithetical to the redefinitions of sexuality and relationships supported by many gay men of the post-Stonewall generation” (Carrithers 64). At the same time, such films negatively depict gay lives that do not follow heterosexual paradigms, thus reinforcing long-held stereotypes of homosexuals as sad, troubled, and unhappy people: “Hollywood does not want to invest in movies that portray queers in any positive way, but there’s always big bucks for homo hatred (Carrithers 64). English academic Richard Dyer, specialized in queer theory and the relationship between entertainment and representations of sexuality, says that in stereotyping, “the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinate groups, find the latter

wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups' own sense of the legitimacy of their domination" (Dyer 356).

Hank and Larry's relationship confuses Alan at first. He cannot believe they love each other. Hank and Larry appear more stereotypically 'masculine' and so their appearances do not present a sexuality that is "a secret that always [gives] itself away," as opposed to Emory's more effeminate sexuality, for example (Foucault 43). Hank and Larry act like heterosexual men. They do not fit commonly held stereotypes of gay men as opposed to the other characters. The fact that Hank and Larry, who are just as gay as Emory yet look as straight as Alan scares Alan. However, their relationship does not completely support a positive image of a committed homosexual couple, because they are mostly bickering and being suspicious of each other's motives (Carrithers 68). This may result in the straight audience assuming that homosexual relationships cannot last: "Gay men cannot be monogamous or committed to each other" (Carrithers 68). The camera plays also a role in depicting the relationship between Hank and Larry as something that is unacceptable to a straight audience. The couple is visually separated, as someone is always standing or sitting between them. Hank and Larry are rarely even in the same frame (Carrithers 69).

In *The Boys in the Band*, forms of sexuality that are alternatives to heterosexual paradigms are presented as failures. The only successful or happy gay men in the play and film are Alan, Hank, and Larry. The relationship between Hank and Larry most closely resembles a heterosexual marriage and Alan, the token straight character, is thought of as gay, a 'closet queen,' but his heterosexual identity remains intact in the end. Just as in the play, none of the characters elicits sympathy from the film's audience for homosexuals and their lives. Michael suffers a brief nervous breakdown and receives psychological help to help him accept his identity as a gay man. The same applies to Donald, whose identity persistently troubles him and causing him to feel guilt. Harold is also guilt-ridden and must use drugs before appearing at his own birthday party. Emory, then, is too effeminate and therefore unable to assimilate fully into the mainstream of either one community, whether gay or straight (Carrithers 65). Bernard is an African American and must face the prejudices of racism and homophobia, but his role is remarkably marginal. As Crowley's character descriptions indicate, the men in the play are too stereotypical and thus, according to Carrithers, none of them represent what might be considered an acceptable image of gayness (Carrithers 65). *The Boys in the Band* can be seen as a presentation of a social conflict between gay and straight identities, but Carrithers claims it ultimately 'functions to' or

'accommodates' a straight audience as they can reassure themselves of the stereotypes of gays and the negativity believed to be inherent in homosexuality (Carrithers 65).

The film came out in 1970, only a year after the Stonewall uprising, but the impact of this and the subsequent emergence of a new sense of identity for homosexual, now known as 'gay pride,' does not appear. That itself is not too surprising, considering the film's fidelity to the original script, but the fact that Crowley kept rigid, pre-Stonewall stereotypes of gay men in public view is. Crowley admitted that Michael's self-hatred was the message "that a very square American public wanted to receive" (qtd. in Carrithers 65). According to Carrithers, the division between homosexual and heterosexual can best be seen in the close-ups: "The screen often shows only one man, suggesting that he is not part of a community, but alone, separate, emotionally isolated" (Carrithers 65). When Emory talks about his one-sided love for Delbert Botts, for example, the camera is first aimed at Emory, Cowboy, Harold, and Michael, but then zooms in on Emory, slowly removing the other men off the frame, thus isolating Emory: "He cannot depend on the others; he must face the audience alone to be judged" (Carrithers 66). This type of camera shot can create more distance between the straight viewer and these gay men. In other films, close-ups can allow the audience to identify with the characters, but here, the close-ups are of men describing the sadness of their lives: "They speak of lost loves, the pain of coming out, the emptiness and self-hatred they often feel" (Carrithers 66). Gay viewers may sympathize, but straight people in the audience will not feel a similar emotional connection, but instead confront stereotypical depiction of homosexuality (Carrithers 66).

