

# Modern America in Tennessee Williams

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## I

Tennessee Williams, whose creative life has not yet ended, is one of the contemporary American authors to understand about one aspect of reality in modern American. According to Esther M. Jackson's book, The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, "the emergence of Tennessee Williams as a major dramatist is a significant development of American culture history." <sup>1</sup> Jackson expresses that his theater is "an aspect of a second American Renaissance" and "an expression of a new sense of identity which American arts and letters reflected at the conclusion of World War II."<sup>2</sup> This study will be concerned with the reality in modern America as revealed by Tennessee Williams in three of his rather early plays. The Glass Menagerie (1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), and Summer and Smoke (1948) are his earlier major plays in the sense of critical and popular acceptance.

Tennessee Williams has shown us in his plays that realism is not the key to reality. He has explored unconventional techniques such as expressionism or impressionism. Tennessee Williams searches for truth and meaning within the moment of a poetic vision. The poetic vision is manifested not only by dialogue but also by staging techniques. In the production notes of The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams suggests "expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth," and "truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance."<sup>3</sup> In The Glass Menagerie the screen device is to give accent to certain values in each scene. For example Laura, a shy and sensitive crippled girl, who is living in her own imaginative world, the glass menagerie, tells her mother about the boy she liked in her highschool days and she says that he used to call her "Blue Roses," while the scene is accompanied by the image of blue roses on the screen. This device gives the audience the image that blue roses are beautiful but the color is strange or wrong and it helps them to feel or notice something wrong with Laura's beautiful world. The lighting changes and the musical accompaniment are

also to be projected to emphasize the emotional truth of scenes.

Tennessee Williams' plays are rather based on incidents than on a plot. When he is asked about a theme, he comments that it is a play about life and that is life in America. He invites us to share his fragmental visions and to find truth or meaning in the direct experiences of human beings. The image of his plays is intensively of the isolation of modern men. His plays describe violence, rape, prostitution, murder, perversion, and castration. In contrast with these, beauty, gentility, sensitivity, and warmth are important elements of his plays. Another significant element is contrast between present and past, in other words between reality and dream. The past is revealed as a key to understanding his plays. In these elements Tennessee Williams' plays present individuals' struggling for self-realization, the destruction of sensitivity and the corruption of beauty by brute ugliness, and decaying aristocracy, and describe a man as a victim of his own conflicting desires, the conflict between soul and body. He considers those points as the causes of suffering in the modern world, but on the other hand it is said that he has no world view and his world lacks the stability of philosophy, government, or religion. Tennessee Williams gives us the question of choice by presenting the ambiguity and ambivalence of men in reality, so that the judgement rests with us. Nancy M. Tschler gives an interpretation as the following:

There are no absolutes for him, no system of values outside of man, no morality outside of personal anguish. His ultimate ethic is sympathize. In a universe that rolls on its inevitable way, living in a society that we cannot change, we are powerless to influence or even understand our fate. The best we can do is to face our doom with fortitude and reach out hands in sympathy to our doomed fellow-beings. <sup>4</sup>

He writes of life and sees the basic problems of the world as personal. Through personal problems in his plays, his ideas of reality in the modern world of America can be sought out.

## II

Tennessee Williams' first successful play The Glass Menagerie contains the themes and techniques that are repeated or expanded in his following ones, though it lacks violence or brutality abounding in his other plays. As well as the screen device, every item of the setting is symbolic in this play. The most prominent symbolic device is Laura's collection of tiny glass animals, which symbolizes her isolated and beautiful but fragile world, and in which the unicorn, being her own image and therefore different from the others, is her

favorite. The lyricism of the dialogue in this play describes each character's attitude to reality and conflict between reality and illusion. Laura, a failure in the real world, retreats from reality and lives in the imagination of the glass collection. Her brother, Tom, recognizes the grim reality of his home and job, but instead of facing the actual problems, he dreams of escaping from them. Their mother, Amanda, trying to dispel her awareness of failing in her life by clinging to the glorious past, talks a good deal about the romantic past, but she only attempts to solve the present problems realistically and desperately.

