



Homo americanus

Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, and Queer Masculinities

John S. Bak

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Though separated by only eleven years of age, Hemingway and Williams seem literary generations apart. Both authors bridged their modernist/postmodernist divide through mutual examinations of the polemics behind heteromascularity, Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* and Williams in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. This book explores the two works' many sociopolitical, literary, and intertextual ties, in particular how the conclusion of one echoes that of the other, not just in its irony but also in its implication of the audience's participation in engendering the social rules responsible for the protagonist's struggle to negotiate his sexual identity. Hemingway's *Sun* shares more with Williams's *Cat* than just a similar ending, however. Both works explore more broadly the construction of a queer masculinity, where the parameters that define masculinity and sexuality grow as unstable and irresolute as the frontier during a war or the line of scrimmage during a football game.

Hemingway and Williams met only once, in Castro's Havana on April 7, 1959. Hemingway's career was in its twilight, or so it seemed to the literary world, and he was just a few years away from committing suicide. Williams's was gradually waning, with the success of *Cat*, for which Castro and Hemingway had known him, already a few years behind him. That afternoon luncheon in Havana brought together two of America's greatest writers of the twentieth century to discuss issues that, as insignificant as they may have seemed at first, were central to both men's literary productions — honour, bullfighting, alcoholism, revolution, death and, implicitly, homosexuality.

This book begins, theoretically speaking, where that first meeting in Havana ends. In other words, it uses Hemingway as a means to examine Williams's evolving relationship with the heterosexual community at the height of the Cold War and with the homo-sexual community following the Stonewall riots. In many ways, Williams's admiration for, and later frustration with, Hemingway reflect his own struggle to convince both communities of his earnest efforts to derail existing identity politics in America.

That is not to say their chance encounter in Havana should be slighted in a study dedicated to the two men's work. To a large extent, biography and autobiography underpin hermeneutics here. As such, the book returns time and again to Williams' passion for Hemingway the artist. From unpublished essays and journal entries he wrote during his college days at Washington University in the mid-1930s to the interviews he gave in the 1970s about the posthumous works he was reading, Williams never stopped talking about Hemingway, never ceased finding in his work a prose style and a bitter sense of irony that Williams had not only respected but had also wanted to reproduce in his own writing.

About the author

John S. Bak is Professor of American Literature at Nancy-Université in France, where he teaches courses in translation, literary journalism, American drama, and the American gothic. A former Fulbright scholar to the Czech Republic, he took degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana (AB), Ball State University (MA, PhD), and the Sorbonne in Paris (post-doctoral *habilitation*). His articles have appeared in such journals as *Theatre Journal*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, *American Drama*, *Journal of Religion and Theatre*, and *South Atlantic Review*. His edited books include *Post/modern Dracula* (2007), *New Selected Essays: Where I Live* by Tennessee Williams (2009), and *Literary Journalism across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences* (forthcoming 2011).



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