Ákos Attila Seress's study, American Tragedies: Role, Personality and Exclusion in the Dramas of Tennessee Williams, presents Williams's dramatic œuvre focusing on the different conceptions of identity manifested in the dramaturgy of the author. The main objective of the book is to investigate the changes and possibilities of identity as they are represented—in order of discussion—by the characters of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Suddenly, Last Summer (1958), And Tell Sad Stories of the Death of Queens (2004), Small Craft Warnings (1972), Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws (2009), Sweet Bird of Youth (1972), Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws (2009), Sweet Bird of Youth (1959), Orpheus Descending (1957), Tiger Tail (1979), Kingdom of Earth (1968), The Glass Menagerie (1944) and Vieux Carré (1977), as well as other plays. One of the greatest merits of this volume is that it is a Hungarian-language contribution to the expanding research on Tennessee Williams in Hungary. Zoltán Dragon's free access text entitled Tennessee Williams Hollywoodba megy [Tennessee Williams Goes to Hollywood], which explores the dialogue between the dramatic texts of Williams and their film adaptations, was published by Americana eBooks the same year as Theatron Seress's study. Another noteworthy quality of the book is that it discusses both canonized and less-known Williams texts, not to mention the later works of the dramatist. For scholars of American drama and theater, the inclusion of rarely-read or seldom-staged works makes the volume quite helpful and thought-provoking. The choice of its primary sources undeniably goes hand in hand with the general intention of the book: as the author states, interest in the playwright's dramas has declined considerably over the past years (7), but rereading his major plays and integrating his neglected works into his critically acknowledged texts can recontextualize the Tennessee Williams canon both in the U.S and abroad.

The introduction designates the framework of the volume (9-16): Seress revisits earlier observations on the dramatist's modernist style with regard to the question of role and personality in his dramas. He argues that although Williams seems to be a modernist author, he crosses, even transgresses the boundaries of modernism and foreshadows postmodern attitudes towards identity and subjectivity. To substantiate this, Seress takes into consideration György Lukács's, Arthur Miller's and Benjamin Bennett's views on modernism and theater history. He borrows Árpád Kékesi Kun's take on postmodernism as well: in the dramas of the author, Seress argues, there appears to be a shift in the perception of subjectivity that is characteristic not as much to modernist but rather to the postmodern art. Lukács, Miller and Bennett are alluded to in connection with the modern(ist), especially in their grasp of the dramatic character's individuality (with special focus in cases when society forces the modern protagonist into different roles, thus s/he ceases to remain a free individual). Still, modern drama presupposes the existence of a unified personality, which, as this volume assigns, is already absent in Tennessee Williams, although his characters are not decentralized, “postmodernist” subjects. In the author's plays, Seress claims, the marginalized figures, who are either the protagonists or closely related—and many times absent—characters, want to maintain a unified identity but they are left to position themselves according to the role they are supposed to play. In other words, Williams's characters have a less unified personality behind the role they are assigned because the repetitive acts and performances they resort to make their personality fall apart. The reference to the Foucauldian theory of power is quite fortunate in Seress's introduction: Seress invokes the Foucaultian's critical examination of power in dramaturgy to emphasize the marginalization of characters, not only in the textual presentation but also in the staging and performance of the plays. The choice of Seress’s introduction is quite significant, considering that Tennessee Williams has long been recognized as a quintessential representative of the postmodern aesthetic, and that his dramas have been interpreted from a postmodern perspective. However, the choice of the introduction seems to be somewhat questionable in terms of the context of the book. The introduction is placed in the volume's beginning, which seems to be out of place considering the book's general intention. The introduction's focus on the modernist and postmodernist styles of the dramatist does not seem to be in line with the book's general intention, which is to investigate the changes and possibilities of identity as they are represented in the dramaturgy of the author. It seems that the introduction is more focused on the dramatist's oeuvre as a whole, rather than on the book's specific focus on identity and exclusion in his dramas.
introduction, since Williams's drama bear indeed the traces the internalization of power; unfortunately Seress he does not go into details in this regard here, nor later in the book.