The play continues at the Wingfield apartment of the lower middle class in St. Louis to dramatize these characters based on incidents rather than on a plot, which eventually makes the last two scenes very dramatic. After a long wait, "someone or something which will provide a form salvation to those who are waiting for him or it"<sup>5</sup> arrives at the Wingfields. To Laura it is "moon" as the screen image and "happiness" and "good fortune" to Amanda. This is the Gentleman Caller, Jim O'Connor, who is the most realistic character in the play. Laura's shyness is solved by his warmth. Jim, believing that the key to success in this society is to understand the personal conditions, leads Laura to recognize the inferiority complex of her physical handicap and the necessity of having confidence in some way. The process of the psychological analysis attempted by Jim is visualized by the aid of the unicorn among the glass animals. When the horn of the unicorn is broken in an accident, Laura says, "Now it is just like all the other horses."<sup>6</sup> But Jim is merely a momentary salvation, because it is discovered that he is already engaged and going to marry soon. Laura gives the unicorn with no horn to Jim as a souvenir.

At the end of the play, Tom who is one of the characters and at the same time the narrator of the play, begins with "I didn't go to the moon, I went much further — for time is the longest distance between two places —" and closes the play in saying "Blow out your candles, Laura—and so good-bye ..."<sup>7</sup> Laura blows the candles out. This signifies that Tom, who has suffered from the conflict between reality and dream in the modern society begins the struggle of seeking for self-realization, and that Laura with purity and sensitivity cannot survive long in the modern society, though Jim is temporarily attracted by the beauty of these, her characteristics, and will remember and respect it when he looks at the glass unicorn by chance. Throughout, the play is filled with the image of isolation in the family — which is intensified by the smiling photograph of the father having deserted the family — and lack of communication among the characters, and finally the disintegration of the family is hinted at by Tom's decision in leaving his mother and sister. These ideas, the conflict between illusion and reality, the fragility of purity and sensitivity, and the isolation of human beings in the modern America are repeated in A Streetcar Named Desire and Summer and Smoke in a different way.

The action of The Glass Menagerie thematically results in the tragedy of Laura — a crippled and delicate girl and the most lost and lonely character, while the other two plays are concerned with young women such as Blanche of A Streetcar Named Desire and Alma of Summer and Smoke. Amanda is, however, a more impressive figure in the play. The Southern aristocrat, Amanda, considers her husband the embodiment of romance and remembers her past as glorious memories, whereby she tries to encourage herself to cope with the ugly present. Her devotion to her children makes her struggle in trying to prevent them from failure in their life, but because of her inability to understand them, she finally drives her son into restlessness and the life of wandering and her daughter further into her own isolated world. When she becomes aware of Laura's inability ever to cope with marriage in spite of her mother's desperate attempt to the contrary, we cannot help feeling more the tragedy of Amanda rather than her daughter, and have similar sympathy for her to that for Blanche of Streetcar. Nancy M. Tischler says:

The audience, never seeing the gracious mansion that was the scene of Amanda's girlhood, feels its remembered glory and its contrast to the mean present. Awareness of the past is always an element in Williams' plays. His characters live beyond the fleeting moments of the drama — back into a glowing past and shrinking from a terrifying future. <sup>8</sup>

The memory of the past becomes a more substantial element in the other two plays.

### III

Tennessee Williams himself sees A Streetcar Named Desire as his masterpiece and most critics agree that it should undoubtedly stand as his finest work. Tischler speaks highly of the good construction of this play and writes the following:

Each scene is constructed like a one-act play, Williams' forte; yet together the scenes have an impressive accumulative effect. There is a convincing balance of humor and pathos, of illusion and reality. Nowhere has Tennessee Williams made better use of his abilities; his talent for picturing violence, for accurate dialogue, for compassionate revelation, for understanding of basic human problems. <sup>9</sup>

Streetcar is less poetic as a whole than The Glass Menagerie, which is more relevant and effective since the lyricism is limited to Blanche's over refined speeches regarding her unrealistic world. The play is wholly concerned with Blanche's private anguish and it is so well constructed that the action moves

steadily and persuasively to the conclusion of her destruction.