Not only the way in which the film is shot, but also the physical placement of the characters reinforces the privileging of heterosexuality (Carrithers 67). This can be most clearly seen whenever Alan is in the frame, for example when he is having a private conversation with Michael. Alan is always in focus in the frame as opposed to Michael. During that particular scene, he stands most of the time that Michael sits, so he can always look down on Michael. He is also more brightly lit than Michael. In shots that include the other characters, Alan is always placed differently: he faces away from the camera while the other men face it and he stands while they sit, for example (Carrithers 68). This is to illustrate that Alan is not part of the group, he is separate from it, just as the straight male audience (Carrithers 68). Thus, Alan represents the straight audience members. They feel this same separation, as they are not part of that community either. They are just viewers, just like Alan is.

During the emotionally brutal telephone truth game, the film's climactic scene, the method by which *The Boys in the Band* affirms heterosexual norms is most clearly illustrated (Carrithers 66). Alan, the married straight man, and Larry 'win' as they received the most points. Larry and his partner Hank have been arguing about Larry's promiscuity. Larry claimed he was unable to maintain a monogamous relationship, but his "emotional commitment soon emulates the model of monogamous heterosexual marriage" (Carrithers 66). Eventually, Larry tells Hank that "in my own way, Hank I love you, but you have to understand that even though I do want to go on living with you, sometimes there may be others" (Crowley 116). For the cover story of the gay newsmagazine *Frontiers*, author Philip Gambone wrote about the years immediately after the Stonewall rebellion and explains: "Monogamous gay mating, it was argued, was an unimaginative and even oppressive copy of heterosexual marriage; as gay and lesbian people, we were free to love, have sex with, and show affection for others outside the realm of 'marriage'" (qtd. in Carrithers 66). Larry and Hank made an agreement that Hank will try to seek fewer signs of Larry's commitment and Larry will try to be faithful, "to be as monogamous as a spouse in a straight marriage should be" (Carrithers 66).

Decades after its debut, *The Boys in the Band* remains a popular play. In 1996, a new production opened in New York City at the WPA Theater on June 20. It had a successful run before it moved to the larger Lucille Lortel Theatre in Greenwich Village in August. There, it played for several more weeks until it closed on October 20, 1996 (Scheie 2). Although its performance is true to the original production, in his article, professor Timothy Scheie notes a change in the audience's reaction visible in the play's revival. Instead of discomfort and even disavowal, the gay spectator in 1996 could derive pleasure from watching self-loathing characters partly as a result of the emergence of a new proud gay identity in the 1970s and 1980s (Scheie 2). Furthermore, the 1968 audience was positioned to identify with the heterosexual Alan "who looked upon the gay characters with disgust and pity and who, like the spectators, leaves the party-goers and their world behind for a 'normal' life at the end of the play" (Scheie 7). In the 1990s, Alan comes across as a bigoted homophobe and the audience instead identifies with the gay characters. It is Emory, the effeminate character and most openly gay, who emerges as the play's hero when he stands up to the rude insults of Alan and "at the risk of physical injury, dares to exhibit his sexuality while all the others attempt to pass as well as they can" (Scheie 7). Crowley wrote *The Boys in the Band* in an era when gay people faced discrimination and the police raided gay bars, but the 1996 revival was



“something that gay people could attend openly for the first time,” said Kyle Renick, artistic director of the WPA Theater (Talbot).