After the introduction (but before the interpretation of the individual plays), Seress dedicates a section of his book to the contextualization of Williams's techniques of representing identity (17-42). As an heir of modernism, the works of Williams are seen in relation to those of Eugene O'Neill, Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht and Arthur Miller. Since the book investigates the methods of identity formation and the evasion of exclusion that characterize the Williams's plays, it considers important to familiarizes the reader with the modernist theatrical trends that had an impact on him. Therefore, Seress looks at a selection of works including Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) by O'Neill, Six Characters in Search of an Author [Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore] (1921) by Pirandello, The Good Person of Szechwan [Der gute Mensch von Sezuan] (1943) by Brecht and The Crucible (1953) by Miller. With these plays, Seress introduces the idea of invisible masks that marginal characters have to put on in order to fit into society, and pinpoints the main difference between these authors's characters and Williams's people. O'Neill, Pirandello, Brecht and Miller problematize the role characters are forced into but which still assume the presence of their 'inner' personality. However, the integration of this selection of plays is rather superfluous. The reader is more interested in the author's investigation of Williams's dramas rather than their large contextualization. Furthermore, in the case of the O'Neill play, the overview of The Great God Brown (1926) might have been an equally wise choice because of its use of literal masks. (The drama revolves around two men, Billy and Dion, who are both in love with Margaret. She chooses Dion, who dies, but Billy burloins Dion's mask to make Margaret his wife. Billy dies too, eventually, but Margaret does not stop loving the mask of Dion.) If not in a comparison of literal versus metaphorical masks, Seress ought to have acknowledged the dramaturgy of the play since a similar strategy shines through in the plays of Williams: the real person might die, but the mask persists.

Seress manages to prove that Williams portrays taboos and exclusion in a peculiar way, especially because the characters of his plays never meet the standards of American society. Compulsory heterosexuality, youth, chastity, wealth, whiteness, beauty, fertility and masculinity are challenged in the author's work through subtle symbolisms and characters that choose diverse modes of passing and 'wear' their masks accordingly. The protagonists of the plays understand that they can only produce a “legitimate status” (15) by building up their public and self-image as heterosexual, young or white, as they comprehend the fact that these are only social constructs. Still, they have to suffer the consequences as light is shed on the deceptive acts they perform.

In the following section of his book (43-101), Seress astutely connects the idea of the characters' invisible masks to the dramatist's careful observation of censorship during the McCarthy era. American mainstream theater, the center of which was/is New York's Broadway, deliberately overlooked (and thus discriminated against) plays with delicate topics, among them homosexuality, prostitution, venereal diseases, etc. Seress devotes this section to scrutinize forms of veiling the truth in Williams's plays. By inspecting the main characters in Cat, Streetcar and Last Summer (58-90), the author concludes that in these major plays the position of the characters is not easy to determine. The book's analysis of plot and character reveal that Maggie, Brick, Blanche and Catherine, and to some extent, Mrs. Venable are trapped between their knowledge of reality and the stories they have to produce or maintain. The truth is covered up with acts of deception: the promise of childbirth to conceal a homoerotic love triangle, soft lights to cover the signs of ageing, and a celibate life of a sensitive poet to divert attention from having unusual desires. Furthermore, in three of Williams' later plays, namely: Sad Stories, Small Craft Warnings and Now the Cats (90-100), the dramatist applies an open rhetoric on homosexuality unlike the ones in his early texts. The emergence of the interest in the realistic portrayal of homosexuals brought into the picture a new type of dramaturgy, with the “demonized presence” (93) of homosexuality still powerful in these plays, as Seress illustrates. Candy, Quentin, First and Second Young Man, who are in these plays not closeted homosexuals any more, become central, tragic figures. All of them are open about their sexuality; nevertheless, this also leads to their final alienation or marginalization in the rigid realms of the society. Other forms of exclusion: beauty consciousness, the condemnation of prostitution and racism are all discussed in the compelling section ranging from page 101 through page 126. Seress focuses on Chance Wayne, the failed actor of Sweet Bird of Youth, who is trying to put on the mask of elegance, beauty and health. The tragedy of Chance is that he has no power to control the discourse that determines his public image: therefore, his persona is only a failed attempt to obtain a socially approved identity in the community that saw him fail as an actor. As for the topic of racism as a form of exclusion, Seress reaches to the work of O'Neill for a second time (109-115). He argues that besides the subversion of Puritan values visible in O'Neill's art, Williams was affected by O'Neill's portrayal of blackness. W.E.B. Du Bois's term of double consciousness, is convenient in the interpretation of The Emperor Jones (1920) and in All God's Chillun Got Wings (1924); moreover, Williams's Orpheus addresses the clash of xenophobia and anti-racism, which are in constant collision during the plot with the threshold character of Val winning symbolically in Seress's interesting reading (121) of it. Furthermore, Tiger Tail and Kingdom tackle the problem of femininity, blackness, trickery and wealth. Baby Doll, a young woman, can only be independent from her unloving husband by engaging in an adulterous relationship with a man of color, Silva. In Seress's account of Tiger Tail, the representation of a mixed-race love affair and the empowerment of a colored character is “provocative” (123) enough, although the closure of the drama is not positive by any means. Kingdom's mulatto protagonist intends to get hold of his stepmother's house. His homosexual stepbrother lives in a fake marriage with a prostitute to maintain a heterosexual image of himself. Furthermore, the book is well documented, with an extensive bibliography section covering the plays that are referred to within the book.
Stepmother's House. His homosexual stepbrother lives in a fake marriage with a prostitute to maintain a heterosexual image of himself, but when he dies, he leaves the house to the woman, who is seduced by the protagonist. The house is destroyed by a flood, making the situation of the two hopeless. Seress calls attention to the fact that all three characters are equally rejected by society, and only with deception did they have the slipping opportunity to break out.