To Blanche, the past seemingly consists of beauty, gentility, intelligence, and boastfulness, but inside herself it is a long, gradual, and inevitable corruption owing to the decline of the aristocracy. Her delicate soul is bruised in having to face a series of deaths under her family and relatives, while her husband's terrible suicide causes her sexual perversion. Her corruption originates in her own natural sensitivity and because of the hidden nature of all human beings. The loss of her parents, relatives, and lover, and the subsequent loss of the plantation, Belle Reve, drives her into desperation and isolation. It appears to her that sexual consummation is able to fill her empty heart and her love affair with a boy student causes her to lose her teaching position. She becomes dependent upon the warmth of strangers as the fear of death and isolation, and the aging of her body begins to prey upon her mind. Eventually she is forced to get away from Laurel in the South owing to this dark drive in her being which has distorted her outlook on life. As a victim of human nature, Blanche in utter despair goes to her sister, Stella, in the hope of at last finding some protection. When Blanche meets Stella, they staring at each other for a moment, Blanche runs to her with a wild cry: "Stella, oh, Stella, Stella! Stella for Star!"<sup>10</sup> and then adds, "You're all I've got in the world."<sup>11</sup> As for Stella, she had deserted Belle Reve and now fully indulges in the brutality and sexuality of life with Stanley in New Orleans. The play begins at this point.

The place to which Blanche comes in this last desperate attempt to save her soul contributes nothing but the acceleration of her corruption which would seem to be a pathway leading to the grave, unless she herself can change. In a small flat of only two rooms Blanche's crushed sensitive mind is more desperately abused by brutality, violence, gambling, and finally rape. In this play not only the characterization of Blanche but also that of Stella and Stanley is prominent. Blanche tries to hide the ugly experiences of her past and her passing beauty. She believes that physical beauty is a transitory possession, but that beauty of mind, richness of spirit and tenderness of heart are not taken away but grow, and a woman possessed of those can enrich a man's life. Her attitude toward life is "I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth."<sup>12</sup> Although Stanley is quite a brutal man, he also loves truth as he says, "After all, a woman's charm is fifty per cent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth, and this is the truth."<sup>13</sup> Stella says, "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark — that sort of make everything else seem — unimportant,"<sup>14</sup> and "People have got to tolerate each others' habits."<sup>15</sup> Neither Stanley nor Stella experiences any inner conflict between sensuality and spirituality, but Blanche does and the anguish it causes her is obvious in the scene where she gives a soft and sweet kiss to the strange young man who comes to collect for a newspaper, though she expects Mitch to

behave gentlemanly in return. She is proud of beauty of mind and hates brutality, yet is an alcoholic. Her inner pride is supported by the belief: "Never inside, I didn't lie in my heart. . . ." <sup>16</sup> Larger and larger grows the gap between her illusion and reality. The climax, her final challenge to Stanley, ends in rape by Stanley. It represents not only the conflict between these two characters who believe utterly different truths regarding human nature but also Blanche's ever inner conflict between her illusion and reality, her soul and her body. Blanche says, "I think of myself as a very, very rich woman! But I have been foolish — casting my pearls before swine!" <sup>17</sup>