## Conclusion

This thesis has investigated three American plays and their adaptations in their representation of homosexuality. By using twentieth-century sexology theories and ideas of heteronormativity, penalization, and explicitness, it analyzed the portrayal of homosexuality in the plays. The works all portray homosexuality in different ways; Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) explores lesbianism and illuminates the struggles that her female contemporaries had to face in the early twentieth century (Titus 215). Out of the three, Hellman's work portrays homosexuality the most implicit and requires the most extensive close-reading to find it. Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) more directly confronts homosexuality and traditional gender roles while critiquing Cold War society; and Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968) depicts homosexuals openly in their own environment. This thesis has demonstrated that the plays have incorporated and reacted to twentieth-century sexology theories and ideas in their portrayal of homosexuality.

For much of the twentieth century, homosexuality was defined as a psychological or physical abnormality and so sexologists regarded homosexuality as a mental condition or illness, an idea reflected in Hellman's play. It was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association (APA) declassified as a mental disorder. According to associate professor Jenny Spencer, Hellman used lesbianism as a metaphor for sickness, for example when Karen calls Martha 'sick' for admitting she might have homosexual feelings for her. As Mary Titus points out, Hellman included twentieth-century ideas on homosexuality, but also gave insight into her personal response to sexual ideology. By depicting main characters Martha and Karen as independent, successful women and owners of an all-girls boarding school, Hellman deviates from the ideology that women should follow the heterosexual path of marriage and childbearing (Titus 216). Because of the accusation that the two women are having a homosexual relationship and as such deviate from the norm that is heteronormativity, it results in penalization: they lose the lawsuit, they lose their jobs, and they end up isolated from society. According to Titus, the story of character Martha Dobie is a reflection of Hellman's private struggle to understand her own personal desires (Titus 226). By killing off the lesbian character, she is symbolically killing the homosexuality in herself, silencing any doubts about her own heterosexuality (Titus 217). The concept of homosexuality is never explicitly mentioned in the play to fit the culture of the conservative 1930s. For the 1952 revival and the 1961 film, Hellman made several changes to take away the power behind the taboo of homosexuality: she provides the possibility that Karen may

have ‘unconscious’ sexual feelings for Martha as well and makes Martha’s lesbianism obvious from the start (Spencer 53).

Williams’s play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was written and produced 21 years later, but Williams also did not explicitly call it by its name. In the play, the 1958 film, and the 1974 revival, heteronormativity and penalization are very much present through Skipper’s suicide, Big Daddy’s terminal illness, Brick’s alcoholism, and his marriage with Maggie. Williams incorporated and reacted to twentieth-century sexology ideas on homosexuality in its Cold War context that was ongoing at the time. According to John Bak, Williams blames the Cold War society for character Brick’s inability to understand what homosexuality precisely is: “What Brick reveals in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* [is] that straight America had disingenuously been reared into privileging certain signs of a homosexual identity, all the while destabilizing those signs through its own acts of male-male desire writ large” (Bak 227, 239). Brick, as an icon of ‘Cold War masculinity,’ struggles to face his sexual identity. By hinting that he may be homosexual, Williams calls into question traditional American definitions of sexual identification. According to Bak, it was not about Brick’s presumed Cold War heterosexuality or homosexuality, but about Cold War sexual politics, how sexuality is politically controlled and commodified.

*The Boys in the Band* was written during the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s. The original play, performed in 1968, and the film version, released in 1970, appear on either side of the historical Stonewall rebellion of 1969. The attitude towards homosexuality differs from the first half of the twentieth century, when Hellman and Williams wrote and produced their plays, and so Crowley was able to explicitly and directly address the subject in his play. Nevertheless, the characters faced some form of penalization for their sexual identity that is alternative to heterosexual paradigms, which can be seen in Michael’s alcoholism, Donald’s need of medical help, and Harold’s ‘suicide-precaution’ and use of drugs as a coping mechanism, for example. Although Crowley still stuck to the stereotyping, for example with Emory being an effeminate gay, he also provides another view on homosexual life with his play, showing homosexuals in their natural environment, having formed a community of friendship and support (Boslaugh).

Thus, the three plays and their adaptations that have been examined in this thesis reflect sexology ideas and theories in the way in which homosexuality was perceived in twentieth-century American society, but the playwrights also criticized and reacted to these developments in their representation.

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