The last section of the book examines two autobiographical plays (127-136): The Glass Menagerie and Vieux Carré. Here, Seress draws a parallel between Williams's unusual dramatic narrator and his lengthy stage directions, which are often filled with hidden clues for the audience, and which, in many cases, function as the implied narrator of the play's plot. Seress confirms the general consensus existent in Tennessee Williams criticism that the author makes his dramas personal with these elaborate stage directions, but the Hungarian scholar takes this idea further by saying that Williams's preoccupation with the visual excess is in curious contrast with his detailed textuality. Seress reminds the reader that the productions might not be able—or not allowed where censorship worked—to stage every minute detail, but the playwright gives explanations in the text by inviting theatergoers to read and read between the lines.

Overall, Seress goes against the postmodern tenet of the death of the author and claims that the two plays are designed to serve the purpose of confession for Williams. The Glass Menagerie, an experimental memory-play, is a painful apology that makes its audience witness a segment of (the author's) past. This works by a double logic, as Seress clarifies, because on the one hand, the author reveals that segment (abandoning his mother and sister) as opposed to concealing it, and on the other hand, he obliterates his own face and wears the mask of Tom, the narrator character. Vieux Carré is an inventory of the playwright's recurring marginal character types. Seress asserts that the figure of the playwright, although he could stand for a young Tennessee Williams, becomes an “autonomous” (136) entity who shares his thoughts on his life and sexuality. The writer exposes parts of Williams' experience but, at the same time, he seems to erase the authorial face. Here, Seress comes to the conclusion that the expiation of Williams is unsuccessful in these plays because of the disappearance of the authorial face, but the reader might ask the writer of the study: does this disappearance signify the failure of atonement beyond any doubt?

Among its many merits let me pinpoint a few flaws in this book. The study achieves its goal by producing insightful readings of Williams's dramas, but the insertion of Brecht's, Pirandello's, O'Neill's and Miller's plays, apart from a general contextualization, seems disproportionately long in this book. Out of the one hundred and thirty-nine pages, the scholar devotes twenty-five pages to present two American and two European authors in an unnecessary in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, a thorough comparison would be worth a separate volume; the consideration of the two canonized American authors is legitimate in the context of the American drama if done in a proportionate manner (O'Neill's dramas are inspected twice, the second scrutiny occurring in the penultimate section, taking up six more pages of the study; Miller seems to be relevant because of his theoretical view on the dramatic art discussed early in the study, but the interpretation of The Crucible is seven pages long, a rather distracting length for a reader looking for clues in Williams's dramas). Less ample focus on these playwrights would have been more advantageous for this otherwise quite good, readable volume. Brecht and Pirandello have certainly been some of the most influential European playwrights in the United States, but the reader might feel that the extensive reading of their plays is not always justified here, in this quantity. Moreover, the main title of the book, American Tragedies suggests a general dimension less pointing to the special feature of its focus, the Williams dramaturgy.

However, this does not diminish the fact that Seress's study convincingly takes the reader through the analysis of the indeterminate and sometimes disintegrating identities of the dramatist's characters by looking at what he calls the "background texts" (43) of the dramas. The slight detours taken to theater history are informative and the prospects of the study promising. It might be worthwhile to write this book further by reading these texts from the point of view of theatricality and performativity: a good starting point for Seress's next volume on American drama.