Blanche is the victim of her own conflicting desires, the conflict between her soul and her body, whose inner beauty is destroyed by the brute ugliness of being misunderstood in the modern American society. She eventually goes insane and is sent to a lunatic asylum. To Stella's question, "I don't know if I did the right thing," Eunice answers, "What else could you do?" <sup>18</sup> and to another question, "What have I done to my sister? Oh, God, what have I done to my sister?," Eunice replies, "She couldn't stay here; there wasn't no other place for her to go." <sup>19</sup> Blanche is a sensitive woman belonging to the aristocracy of the South; neither can any longer survive in modern America, though sensitivity and gentility are still respected once in a while. Mitch admires Blanche's beauty and loves her, but she is forsaken by him when he learns of her past. When Stanley seizes the paper lantern, by which Blanche has avoided direct light on her face, and tearing it off the light bulb, extends it toward her, she cries out as if the lantern were herself and leaves Stanley and Stella's flat. This indicates the destruction of all delicate beauty.

No one else understands the truth of Blanche, even though Stella and Mitch can sympathise with her. We share the agony of Blanche and feel strongly sympathetic toward her, but we cannot criticize Stanley and Stella. They recognize the inevitable and helpless lack of communication between their worlds and try to fill the gap in their own way.

#### IV

Summer and Smoke is a poetic and lyrical play. It deals with violence, murder, insanity, and prostitution all common elements in Tennessee Williams' plays, but the poetic lyricism surpasses these as a more prominent element. The symbols and themes are so clearly expressed in Summer and Smoke that some critics see this play as inferior to his others because it lacks usually so much a part of Tennessee Williams' plays, the more usual shadowing depth and driving power. In the prologue, we are acquainted with Alma and John's childhood, which, in the play, represents the beauty of the past. The stone angel, a figure of "Eternity," is a symbol of spirituality and the anatomy chart is

that of sexuality. Alma, the daughter of a minister, whose name means "soul" in Spanish, is a spiritual woman and John, the son of a doctor, is a physical man. Alma's world is "the stars" and John's is the gambling casino of Moon Lake. Their childhood bond of friendship allows them to freely exchange their attitudes and opinions, and though they each have a different approach to life, they remain attracted to each other. When John tries to seduce Alma, he is refused, but after John's father is killed, they both change. John, who has long felt the struggle between spirit and body, and between order and anarchy in the search for self-identification, is saved by the strength of Alma's soul when he has to face his father's death. He finds that what he has needed from Alma is not physical contact, which he has recognized as only momentary relief, but spiritual communication, something beautiful and warm which he has mistaken for "ice". In spite of his understanding this truth, his long separation from Alma which occurs after John's father's death makes him reach the conclusion: "I've settled with life on fairly acceptable terms. Isn't that all a reasonable person can ask?" and "It's best not to ask for too much."<sup>20</sup> He decides to marry Nellie, whose character has been determined due to the influence and education received from both himself and Alma. When Alma also changes to find that her pride in spiritualism is so silly in the relationship between a man and a woman where sexuality is natural and important. It is too late. John won't treat her as before partly because he now respects gentility and spirituality, but chiefly because this new Alma does not inspire him as before. They had previously searched for a satisfactory response to each other's needs, but there had always been certain discrepancies in their attitudes toward life and human nature, which led to difficulty in communication. When they come to believe that at last they can understand each other, it is only to find that each now regards life from the other's previous viewpoint. Alma says in despair:

You've come around to my old way of thinking and I to yours like two people exchanging a call on each other at the same time, and each one finding the other one gone out, the door locked against him and no one to answer the bell! I came here to tell you that being a gentleman doesn't seem so important to me any more, but you're telling me I've got to remain a lady. The tables have turned with a vengeance!<sup>21</sup>

Ironically the rakish John ends up reformed in a moderate way and is rather rewarded, whereas the sensitive and Puritanical Alma dies and the newly-born Alma, whose sexual instinct is awakened, moves to the other extreme. She now cannot but depend upon the temporary warmth offered by a stranger, a salesman, as the result of her isolation and desperation after being rejected by John in her final attempt to fulfil her newly found physical need. This means that the original Alma can no longer exist. The death of the old Alma indicates the

impossibility of the survival of sensitivity and gentility and the rebellion against the oppression of Puritanism.

Summer and Smoke is a different story, according to its impact on the public, from The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, and its value varies with critics' appreciation. It is the old story of the flesh and the spirit and lacks fire, but it contains beauty and truth. It is well controlled and beautifully constructed, and the theme — the conflict between the spirit and the flesh, and between order and anarchy — has universality. There is considerable truth of life in the story that a young man and woman search for perfect communication over a period of years, but their love results in fruitless one. Summer and Smoke, a beautifully symbolic play about morality will remain one of Tennessee Williams' best plays.

## V

These three plays are all concerned with the corruption or dissolution of a sensitive woman with a beautiful mind owing to her inability to adjust to the reality in the modern world of America. These heroines' tragedies lay, not in the fact that they had resisted, but in the fact that they had little to resist with, so that they were driven to live in their inner world. These tragic plays about women contribute to our greater understanding the American people, particularly of American women of today. The heroines who appear in these three plays by Tennessee Williams are quite different from the image we have of today's general American women. The young American women of today are very active and aggressive in their approach to life and love. The modern America has become over civilized and individualistic, with equal emphasis too on materialism and mechanism as a whole. In such a world people are forced to be competitive, aggressive, and egotistic but seemingly sociable; their old sense of sensitivity, gentility, and spirituality has to die or change. Esther M. Jackson says in The Broken World of Tennessee Williams :

Williams thus examines a comprehensive theme of twentieth century arts, the search for identity: the journey toward meaning. It is because of his perception of a moral crisis that Williams has abandoned more flattering images of man . . . He insists that the proper function of modern drama is to expose man's hidden nature, to search out his motives, to discover his limits, and ultimately, to help him to find a mode of salvation . . . He is intened as the object of pity and terror in the modern world.<sup>22</sup>

The plot of these three plays are primarily written around the heroines, but we can still catch the common image of men struggling for self-identification in the modern world of America, such as Tom of The Glass Menagerie, Stanley

of A Streetcar Named Desire, and John of Summer and Smoke. This image of struggling men takes on more emphasis in his later plays and indicates a trend of contemporary American literature: the lacking communication and the isolation of modern men, as well as the individual conflict between idealism and reality in the modern world. Jackson also says:

As early as The Glass Menagerie, Williams began to create myth of modern life; that is, he began to weave the dark images of his personal vision . . . in a schematic explication of modern life. This activity, begun in his early work, was accelerated in middle plays such as A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, The Rose Tattoo, and Camino Real.<sup>23</sup>

Gradually, in his later works, Williams has put together a kind of modern myth, a symbolic representation of the life of man in our time, . . . The myth of Williams mirrors modern man's dilemma — his need for a comprehensive system of interpretation, for a structure which can restore meaning to life and which can reconcile the conflict within reality itself.<sup>24</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 Esther Merle Jackson, The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. ix.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ruby Cohn and Bernard F. Dukore, ed., Twentieth Century Drama: England, Ireland, the United States (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 336.
- 4 Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan, (New York: Citadel Press, 1961), p. 300.
- 5 Ruby Cohn and Bernard F. Dukore, ed., Op. Cit., p. 334.
- 6 Ibid., p. 393.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 401-2.
- 8 Op. Cit., p. 101.
- 9 Ibid., p. 143.
- 10 Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, (New York: New American Library, 1947), p. 18.
- 11 Ibid., p. 20.
- 12 Ibid., p. 117.
- 13 Ibid., p. 41.
- 14 Ibid., p. 70.
- 15 Ibid., p. 65.

- 16 Ibid., p. 119.  
 17 Ibid., p. 126.  
 18 Ibid., p. 133.  
 19 Ibid., p. 141.  
 20 Tennessee Williams, Summer and Smoke, (New York: New Direction, 1948 ), p. 114.  
 21 Ibid., p.121.  
 22 Op. Cit., pp.86-7.  
 23 Ibid., p. 47.  
 24 Ibid., p. 54.

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